

Ad (Synodalem) Theologiam (Moralem) Promovendam

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SINCE OCTOBER 2023, VARIOUS VATICAN OFFICES HAVE ISSUED—in dizzying succession—a series of important documents. On the opening day of the 2023 assembly of the Synod on Synodality, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis issued *Laudate Deum*. A follow up to his landmark 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* timed to inform the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference (COP28), this short apostolic exhortation emphasized the climate crisis's rapidly increasing severity and the urgent need for immediate action to ameliorate its effects on both our eco-system and the poor.¹ Before the month was out, the church received the Synthesis Report of the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, entitled “A Synodal Church in Mission.”² This report summarized the work of the first session of the Synodal Assembly, held in Rome from October 4 to 29, 2023, identifying points of convergence, matters for further consideration, and proposals for next steps. Four days later, on the Feast of All Saints, Pope Francis issued the *motu proprio Ad Theologiam Promovendam* to accompany the revision of the statutes of the Pontifical Academy of Theology.³ In this short document, Pope Francis reaffirms key points outlined in his 2018 Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, intended to renew ecclesiastical educational institutions.⁴ Finally, in what many

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum* (October 4, 2023), www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html; Catholic Climate Covenant, “Laudate Deum—Pope Francis’s Apostolic Exhortation on the Climate Crisis,” catholicclimatecovenant.org/resources/laudate-deum-pope-francis-apostolic-exhortation-on-the-climate-crisis/.

² First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “A Synodal Church in Mission,” Synthesis Report, October 28, 2023, www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf.

³ *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* (To Promote Theology, November 1, 2023), (www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html).

⁴ Pope Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium* (2018), press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/01/29/180129c.html.

considered an Advent surprise, on December 18, 2023, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*, opening up the possibility of incorporating the blessings of divorced, remarried, or same-sex couples into the church's practice of pastoral care.⁵ Needless to say, the document generated a flurry of celebration, controversy and commentary.⁶

Each document certainly merits a focused analysis—analyses we would welcome at the *Journal of Moral Theology*. Yet given their confluence, it is particularly instructive to read them together. For in doing so, the outlines of a dynamic, multi-faceted, Conciliar vision of theology begin to coalesce. Crucially, unlike previous magisterial documents, they do not distinguish between various subdisciplines of theology.⁷ Rather, they speak of theology as a unified practice, while pervasively centering what has typically fallen under the “moral” domain. Thus, these documents have significant implications for moral theology. Not only do they powerfully challenge what remains in many sectors an intransigently ossified manualism;⁸ they also subtly affirms that moral theology is—or should be—a *theological* practice, in both content and method; and that the other theological disciplines are always, at once, moral.

This is a core conviction that animates the work of the *Journal of Moral Theology*. Equally, in reading through these documents, I was struck by how deeply the contours of theology limned here resonate with our own mission and commitments. To highlight those resonances, I thought it would be instructive to revisit the *Journal's* initial rationale as articulated by founding editor David Matzko McCarthy. While that vision has developed over the intervening decade, many of his inaugural insights continue to shape our work. I then turn to the Fall 2023 documents, distilling five key themes and highlighting points of alignment with the *Journal*. I close with an overview of the current issue, suggesting how a dozen years later, the

⁵ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans* (On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings, December 18, 2023), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dcf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html.

⁶ See, e.g., Jake Hardin, “Response to Cardinal Müller’s essay on *Fiducia Supplicans*,” *Where Peter Is*, January 3, 2024, wherepeteris.com/response-to-cardinal-mullers-essay-on-fiducia-supplicans/; and Justin McClellan, “Vatican Doubles Down: Catholic Bishops Shouldn’t Stop Blessings for Gay Couples,” *NCR*, January 4, 2024, <https://wherepeteris.com/response-to-cardinal-mullers-essay-on-fiducia-supplicans/>.

⁷ See, e.g., John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, and the documents of the Second Vatican Council as noted below.

⁸ A prime example is the 2023 USCCB “Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body” (March 20, 2023), www.usccb.org/resources/Doctrinal%20Note%202023-03-20.pdf. For my critique, see M. Therese Lysaught, “US Bishops’ Transgender Document Fails Morally, Theologically—and is Poorly Argued,” *NCR* (May 1, 2023), www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/us-bishops-transgender-document-fails-morally-theologically-and-poorly-argued.

Journal's vision has matured and expanded, advancing what we might now call a synodal moral theology.

MORAL THEOLOGY IN THE RUINS, REDUX

In January 2012, David Matzko McCarthy opened the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology* by reflecting on the state of the field and, correlatively, the *Journal's* mission and scope. Utilizing Walker Percy's classic novel as an analytical frame, he entitled his reflection "Moral Theology in the Ruins."⁹ His title gestured simultaneously to Catholic theology's increasing fragmentation and the conviction that the place where authentic theology properly ought to be done is "amid the fragmentation of modern life . . . and the everyday world that we inhabit with our secular neighbors."¹⁰ "A moral theologian," McCarthy averred, "is one who thinks theologically about common goods and ends, especially in terms of the fragmentation of life." She is a scholar committed "to living well among the ruins and thinking things through day by day," while helping others to do the same.¹¹ Thus, from its outset, the *Journal* has held that both the locus and *telos* of theology is the messy, fragmented realities of everyday life.

This vision of moral theology set the direction for the *Journal* in four additional ways. First, amid methodological differences and rifts in the theological landscape—which have only become more fractious—McCarthy refused to privilege one particular theological approach or "school" of thought, as some academic journals do. Doing so, he argued, does not actually overcome the fragmentation: rather it "merely defines the whole by privileging one of the pieces and putting everyone else (I suppose) on the outside."¹² Such an approach, he suggested, also fails to "engage the lives of people who live and work among the fragments . . . who are looking for lines of conversation with theologians."¹³

Second, McCarthy privileged this practice of conversation. Rather than simply providing answers, he argued that the *Journal* "needs to be an ordinary place of conversation, argument, and rigorous thinking."¹⁴ He did not mean, as he makes clear, "simply an open-ended and directionless conversation—a conversation for the sake of

⁹ David Matzko McCarthy, "Moral Theology in the Ruins: Introducing a New Journal," *Journal of Moral Theology* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–21. Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Picador, 1999; originally published in 1971).

¹⁰ McCarthy, "Moral Theology in the Ruins," 5.

¹¹ McCarthy, "Moral Theology in the Ruins," 6.

¹² McCarthy, "Moral Theology in the Ruins," 4.

¹³ McCarthy, "Moral Theology in the Ruins," 5.

¹⁴ McCarthy, "Moral Theology in the Ruins," 20.

conversation.”¹⁵ Rather, the *Journal*, he suggested, would cultivate common modes of reflection and a shared theological imagination by creating “a venue to think and converse among the ruins in a way ‘that views the world and all that is in it as enchanted, haunted by the Holy Spirit and the presence of grace.’”¹⁶

Third, as the only journal focused on Catholic theological reflection on the moral life, McCarthy declared that the *Journal* would be: “attentive to a broad spectrum of approaches and the relationship of theology to other disciplinary inquiries, such as economics, psychology, and political philosophy . . . [seeking to] find a way to think and converse well as moral theologians among ‘the ruins’ . . . [so as to] find a way forward that is good and common.”¹⁷ His inaugural essay itself—deftly interweaving literature (Percy) with rigorous theological, philosophical, ethical, and political analysis—exemplifies the critical advances possible when theologians engage and draw on other disciplines.¹⁸

Finally, noting that “throughout *Love in the Ruins*, the antidote to human fragmentation is the Eucharist,” McCarthy foregrounded the church’s sacramental life as a crucial starting point and milieu for moral theology.¹⁹ Citing two contemporaneous interlocutors, he notes:

For [Reinhard] Hütter and [Peter] Steinfels, for instance, the backdrop for their analyses of the ruins is the Eucharist—the real presence of Christ and our sharing in one body. Whatever can be said about a common mode of inquiry for moral theology, we should say that it is a theological mode or imagination and, as Catholic, an imagination that begins with a world where God has given himself as gift, where creation itself is gift, and where we have been offered participation in things as they are in fragments and will be in the restoration of creation. The theological mode responds to divine life incarnate, crucified, and resurrected so that we might share God’s communion.²⁰

These commitments have shaped the *Journal* over the past dozen years. From its outset, the *Journal* has been shaped by a deeply contextual sensibility—affirming that a primary *locus theologicus* (moral and otherwise) is found in the ordinary, messy realities of the church and the world and that our work is necessarily done in

¹⁵ McCarthy, “Moral Theology in the Ruins,” 5.

¹⁶ McCarthy, “Moral Theology in the Ruins,” 21.

¹⁷ McCarthy, “Moral Theology in the Ruins,” 1.

¹⁸ McCarthy also incisively critiqued two “schools” which have fomented the fracturing of the theological landscape: Michael Novak and his neoliberal followers and the theology of the body movement. Drawing on Percy’s twin heresy of angelism and bestialism, he details how the defects of these schools of ethics and politics are grounded in serious theological missteps (“Moral Theology in the Ruins,” 8–20).

¹⁹ McCarthy, “Moral Theology in the Ruins,” 7.

²⁰ McCarthy, “Moral Theology in the Ruins,” 8.

proximity to places of brokenness. It has sought to bring into conversation perspectives from across the Catholic spectrum in order to advance theology and the Christian life. It has worked to break down the siloes isolating theological disciplines while fostering interdisciplinary and ecumenical scholarship. And this work has been informed by the Conciliar vision of the sacraments as crucial for Catholic moral methodology.²¹

Notably, McCarthy penned these reflections prior to March 2013 and the election of Pope Francis. In revisiting them a dozen years later, it is striking how deeply they align with the vision of the Conciliar, synodal theology that has emerged from Francis's pontificate captured so powerfully in the documents promulgated in late 2023. Let me now turn to that vision.

ELEMENTS OF A SYNODAL MORAL THEOLOGY

Ad Theologiam Promovendam (hereafter, ATP) opens with the following claim: "To promote theology in the future we cannot limit ourselves to abstractly re-proposing formulas and schemes from the past" (no. 1).²² Here Pope Francis echoes the now-familiar position he has taken regarding moral theology from the start of his pontificate, articulated first in his interview with Anthony Spadaro and reaffirmed in *Evangelii Gaudium* and elsewhere.²³ Now, speaking to the Pontifical Academy for Theology, he urges "theology to rethink [itself] epistemologically and methodologically" (no. 3).

At the heart of Pope Francis's critique is a fundamental conviction: that theological method is—or ought to be—resonant with ecclesiology. As he declares: "A synodal, missionary, and 'outgoing' Church can

²¹ Post-Conciliar moral theology has yet to receive a key aspect of the Second Vatican Council; namely, that the Council—in its structural legacy—opens with *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Drawing on Henri de Lubac, the Council names liturgy as "the font from which all [the Church's] power flows" as well as "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed" (SC, no. 10). The liturgy—sacraments, worship, contemplation—acts as the recursively generative starting point for every aspect of ecclesial life. The Council names liturgical scholarship and participation as the unifying heart of theological and pastoral study—reuniting the disciplines severed after Trent. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* specifically counsels dogmatic, spiritual, pastoral, and biblical studies to identify and foreground their connections to liturgical realities (SC, no. 16). Notably, one field is left off this list: moral theology. Although *Optatam Totius*—in the one explicit reference to moral theology in the Conciliar documents (OT, no. 16)—does call for moral theology to be renewed by engagement with scripture, the reference to liturgy is oblique.

²² Translations of *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* are my own.

²³ For just a few examples, see Anthony Spadaro, "Interview with Pope Francis," (September 2013), www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html; *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 35, 41, 43, 45, 49, and 83; and *Gaudete et Exsultate*, nos. 49, 58, 59, 134, and 173.

only correspond to an ‘outgoing’ theology” (no. 3).²⁴ What, then, would a synodal moral theology look like? While certainly more could be distilled from *Laudate Deum*, *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, the synod’s *Synthesis Report*, and *Fiducia Supplicans*, as a starting point I would name five elements: a contextual epistemology, a method of listening and dialogue, transdisciplinary engagement, a conviction that love and truth are integral, all of which infused by an ongoing sacramental praxis. Each of these elements seeks to align theological method with synodality and to reimagine it as theological *in se*, as practicing the theological convictions we preach.

A Contextual Epistemology: All four documents elevate ordinary life as a theological source *sine qua non*. Resonating with McCarthy’s comments above, Pope Francis exhorts the Pontifical Academy for Theology: “Good theologians, like good shepherds, smell of the people and the street and, with their reflection, pour oil and wine on the wounds of men” (ATP, no. 3). These “streets” are myriad—from the peripheries to culture to the church itself. *Laudate Deum* foregrounds the (literally) burning reality of climate change. The theological developments in *Fiducia Supplicans* arise from engagement with “people in every situation [who] might seek God’s help through a simple blessing” (no. 38; see also Presentation and no. 25). The Synod Report foregrounds “people in poverty,” named “protagonists of the church’s journey” (I.4). Equally, the Christian community itself—“the daily experience of God’s Holy People” in its culturally “diverse expressions of being church” which brings a multitude of gifts *to* the church—is identified as a crucial starting point and *telos* of theological *research* (III.15.j, I.5.b).

Thus, a synodal (moral) theology is, in Pope Francis’s words, necessarily contextual and inductive:

Theological reflection is therefore called to a turning point, to a paradigm shift [a change of paradigm] . . . which commits it, first of all, to being a *fundamentally contextual theology*, capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel in the conditions in which men and women live daily, in different geographical, social, and cultural environments and having as an archetype the Incarnation of the eternal *Logos*, his entry into the culture, into the vision of the world, into the religious tradition of a people (ATP, no. 4, emphasis in the original).²⁵

²⁴ Section II of the synod report opens with the words: “Rather than saying that the Church has a mission, we affirm that Church ‘is’ mission” (II.8.a). This sounds remarkably like Stanley Hauerwas’s classic phrase that the church does not *have* a social ethic, but rather the church *is* a social ethic (*The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993], 99–104).

²⁵ Later in ATP he notes: “This is the *pastoral ‘stamp’* that theology as a whole, and not just in one particular area, must assume: without opposing theory and practice,

This shift, as he notes, is fundamentally Christological, a point affirmed by the synod: “For the Church, the preferential option for the poor and those at the margins is *a theological category* before being a cultural, sociological, political, or philosophical one” (I.4.b, emphasis added). Theologians thus follow Christ to the places Christ goes—where men and women live daily. There they will “encounter the face and flesh of Christ” in those who “through their sufferings have direct knowledge of the suffering Christ” (I.4.h).

A Synodal Method: A paradigm shift in sources entails a paradigm shift in method. In these documents, Pope Francis’s core practice for the church becomes the heart of theological method involving encounter, listening, and dialogue:

Starting from [the contexts where Christ is incarnated], theology can only develop in *a culture of dialogue* and encounter between different traditions and different knowledges, between different Christian confessions and different religions, openly engaging with everyone, believers and non-believers (ATP, no. 4, emphasis in original; see also no. 9).²⁶

The synod report extends this practice of listening to the poor and those otherwise marginalized; victims and survivors of abuse, in its myriad forms, by church personnel; other cultures; and women.²⁷

Akin to McCarthy’s concern, this is not simply listening for its own sake, nor merely an emotive, pastoral, or sociological construct. Rather it is a vision of theology as itself a *theological practice*—one that enacts the foundational Christological, trinitarian, and anthropological convictions it professes. It is kenotic, requiring “some degree of self-emptying,” a willingness to “‘decentre’ oneself in order to leave space for the other” (III.16.c-d). It reflects the trinitarian

theological reflection is urged to *develop with an inductive method*” (no. 8, emphasis in original).

²⁶ These documents, like Pope Francis’s pontificate as a whole, foreground the Council’s ecumenical commitments. The synod Assembly welcomed “fraternal delegates,” emphasized the need to further explore questions of Eucharistic hospitality and interchurch marriages (I.7.f), and stated clearly that all the baptized—Catholic and non-Catholic—participate in the *sensus fidei*: “There can be no synodality without an ecumenical dimension” (I.7.b). See also “Fraternal Delegates Lend ‘Ecumenical Character’ to Synod Press Briefing,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, October 26, 2023: www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2023-10/fraternal-delegates-lend-ecumenical-character-to-briefing.html. Ecumenism could be listed as a sixth element of a synodal moral theology which also characterizes the *Journal of Moral Theology*, as we have been joined by scholars from the Baptist, Orthodox, and Methodist traditions, and more.

²⁷ The synod’s reflections on women will be addressed further in our July 2024 issue.

dynamism inherent in creation, the human person, and community. By attending to the God who ceaselessly encounters us at all times and in all things, it recursively “renders Christ present in the Holy Spirit” (I.1.h; ATP, no. 4).

The synod Assembly itself adopted this synodal theological method in its practice of “Conversation in the Spirit” (I.2.d, I.2.h, II.10.a, III.15.a, III.16.c).²⁸ Eschewing both quick, clean, and easy answers and conversation for its own sake, this account of theology resonates with that cultivated by the *Journal*—an inextricably ecclesial, collegial, and communal practice (ATP, no. 6) that patiently seeks to cultivate common modes of reflection and a shared theological imagination amid a myriad of differences.

Transdisciplinarity: Given its “scientific nature,” these documents maintain that theology must necessarily be engaged in “*transdisciplinary dialogue with other scientific, philosophical, humanistic, and artistic knowledges*” (ATP, no. 9, emphasis in original).²⁹ Such an approach eschews equally arrogant privileging of theology, apologetic privileging of non-theological disciplines, and siloed relativism.³⁰ Rather than a weak multidisciplinary in which various sciences offer “multiple points of view, that however remain complementary and separate,” these documents seek a thick transdisciplinarity. Here theology—in decentered, humble openness—is endowed with an integral and integrating function: “*Transdisciplinarity should instead be thought of ‘as the placement and fermentation of all knowledge within the space of Light and Life offered by the Wisdom that emanates from the Revelation of God’ (Veritatis Gaudium, Proem, 4c)*” (no. 5, emphasis in original).

Laudate Deum models this transdisciplinarity. While rejecting the causal “technocratic paradigm,” it frames the urgent scientific truths surrounding climate change within God’s infinite love (no. 65), who calls us into a “journey of communion and commitment” which is a pilgrimage of reconciliation (nos. 65, 69). Notably here, as throughout

²⁸ Julian Paparella, “What are Conversations in the Spirit? A Fruitful Method for a Synodal Church,” *Salt and Light Media* (October 16, 2023), slmedia.org/blog/what-are-conversations-in-the-spirit-a-fruitful-method-for-a-synodal-church.

²⁹ See also the synod Report at I.2.h, III.14.h, III.15.c, g. This positive affirmation of scientific disciplines marks a shift from *Fides et Ratio*, wherein each positive mention of the sciences is followed by a caveat and philosophy is privileged as moral theology’s primary interlocutor. See particularly John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, nos. 92–99. Prior to *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, these paragraphs had provided the guidelines for the Pontifical Academy for Theology (www.vatican.va/content/roman-curia/en/pontificie-accademie/pontificia-academia-theologica/profilo.html).

³⁰ “From an epistemic point of view, the status of theology is driven not to close itself in self-referentiality, which leads to isolation and insignificance, but to perceive itself as inserted in a web of relationships, first and foremost with other disciplines and other knowledge” (ATP, no. 5).

these documents, ecclesial, theological, and ethical discernment is for the purpose of action, mission, and the common good.

Where *Laudate Deum* exemplifies transdisciplinarity, the synod Report laments that too often, the Church's engagement with "traditional" moral issues does not. It raises concerns that, to date, the anthropologies underlying traditional analyses may have been flawed, leading to simplistic judgements that often "hurt individuals and the body of the Church." One source of these flaws has been a lack of transdisciplinary engagement: "Sometimes the anthropological categories we have developed are not able to grasp the complexity of the elements emerging from experience or knowledge in the sciences and require greater precision and further study" (III.15.g).

A commitment to transdisciplinarity in this thick sense remains a hallmark of the *Journal*. We have been pleased to welcome contributions from scholars outside the theological guild—sociologists, attorneys, physicians, and more—who have brought their own disciplinary perspectives to bear on critical moral and theological questions.³¹

Caritas in Veritate: Pope Francis's reference to wisdom signals a fourth element of a synodal moral theology, namely, the deep commitment to the integral unity of wisdom, love, and truth. As the synod synthesis notes: "At the heart of many of these controversial matters [all key topics in theological ethics] lies the question of the relationship of love and truth" (III.15.d). The inextricability of love and truth "flow[s] from Christological revelation" (III.15). For, theologically-speaking, the Truth is a Person, not a proposition, who in Jesus encounters us always as God in our midst, which is love (III.15.e).

Pope Francis likewise challenges an abstract, propositional notion of truth, arguing again for a contextual epistemology—*knowledge* of the truth only comes through the practice of charity, and vice versa:

The necessary attention to the scientific status of theology must not obscure *its wisdom dimension*, as already clearly affirmed by St. Thomas Aquinas. . . . Therefore, Blessed Antonio Rosmini considered

³¹ For just a few examples, see the analyses: of virtue and medicine by physician Brian Volck in "What's Love Got to Do with It? Situating Theological Virtue in the Practice of Medicine," *Journal of Moral Theology* 1, no. 2 (2012):72–95; of peace-building initiatives by policy practitioners Isabel Aguilar Umaña and Cecelia Suarez Trueba in "Walking Toward Peace: Generating Synergies at a Regional Level," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 2 (2023): 96–105, doi.org/10.55476/001c.84394; and of gun ownership by sociologist Katie Day ("Guns, Construction of Threat, and Lived Ecclesiologies,") and attorney John E. Carter ("Natural Law's Return: Uncovering the Roots of Intractability on Guns as Prelude to New Growth"), both in the *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue No. 2 (October 2023): 84–107, doi.org/10.55476/001c.89313 and 33–57, doi.org/10.55476/001c.89310.

theology a sublime expression of “intellectual charity,” while asking that the critical reason of all knowledge be oriented towards the Idea of Wisdom. Now the Idea of Wisdom internally tightens Truth and Charity together in a “solid circle,” so that it is impossible to know the truth without practicing charity: “because one is in the other and neither of the two is found outside the other. So, whoever has this Truth has with it the Charity that fulfills it, and whoever has this Charity has the Truth fulfilled” (ATP, no. 7, emphasis in original).

Thus, as McCarthy noted in 2012, moral theology cannot be reduced to an intellectual exercise, but must equally seek to be a way of life shared with others that ploddingly, perhaps, forms in us the virtues of following Christ.³² It is not coincidental that our second issue focused on the theme of love,³³ or that the novel McCarthy drew on for his vision of the *Journal* was entitled *Love in the Ruins*. For Percy’s protagonist Tom More—riven by the metaphysical fragmentation of our culture and seeking the one, technical fix for it all—reaches a similar conclusion as the synod: “The unity of truth and love implies bearing the difficulties of others, even making them our own, as happens between brothers and sisters. This unity can only be achieved, however, by patiently following the path of accompaniment” (III. 15.f).³⁴

A Sacramental (Moral) Theology: A final element of a synodal moral theology that resonates with McCarthy’s vision for the *Journal* emerges from *Fiducia Supplicans* and the synod—namely, the integral relationship between (moral) theology and prayer, contemplation, and the sacraments. As the synod report notes, the Synodal path is “first and foremost a spiritual experience that stems from the contemplation of the Trinity and unfolds by articulating unity and variety in the Church” (Introduction). In practice, the October Assembly followed its own counsel that all synodal activities should be grounded in the Eucharist, scripture, and prayer (III.18.c). Prior to the opening session, attendees participated in a three-day spiritual retreat, and prayer and worship were woven throughout the month-long process.³⁵ On the level of theory, the synod report reprises the conciliar grounding of synodality in baptism and the Eucharist articulated in the first phases of the synod process (I.1.a, I.3.c, e, g, h, 1.8.h). Penance and reconciliation are specifically named as necessary resources for addressing the structural conditions that aided and abetted the church’s sins—from colonization and genocide to the abuse crisis (I.1.e, I.5.e). *Lectio divina* and the church’s rich spiritual traditions are proposed as

³² McCarthy, “Moral Theology in the Ruins,” 20.

³³ See *Journal of Moral Theology* 1, no. 2 (June 2012): jmt.scholasticahq.com/issue/1779.

³⁴ McCarthy, “Moral Theology in the Ruins,” 6.

³⁵ www.synod.va/en/highlights/retreat-for-the-participants-of-the-synodal-assembly.html.

aids to discernment (I.1.3) necessary for theology's integrative work (ATP, no. 7).³⁶

The challenges presented by centering the sacramental nature of a contextual, synodal theology are exemplified in the stiff resistance from some factions to the conclusions of *Fiducia Supplicans*. For some within the church, to suggest that God—via the church—could bless persons whose lives do not hew to particular marital norms has been met with a response not unlike that of those in the gospel who took offense at Jesus's practice of eating with tax collectors. As the document makes clear, *Fiducia Supplicans* makes no change in church teaching on marriage nor in its sacramental rite. Rather, deep and careful reflection on a particular sacramental practice (blessing) in light of encounter, listening, and dialogue with marginalized persons has resulted in what the Declaration calls "a real development," "a specific and innovative contribution to the pastoral meaning of blessings, permitting a broadening and enrichment of the classical understanding of blessings, which is closely linked to a liturgical perspective" (Presentation). In so doing, it may well provide one step in the important work of developing the more adequate anthropology—and consequently ecclesial and ethical discernment—called for above.

The Joy of Doing Synodal Moral Theology among the Ruins

It has often been said that it takes one hundred years for an ecumenical council to be fully received. Almost sixty years after the close of Vatican II, the lineaments of a Conciliar, synodal moral theology continue to crystalize. The incorporation of these lineaments into the documents analyzed here reflects the work of theologians and scholars—many of whom are lay people, women, and from the Global South—who have worked quietly and patiently in the academy and places of brokenness; praying, listening, conversing with each other, cultures, and disciplines; analyzing, and seeking to recursively discern the truth via the daily, ordinary work of love in order to evangelize both church and world.

Similarly, under the able leadership of Jason King and now our expanded editorial staff, the mission and vision of the *Journal of Moral Theology* continue to deepen and expanded, shaped by the evolving realities of our discipline, church, and context. Much has happened since 2012. Catholic theology and, now, the church itself, is even more fragmented, fomented specifically by the factions

³⁶ The phrasing of "true critical knowledge as wisdom knowledge, not abstract and ideological, but spiritual, [is] developed on one's knees, pregnant with adoration and prayer" is reminiscent of Gavin D'Costa's superb essay "On Cultivating the Disciplined Habits of a Love Affair, or On How To Do Theology on Your Knees," *New Blackfriars* 79, no. 925 (March 1998): 116–136).

McCarthy critiqued in 2012. The range of Catholic institutions—departments of theology, Catholic colleges and universities, parishes, Catholic health care—are increasingly fragile or closing, fueled by the ongoing sequelae of the abuse crisis, other failures in episcopal leadership, and regnant neoliberal ideologies. That same ideology—unmasked and compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the (yet again) new racial consciousness after the murder of George Floyd and the inevitable backlash against it, and the analogous culture wars around waged around the bodies of women and LGBTQ+ persons—has catalyzed what seems like cascading social and civic fractures, from the opioid crisis, the epidemics of loneliness and deaths of despair, and staggering increases in income inequality, to the global rise of right-wing populist movements, the nightmarish experiences of migrants and refugees, horrifying military conflicts thought no longer imaginable, and more.

The “ruins”—or perhaps, in Pope Francis’s term, the “peripheries”—continue to grow. And the *Journal* continues to believe that this is precisely the place where theologians are called to do our work. For, we maintain, it is especially in these places of extraordinary pain and brokenness that grace dwells, grace that via these places is manifest with particularities that must then be brought into conversation with other theological sources—scripture, tradition, metaphysics, liturgy, and more. As such, this synodal, contextual method moves beyond a contest of ‘schools’ to a (moral) theological method whose starting point, like Cardinal Bernardin’s attempt to build common ground, is ecclesiological—a vision of a richly diverse church, walking together; listening to God in all the places God speaks; and rigorously engaging with the tradition, the margins, cultures, disciplines, and each other, as a corporate agent of missionary discipleship shaped by the gifts and fruits of the Spirit and the practices of the Christian life.

The January 2024 issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology* exemplifies our ongoing commitment to engaging cultures, broadly construed. In our opening article, “‘And You, Africans, Who Do You Say Jesus Is?’: The Legacy of Laurenti Magesa for the Future of African Theology,” systematic theologian SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai evangelizes (most) US theologians with a new source of theological wisdom, namely, the work of Tanzanian theologian Fr. Laurenti Magesa. Via Magesa’s legacy, Ahiokhai reflects particularly on the challenges of reception in a context fractured by colonial trauma aided and abetted by the church. Importantly, Ahiokhai focuses on Magesa’s legacy for *African* theology and the *African* church.

The challenges of reception unite Ahiokhai’s article with Christopher McMahon’s “A View from the Dunghill: Learning Forbearance in a Synodal Church.” Writing as the synodal assembly was proceeding, McMahon—a systematician and scripture scholar—details new dynamics of dissent that have arisen over the last three

decades but come into full bloom since 2013. Fomented by precisely the two factions McCarthy critiqued, McMahon extends his analysis, demonstrating how these dissenters take issue not necessarily with a specific teaching (e.g., *Humanae Vitae*) but with the person of the Pope himself. In a presciently synodal move, McMahon suggests looking to an ecumenical source—the Mennonites—and their ecclesial practice of forbearance as a possible way to maintain unity amidst dissension.

Where Aihiockhai and McMahon turn to diverse cultures and faith traditions, our next two articles find constructive insights through dialogue with contemporary culture. In “*Blade Runner’s* Replicant Humanity: Self-Discovery and Moral Formation in a World of Simulation,” systematic and spiritual theologian Jean-Pierre Fortin turns to these classic films to study the role artificiality and simulation play in the formation of authentic human personal identity and morality in times of acute social and ecological crisis. As technology and AI increasingly blur the distinctions between natural and artificial, real and simulated, film—as a contemporary form of literature—provides an important medium for probing multiple dimensions of philosophical and theological anthropology.

Similarly, in “Afrofuturist Worlds: The Diseased Colonial Imagination and Christian Hope,” systematician and social ethicist Adam Beyt turns to contemporary media to begin to dismantle the diseased colonial imagination (also referenced by Aihiockhai), its problematic anthropology, and distorted theology. Forged out of embodied Black suffering, Afrofuturism—captured here via Janelle Monáe’s multi-media project *Dirty Computer*—is brought into conversation with Edward Schillebeeckx to explore a decolonial praxis based on eschatological hope.

As noted above, the emerging synodal theology relentlessly reflects and urges a Christological turn. In “Moral Exemplarism in the Key of Christ,” early-career moral theologian Noah Karger exercises the same intervention on the work of theorist Linda Zagzebski. Over against Zagzebski’s own account, Karger argues that a Christocentric reading of her exemplarist moral theology (EMT) overcomes certain epistemic challenges. This Christological, scriptural, and theological version of EMT provides a stronger interface with Catholic virtue theory.

In our final essay, “Power Literacy in Abuse Prevention Education: Lessons from the Field in the Catholic Safeguarding Response,” Cathy Melesky Dante, Mark A. Levand, and Karen Ross draw attention on yet another painful margin, the ongoing sequelae of the clergy abuse crisis. This interdisciplinary team of scholars draws on theology, psychology, sexuality studies, and the study of intimate partner violence to analyze the uneven landscape of safeguarding materials deployed

by Catholic dioceses across the US. Drawing on their own safeguarding workshop developed for adolescents and piloted in 2022, they propose that theological understandings of agency, power, relationships, and structures of virtue and vice are necessary for creating a more holistic framework for evaluating and creating adequate safeguarding materials.

This issue continues the mission of the *Journal of Moral Theology* as articulated in 2012 and provides a glimpse of an emerging synodal moral theology. It images, we hope, the definition of synodality offered in the synthesis report: “Christians walking in communion with Christ toward the kingdom along with the whole of humanity” (I.1.h). In so doing, we hope to be one place where the Church, “truly becomes a ‘conversation’ within itself and with the world” (I.2.a.), a conversation that is more than mere dialogue, but in the Spirit is the basis for personal, ecclesial, and disciplinary conversion (I.2.d). As such, moral theology can evangelize the church so as to aid its mission of pouring oil and wine on the wounds of all. **M**