

The Essential Moral Handbook



Old Testament Trinity
Andrei Rublev

The Essential Moral Handbook

A GUIDE TO CATHOLIC LIVING

KEVIN O'NEIL, C.Ss.R. & PETER BLACK, C.Ss.R.



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Contents

Introduction xiii

Section One: Foundations of a Moral Life 1

Chapter One: Created by Love for Love 2

1. Trinity: A Communion of Love 3
2. Implications of a Triune God for Humanity 5
3. The Human Face of God 7
 - The God of the Parable of the Prodigal Son 8
 - God's Love Never Fails 11
 - Implications for the Moral Life 12
4. False and Incomplete Images of God 13
 - God As Distant From the Concerns of the World:
Separating Spirituality and Morality 14
 - God As Lawgiver 16
 - God As Judge 19
5. Conclusion 21

Chapter Two: Responding to Love in Love 23

1. The Human Act 24
 - Human Knowledge 25
 - Human Freedom 27
2. The Virtuous Life: Gift From God and the Fruit of Freedom
for Excellence 32
 - Context for the Exercise of Freedom: Rightly Ordered
Feeling, Thinking, and Willing/Choosing 33

Contents

- Particular Virtues Tending Toward the Good:
 - Human (Moral) and Theological Virtues 40
 - Tending Toward the Good in Every Moral Act 53
- 3. Conclusion 55

Chapter Three: Conscience: Our Most Secret Core and Sanctuary 56

- 1. Conscience: What Is It? 57
- 2. Four “Moments” of Conscience 58
 - First Moment: Conscience As Desiring and Knowing the Good 60
 - Second Moment: Conscience As Discerning the Particular Good 65
 - Third Moment: Conscience As a Judgment for Right Action 77
 - Fourth Moment: Conscience As Self-Evaluating 82
- 3. Conclusion: Conscience As Heart 84

Chapter Four: Sin: The Betrayal of Freedom 85

- 1. A Word on Sin 87
 - In the Beginning 88
 - The Prodigal Son 89
 - Original Sin 91
- 2. The Catholic Tradition and Sin 92
 - Mortal Sin and Venial Sin 93
 - Formal and Material Sins 95
 - Sins of Commission and Omission 96
 - Sinful Thoughts and Attitudes 97
 - Social Sin 98
- 3. In Him There Is Plentiful Redemption 100
- 4. Conversion: Turning From Sin to God Through the Grace of the Holy Spirit 101
- 5. Conclusion 103

Section Two: Avenues to Moral Truth 105

Introduction 106

Chapter Five: The Roman Catholic Tradition 109

1. What Is Tradition? 109
2. Christian Tradition According to Catholic Teaching 110
3. “Big” Tradition and “Little” Traditions 111
4. The Catholic Moral Tradition 112
5. The Living Moral Tradition 115
 - Traditionalism and Enthusiasm 116
 - Images of Tradition 117
6. Conclusion: Tradition—The Quest for Wisdom 118

Chapter Six: Scripture: The Soul of Moral Theology 119

1. Scripture Calls Us to Greater Things 119
2. Scripture: The Basis for Love Responding to Love 120
3. Scripture: A Catechesis of the Twofold Commandment 121
4. Scripture: A Catechesis of the Beatitudes 125
5. Scripture: A Catechesis of the Human (Moral) Virtues 127
6. Scripture: The Story to Which We Belong 129
7. The Ten Commandments in Sacred Scripture 130
 - The First Commandment 131
 - The Second Commandment 132
 - The Third Commandment 133
 - The Fourth Commandment 133
 - The Fifth Commandment 134
 - The Sixth Commandment 135
 - The Seventh Commandment 136
 - The Eighth Commandment 137
 - The Ninth Commandment 138
 - The Tenth Commandment 139
8. Scriptures As a Lens and Source of Motivation 139
9. Scripture: Source of Formal and Material Norms 140

Contents

- 10. Scripture and Fundamentalism 142
- 11. For a Balanced Interpretation and Application
of the Scriptures 144
- 12. Conclusion: The New Law of the Grace
of the Holy Spirit 145

Chapter Seven: The Natural Law 146

- 1. Definition of Natural Law 147
- 2. Primary Principle of Natural Law 149
- 3. Four Inclinations of the Human Heart and Mind 151
 - To Preserve Your Life 151
 - To Marry and to Generate, Preserve, and
Educate Offspring 152
 - To Search for the Truth 153
 - To Live in Society 154
- 4. Reducing the Natural Law to the Physical 155
- 5. The Content of the Natural Law:
 - Primary and Secondary Principles 156
 - Primary Principles 157
 - Secondary Principles 157
- 6. A Contemporary Insight Into Natural Law 159
- 7. The Teaching Church and the Natural Law 160
- 8. Two Wings for the Human Spirit 161
- 9. The Natural Law and Moral Education 162
- 10. Conclusion 163

Chapter Eight: The Magisterium as Authoritative Teacher 164

- 1. What Is the Magisterium? 165
- 2. Varieties of Expression of the Magisterium 166
 - The Extraordinary Magisterium 167
 - The Ordinary Magisterium 167
- 3. Teaching With Authority 168
 - Models of Teaching 168

Contents

- 4. The Nature of Church Teaching and Assent Required of the Faithful 171
 - Definitive Dogma 172
 - Definitive Doctrine 176
 - Authoritative Non-Definitive Doctrine 177
- 5. Conclusion: A Common Task:
 - Tending Toward the Good for the Fullness of Life 178

Section Three: Specialized Moral Theology 181

Introduction 182

- Divisions of Theology 182
- Moral Theology and Its Subdivisions 183
- Tending Toward the Good/God 183

Chapter Nine: Bioethics: Safeguarding Human Life, Human Dignity, and Health 189

- 1. Introduction 189
- 2. Historical Overview 190
- 3. Tending Toward the Good in Bioethics 191
 - Respect for Human Life 191
 - Human Dignity: Balancing Autonomy and Relationality 195
 - Unity of Body and Soul 197
 - Health 198
 - Compassionate Care for Those Who Suffer 198
- 4. Suffering: Absence of These Goods in Varying Degrees 198
 - Response to Suffering 200
- 5. Principles: Aids to Moral Reasoning in Bioethics 201
 - Principle of Double Effect 202
 - Principle of Cooperation 204
 - Principle of Totality 205
- 6. Issues in Bioethics: Morality of Certain Responses to Suffering 206
 - Issues at the Beginning of Life 206
 - Issues at the End of Life 212

Contents

- 7. Guidelines for Consideration of Issues in Bioethics 217
- 8. Conclusion 218
- 9. Selected Bibliography of Church Teaching on Bioethics 220

Chapter Ten: Male and Female, God Created Them: The Catholic Tradition and Human Sexuality 221

- 1. The Gift and Power of Sexuality 222
- 2. I Call You Friends 223
- 3. Sexuality and Sex 224
- 4. Sexuality and Pleasure 226
- 5. The Sexual Virtue 227
- 6. The Christian Virtue 229
- 7. The Sexes: Male and Female 229
- 8. The Equality of Women 230
 - Gender Roles 231
- 9. Married Love and Life 233
- 10. Conjugal Unity 233
- 11. The Fecundity of Marriage 235
- 12. Everyday Struggles 236
- 13. Sexual Intercourse Outside of Married Love 236
- 14. Sexual Orientation and Sexual Behavior 237
- 15. The Christian Family 238
- 16. Some Specific Issues in Sexual Morality 238
 - Artificial Contraception 239
 - Premarital Sex and Cohabitation 242
 - Sexual Abuse 243
 - Persons With a Homosexual Orientation 245
- 17. Conclusion: The Need For, and Obligation Of,
Pastoral Care 247
- 18. Guidelines for Consideration of Issues in Sexual Ethics 248
- 19. Selected Bibliography of Church Teaching
on Sexual Ethics 249

Chapter Eleven: Social Ethics 251

1. Introduction 251
2. Historical Overview 252
3. Seeking Justice 252
4. Types of Justice: Legal, Commutative, Distributive 252
5. Tending Toward the Social Good 253
 - Solidarity Among All People 254
 - Common Good 255
 - Preferential Option for the Poor 257
 - The Good of the Individual Secured by Human Rights 259
6. Public/Political Dimension of Life 261
 - Family: The Original Cell of Social Life 261
 - The State: Insurer of the Common Good 263
7. Economic Dimension of Life 267
 - Rights Associated With Work 269
8. Social Dimension of Life 270
9. Specific Issues in Social Ethics 271
 - Public/Political Life: Legitimate Protection From Aggressors: Capital Punishment and Just War 271
 - Economic Life: Private Property 275
 - Social Life: Resistance to the Stranger:
 - Racism/Migration 275
 - Guidelines for Consideration of Issues in Social Ethics 278
10. Conclusion 279
11. Selected Bibliography of Church Teaching on Social Ethics 281

**Chapter Twelve: A Catholic Approach
to the Environment 282**

1. Introduction 282
2. What Is This Crisis? 283
3. What Is the Cause of This Crisis? 284
4. The Breaking of Relationships 284
5. Behold the Lilies of the Field 285
6. Brother Sun and Sister Moon 286
7. The Ecological Crisis and Human Ecology:
A Moral Problem 288
8. A Few Sobering Facts 288
9. So What on Earth Can We Do? 289
 - A New Solidarity Among the Nations 290
 - An Option for the Poor 290
 - Sustainable Development? 291
 - An End to War 292
 - A Change of Attitude and Lifestyle 293
 - Education 293
 - Influencing Policy 294
10. Hopeful Signs for Renewing the Earth 294
11. Let the Earth Praise the Lord:
Guidelines for Consideration 295
12. Selected Bibliography of Church Teaching
on the Environment 297

Afterword 299

Glossary of Terms 301

Index 311

Introduction

Our experience as priests and teachers of moral theology is that people often have a view of moral theology that is incomplete, that does not capture the fullness of moral theology nor the moral life. Many consider moral theology primarily as a field of theology which tells people right from wrong and offers moral guidance on specific moral issues. With all the developments in technology, particularly biomedical advances, people are daily reminded of the importance of reflection on the rightness or wrongness of action and, perhaps, as a consequence, have a heightened awareness of the field of ethics and moral theology. While it is true that the moral life is about right and wrong action, it is about much more than that. The very terms we use, that is, “theology,” “moral,” and “ethics,” can help us to comprehend moral theology more completely.

Saint Anselm described theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Although it is possible for an unbeliever to study the various disciplines of theology, the whole purpose of theology is for people to delve more deeply into their faith in an attempt to understand it more fully and to write down in a systematic way what they have learned. For example, we believe that Jesus is both divine and human. That statement of our belief has been mulled over through the centuries by theologians who have spoken to us of Jesus’ divinity and humanity. Using terms from philosophy, theologians have tried to express a bit more clearly *what* we believe and write it down so that it could be passed on to future generations. Our theological tradition develops as theologians over the centuries draw from, and build on, the thought of believers and thinkers who have preceded

Introduction

them. Thus, the task of theology is never completed, because we will never fully understand God nor, consequently, our faith. Still, the study of theology is an effort to penetrate the mystery of God and the mysteries of our faith more deeply and to pass those insights on to the whole community of faith, present and future.

When we speak of *moral* theology, then, we are getting more specific about what we are trying to understand—in this case, faith seeking understanding about moral matters. Ordinarily, the word “moral” refers to behavior, so, in its narrowest sense, moral theology is faith seeking understanding about behavior that is consistent with our beliefs. This definition represents a less expansive understanding of moral theology. If we go further, a brief look at the word “ethics” will help us to fill out our understanding of what moral theology is all about.

The Greek word *ethos* is the root of our English word “ethics.” In Greek, however, there are different spellings of this word and, consequently, different meanings. One meaning of *ethos* is related to the idea of “morals,” so the word *ethos* can refer to a particular custom or way of doing things. Another meaning of the word *ethos*, however, refers to the character of a person. We call a person “honest” if he or she consistently tells the truth. In that example, *ethos*, or ethics, includes both the right action of telling the truth and the character of the person as truthful. Thus, an examination of the Greek term *ethos* helps us to grasp more fully what moral theology is all about.

Before we complete this brief analysis of the words themselves, we might look at one more obscure meaning of the word *ethos* as a way to understand moral theology. *Ethos* also means “a residence,” or “a home.” At first blush, this definition may seem to have nothing to do with moral theology or the moral life. What does a residence or a home have to do with moral character and action? Granting that we all have had different experiences of home life, many people typically see “home” as the place where we belong, where we are ourselves.

Introduction

Might we not think of the moral life as a journey on which we are finding our way home to where we belong? Surely none of us has arrived at this point, nor are we totally consistent in our moral lives. The words of Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans could be ours, we are sure, as well. “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom 7:15). We envision where we should or would like to be, aware that we are not yet there. A graphic image, then, of the moral life is one of a journey home to where we belong. The story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:10–32) fits this image well. The moral life and moral theology are about finding the way home to our true selves.

All of this examination of words can help us understand better, we hope, why we speak of moral theology as faith seeking understanding about the type of people we become (moral character) and what actions are consistent with that identity. Put another way, moral theology is about finding the way home to our true selves as believers in the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. As we will see, “being home” is marked by right relationships with God, with others, with ourselves, and with Creation. This book will spell out in greater detail the Roman Catholic Tradition of moral theology that follows from this vision of moral theology and the moral life.

Section One of this book focuses on the foundations of the moral life. Our faith speaks to us of a God who created us in his own image, a Triune God. The first chapter examines the significance of the image of God at work in moral theology and its implications for the way we understand who we are called to be and what the moral life is all about. Our Triune God, who is community, invites us into relationship with him and with one another. In the second chapter, we examine our response to God in the moral life through our responsible use of freedom, a life of virtue, and well-ordered loves in our lives. Our response to our Triune God entails our own attention to our relationships. When thinking of the human person in moral theology, we must keep in mind our fourfold relationship:

Introduction

relationship with God, with others, with self, and with all Creation. The responsible use of freedom fosters “right relationships” in all of these areas. Chapter Three looks at the formation and exercise of conscience, making moral judgments which foster these right relationships. Failures in our responses break relationships. Chapter Four presents a biblical vision of sin within the context of relationship. Section One concludes with the theme of conversion, a focus on the journey home.

In Section Two, we move to a more theoretical area of moral theology, but an area with very practical implications for who we are and what we do. Entitled “Avenues to Moral Truth,” this section examines some of the resources that the Roman Catholic Tradition uses to discover the truth about ourselves and right and wrong action. We begin with an explanation of Tradition itself. Chapter Six looks at Sacred Scripture, the “soul of all theology,” according to the Second Vatican Council. With a particular focus on the beatitudes and the commandments, we examine how Scripture influences both our moral behavior and who we are called to be. Next, we look at the natural law tradition which has served as a very important source of moral wisdom within Roman Catholicism. In the eighth chapter, we consider the role of the teaching of the Church as a source of moral wisdom. The teaching office of the Church stands within the Roman Catholic Tradition and uses resources we will study as roads to moral truth to guide itself in offering sound teaching to the faith community.

Section Three of this work offers a brief overview of the various subdivisions of moral theology. In these chapters, you will find, outlined in broad strokes, the teaching of the Church gleaned from the resources studied in Section Two of this book and applied to specific areas of morality. We will summarize contemporary Roman Catholic teaching on social ethics, sexual ethics, bioethics, and environmental ethics.

Introduction

John's Gospel concludes by stating that all the books in the world could not contain everything that could be said about Jesus and his ministry. With no intention of comparing in significance the life and ministry of Jesus with the Roman Catholic Tradition of moral theology, the same could be said of the discipline of moral theology. We believe, however, that this book will provide readers with the essentials for grasping the Roman Catholic Tradition of moral theology and applying them to their own lives. Saint Irenaeus said that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. Our hope is that this work will contribute to a greater understanding of the fullness of life and bear fruit in the lives of readers so that God may be given glory.

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SECTION ONE

Foundations of a Moral Life



CHAPTER ONE

Created by Love for Love

Why begin a work on the essentials of Roman Catholic morality with a chapter on God? Some might think it more appropriate to start with humanity and human freedom since morality concerns our choices for moral character and good and evil actions. Yet, Pope John Paul II describes the moral life as a response “due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love” for us (*The Splendor of Truth*, §10). This description of the moral life seems more accurate for two reasons. First, God always acts first and thus the moral life begins with God’s grace. Second, we respond in freedom in the moral life to something that happens. It may be an unkind word, a violent act, a smile, a compliment. All these occur, and we respond in some way. As we will discuss later, the way we interpret what happens in our lives, the way we judge good and evil, precedes our action in freedom. This dynamic marks the moral life.

From our faith perspective, the moral life does not begin with us, but rather with God. Pascal once wrote that “we would not seek you, Lord, if you had not first found us.” God acts first in our lives. Consequently, an authentic image of God is crucial for moral theology for two principal reasons. First, we must know to whom we are responding and what the nature of the response should be. Second, focusing on truthful images of God moves us to a clearer understanding of ourselves and our purpose in life. Our Creation story and theology tell us that we have been made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). No other creature can make this claim. So, truthful images of God will yield a more authentic response in

the moral life that will, in turn, shape us truthfully in the image and likeness of God.

We are immediately confronted with a difficulty when speaking of God, however. Because God is mystery, it is impossible to fully comprehend God (CCC §§39–43). Our only way to attempt to understand God is by analogy, through reflection on our own human experience. That is what theologians have done for centuries. Our approach will be no different.

Our faith confesses a God who is Trinity and who has been revealed throughout salvation history. The mystery of the Holy Trinity is the most fundamental and deepest mystery of our Christian faith (CCC §234). We will reflect briefly on God as Trinity and on one particular image of God presented by Jesus in the Gospel according to Saint Luke. We also draw out the implications of the image of God for the moral life.

1. Trinity: A Communion of Love

One of the most beloved icons in both the eastern and western world is the renowned *The Old Testament Trinity* or simply *Trinity* by the Russian painter Andrei Rublev (1360–1430). A reproduction of this painting serves as the frontispiece of this book (p. II). This image is based on the Genesis story of three visitors at Mamre, three angels who surprised Abraham and Sarah with a visit (Gen 18:1–8). This scene from Scripture has been the occasion for artistic reflection on the Trinity for centuries.

Rublev's *Trinity* presents three haloed angels seated around a small table with a chalice in the center. True to the purpose of an icon, *Trinity* draws the viewer into itself in at least two ways. First, we are caught up in a subtle circular movement within the icon. The posture of each angel draws our attention from one to the other. The angel on the right appears to be leaning toward the angel in the middle, who, in turn, looks toward the angel on the left. The angel on the

left inclines its head toward the one on the right, thus bringing us back to the beginning. So, viewers would find themselves caught up in the movement of the glances of the angels from one to the other. We are also drawn into the painting by an open space at its base, where viewers would be standing. It is as if we are invited to a place at the table with the three angels.

Rublev's image provides a wonderful entry point into the mystery of the Trinity, to the God who created us, redeems us, and sanctifies us, while, at the same time, it invites a reflective response from each one of us.

First, the icon suggests our understanding of the relationship among the persons of the Trinity. They are coequal persons. In Rublev's image, it is unclear which angel represents which person of the Trinity. This observation is made more to indicate the equality of the persons in the Trinity than to suggest that the persons are one and the same. Each angel, in fact, is distinct: Father (Creator), Son (Revealer and Redeemer), and Spirit (Sanctifier). The life of the Trinity, conveyed in the image, is a union of love: the Father loving the Son, receiving the love of the Son, the Spirit as that love personified.

The first thing to say about the Trinity, then, is that it is a communion of love, an eternal giving, receiving and exchanging of love among the inseparable persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (CCC §221). This is the inner life of our Triune God, the way that the persons relate to one another. Some suggest that the position of the lateral angels in Rublev's icon forms something of a chalice, symbolic of the internal life of the Trinity as a chalice of love.

We believe, however, that God does not contain his love within the confines of the Trinity. It is God's desire to share love not only among the persons of the Trinity but to go out from their communion. This quality is caught in the icon at the point where the chalice of love, representing the inner life of the Trinity, is offered through the open space at the base of the icon; a real chalice is offered to the

viewer who has taken the observer's "place" at the table. Another interpretation of the significance of the open space is that it is the place where Trinitarian life flows over into a creative love.

The Creation of the world, and humanity in particular, is an expression, a manifestation, of God's love and reaching out to humanity. It is the original and universal testament to God's all-encompassing love (CCC §288). Thomas Aquinas says beautifully, "Creatures came into existence when the key of love opened his hand" (see CCC §293). Throughout salvation history, God continually reached out to humanity. The stories of our salvation recount these events, particularly through the prophets (CCC §§54–64). The fullness of the revelation of God, however, comes through the human face of Jesus of Nazareth. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb 1:1–2). Jesus is the concrete expression of God's love for us. John 3:16 says that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." The Spirit, also gift to us, moves us to know and to love Jesus and to seek union with the Father through him.

2. Implications of a Triune God for Humanity

What are the implications of this Trinitarian God for humanity made in his image and likeness? Created in God's image, humanity is destined to a life of love with the Trinity. Just as the Trinity is characterized by giving and receiving love, so too are we to be people of love, offering and receiving love in our own lives. This understanding of ourselves is fundamental and what we are about as God's creatures. In his encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II writes: "The meaning of life is found in giving and receiving love" (*The Gospel of Life*, §81, *Origins*, 24/42 [April 6, 1995]). This claim is rooted in our understanding of the Trinity as a communion of love. Created by Love, we are destined to live in community, in relationships of love.

Our becoming the image and likeness of God entails likening ourselves to the persons of the Trinity in their distinctiveness as well. The Father is the source and fullness of love and truth; we have been created in his image, made with a desire for God, a longing for love, for truth, for goodness, and for beauty. So, God the Creator has imprinted himself on us in this way. Our lifelong goal is to become who we in fact are, this image and likeness of God. Our insight into who the Father is has come to us chiefly through his Son, Jesus. The love and truth of the Father is manifest in Jesus and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Jesus reveals to humanity most clearly who we are called to be, since he is the fullest revelation of God. “In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, §22; CCC §359).

Through reflection on, and conformity to, the person of Jesus, we approach our true selves. We come to perfection and true stature in Christ. At the same time, like Jesus, we become the human face of God in the world, expressions of God’s love in the world.

The love between Father and Son is personified in the Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity. The Spirit, given to us at baptism, is at work first in our lives, prompting our desire for God and moving us to believe in and accept Jesus (CCC §§683–684). We are conformed to the Spirit through lives of love that bear witness to Jesus and move others to belief in him and to union with God the Father. We also image the Spirit who is the personified love of the Trinity in the loving relationships in which we participate.

Ultimately, Trinitarian life marks our moral lives by the communion of love in all our relationships, that is, our relationship with God, with ourselves, with others, and with all of Creation. The meaning of life is found in giving and receiving love. Trinitarian life is the model for this exchange of love, and it is the same Trinity which graces us to live it.