The Gospel Sources

Ancient Moral Catechesis
The New Testament contains numerous moral texts, both in the words of the Lord as reported by the evangelists and in the apostolic preaching. This teaching has its roots in the Old Testament, but deepens its doctrine and imparts a new dimension by placing it in relation to the person and life of Jesus.

The apostles and the first Christian communities took particular care to compile and transmit a precise moral catechesis faithful to the teaching of their Lord. The most representative example is the Sermon on the Mount. It gathers together in one great discourse, after the manner of the historians of antiquity, the teachings of Christ that present the rules of life, rules that will enable his disciples to attain a “justice surpassing that of the scribes and Pharisees.”

In order, however, to appreciate adequately the ethical character of these texts, we must remove from our minds certain modern notions that inhibit our ability to interpret them correctly. Moral theology has become the domain of obligations and legal imperatives and has set aside the question of happiness or perfection. Hence, it especially separates itself from spirituality and from parenesis, which is a form of exhortation. Such divisions were unknown in antiquity; one cannot apply them to the writings of the New Testament without being anachronistic. These divisions have led many interpreters, theologians, and
exegetes to view the scriptural texts that go beyond the level of strict obligations as not properly belonging to moral theology; this explains why these texts generally attract so little attention. This mindset is a major intellectual obstacle inhibiting our return to the ancient sources of the Christian life.

The Gospel texts presuppose a different conception of the moral life. Their moral teaching is a response to the question of happiness and of salvation. It offers a description of the ways of wisdom that lead to holiness and perfection through living the virtues and the precepts. From this perspective, moral theology encompasses a larger domain. It recovers the sapiential and spiritual dimensions essential to it. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, responds directly to the moral question understood in this way. It begins by announcing the Beatitudes; it then extends the moral pathways traced in the Ten Commandments to the precept: “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The Sermon on the Mount
Let us review rapidly the principal passages of the New Testament that offer moral catechesis, focusing above all on two characteristic texts. The Sermon on the Mount stands out at once. It is the first of five discourses that are the linchpins of Matthew’s Gospel. It assembles the essential elements of Jesus’ teaching on justice and the moral rules offered to his disciples. It is an explanation of the call to conversion: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4.17).

This discourse, which draws together into an ordered whole words that might well have been spoken on different occasions, is a model of the ancient moral catechesis. It can justly be called a “charter of the Christian life.” The Sermon enjoys the authority of the Lord, expressed in
categorical formulas: “Unless your justice surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”; “you have heard it said. . . . But I say to you. . . .” The text has undergone a work of redaction that has not been sufficiently recognized. It is composed of short phrases, often arranged together to form compact units such as the Beatitudes. They are bundles of condensed doctrine fashioned for oral transmission as well as for meditation. Assembled together they form a body of doctrine inspired by a single guiding wisdom. The Sermon is not a mosaic of disparate sayings. Although it does not follow the logic of abstract reason, it does exhibit an underlying unity. It conforms to the often contrasting movements of the deep intelligence of the human heart revealed in human experience. As John Chrysostom and Augustine well understood and explained to their people, the Sermon is addressed to all, beginning with the poor and the afflicted. Thus, contrary to what will too often be claimed later, it is not reserved to a religious elite.

The structure of the Sermon in its broad outline is relatively simple.

1. The Beatitudes take up the promises made to the Chosen People since the time of Abraham. These are the numerous blessings scattered throughout the Scriptures, as for example in the first verses of the Psalter. The Beatitudes focus the hope of the disciples upon the kingdom of heaven, paradoxically directed to the poor and those persecuted for Jesus’ sake, a message that expresses the experience of the first Christian generations. The Fathers saw in the Beatitudes the response of Christ to the question of happiness. When they present Jesus as addressing the philosophers’ central question, the question of happiness, they are portraying him as the true sage.

2. After the description of the disciples as the “salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” there is the
description of the “justice” of the moral law according to Christ. This description develops five of the precepts of the Ten Commandments by means of contrast: “You have heard it said. . . . But I say to you. . . .” Justice is henceforth placed at the level of the human heart, at the roots of action. It is there that the love of God and neighbor is formed and attains its summit in the forgiveness of one’s enemies, imitating the mercy and perfection of the heavenly Father.

3. Next there is the reordering of three primary acts of a pious life: almsgiving (the archetypical form of mutual assistance), prayer, and fasting (the principal form of asceticism). Instead of doing these acts to be seen by one’s fellows, one should engage in them for love of the Father who sees in secret. We return once again to the level of the heart’s intention, which places us by faith and love in communion with the Father. It is here at this central point in the Sermon that Matthew inserts the Our Father.

4. The last section is more diverse and brings together sayings that invite us to seek our true treasure in heaven. We are to guard against the attraction of wealth and to be benevolent in our judgments. We are also called to persevere confidently in our prayer.

5. The conclusion of the Sermon summarizes the teaching of the Law: It presents the Golden Rule as a practical criterion of discernment; it offers us a choice between the narrow way that leads to life and the broad way that leads to perdition; it distinguishes false prophets from true disciples by noting whether they practice the Word and exhibit the fruits and perseverance that the Word produces. The evangelist notes in conclusion the admiration of the crowd before the authority of Jesus, an authority that he will subsequently reveal through a series of healings.
Chapter I: The Gospel Sources

The modern interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount has principally addressed the issue of whether one can put this teaching into practice. The difficulty of interpreting the Sermon has been increased by the habit of viewing the Law as a code of obligations. In reality, the Sermon describes the ways of the kingdom of heaven toward which the Holy Spirit wishes to lead the disciples by faith in Jesus, a faith that operates through charity. Thus, the Sermon is integrated into a Gospel that both announces “Jesus Christ the Son of God,” and calls us to believe in him. This response of faith is impossible for those who count only on their own strength. The Sermon on the Mount, however, describes itself as accessible to the humblest who know how to receive the gift of grace and love. This, at least, is how the Fathers interpret the Sermon.

The “Paraclesis” of the Letter to the Romans

We find the second example of moral teaching in the second part of the letter to the Romans, in chapters 12 to 15. It is a model of apostolic catechesis. It has a different style from the Sermon: While the Sermon enjoys the authority of the Lord whose words it proclaims in formulations, the letter to the Romans presents the doctrine of an apostle who shares what he himself has received. The passage begins with a significant term, a term that reappears regularly in St. Paul: “I exhort you brothers and sisters. . . .” The moral teaching of the apostles is made in the manner of an exhortation among brothers and sisters in the name of the Lord from whom it receives its force. We shall call this mode of teaching a “paraclesis” (from the Greek word that Paul employs: parakaleo [I exhort], from which comes “Paraclete,” a word signifying the Holy Spirit [Jn 14.26]). We do so in preference to the usual “parenesis,” since
*parenesis* evokes a simple recommendation on the spiritual plane, without any direct impact in moral science. This great text from *Romans* was continually commented on by the Fathers and the early scholastics. Yet, like the Sermon on the Mount, it was much neglected in the years that followed.

The *paraclesis* of the letter to the *Romans* depends directly on the first part of the letter, which deals with justification by faith, life in the Spirit, and the love of Christ. The *paraclesis* explains concretely how those who believe in Jesus and are animated by his Spirit are called to live. This progression is natural and would not have caused difficulty if later theologians had not intervened to cut the thread that joins the two halves of the letter. Among Catholics this separation was expressed in the division between dogmatic theology, to which the teaching of faith belongs, and moral theology, to which the second part of the letter was relegated, and subsequently reduced to a form of spiritual exhortation. Among Protestants the opposition was between faith, which alone justifies (a topic treated at the beginning of the letter) and works, along with the virtues (a topic addressed in the second part of the letter).

In our view, it is not possible to return to the apostolic sources unless we discover how to reestablish the connection between the act of faith and the moral life, and thereby recover the holistic unity of *Romans*.

The *paraclesis* of chapters 12 to 15 possesses a specific structure and sketches for us the dominant lines of Gospel morality, coming to a close by offering a response to certain precise problems. The stages of this teaching are the following.

1. The Christian life is true worship. It is a liturgy where we offer to God as a living sacrifice our bodies and our persons, discerning what is good and pleasing to him. The term “body” (*soma*) employed here evokes the body of
Christ offered in the Eucharist and the body that forms the Church (12.1–2). One can, therefore, refer to the liturgical dimension of Christian morality.

2. Shaped by faith, moral teaching takes place within the context of the faithful’s participation in the body of Christ. They are members of this body and have received a multitude of gifts and ministries that they exercise for the good of all (vv. 3–8). This is the ecclesial dimension of the apostolic moral teaching, which returns to the fore in 1 Corinthians (ch. 12).

3. This ecclesial unity and generosity are the work of charity. Paul describes charity through a collection of characteristics that form a prototypical passage composed of brief, well-chosen notes that in Greek have an assonance and rhythm that facilitate memorization. With these successive brushstrokes, St. Paul paints for us the face of the Christian (vv. 9–13). (See C. H. Dodd, Gospel and Law: The Relation of Faith and Ethics in Early Christianity [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957]).

4. The picture is completed by a passage full of energy that calls to mind the Sermon on the Mount: the invitation to bless one’s persecutors, to seek out what is humble, and to conquer evil with good. This is the summit of Gospel agape (vv. 14–21).

5. After this more general part, Paul presents the attitude that Christians should hold toward civil authority, which at that time was pagan. One should offer civil authority a frank and active obedience, an obedience that flows from one’s submission to God and love of neighbor, which the Apostle sees as the summation of the entire Law (ch. 13.1–10).

6. Pauline moral teaching also has an eschatological dimension: sustained by the hope that the coming of Christ is a day that is going to appear, the Christian is invited to “put on Christ,” and in the light of Christ to remain
vigilant in the battle against the works of darkness (vv. 11–14).

7. The Apostle next examines at length (chs. 14 to 15.6) the delicate problem of divergent practices among the faithful with regard to diet and days of the week. Paul’s response is a model of Christian discernment in the treatment of cases of conscience, something that we also find

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**The Face of Charity**

*Romans* 12.9–13

Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with fraternal affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in affliction, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.

*1 Corinthians* 13.4–7

Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not jealous; it is not boastful; it is not arrogant or rude; it does not seek its own interests; it is not quick-tempered; it does not brood over evil; it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

*Galatians* 5.22–26

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit. Let us not be conceited, provoking one another, envious of one another.
in 1 Corinthians. St. Paul demonstrates with great refinement how to give priority to fraternal charity in the discussion of concrete cases.

8. The conclusion takes up again the major themes of the entire letter, offering the example of Christ. Christ became the servant of all (Jews and Pagans) in order that they might live as brothers and sisters in the faith through the mercy of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Other Texts Containing Moral Teaching
Besides these prototypical examples of the moral catechesis of the apostolic period, we should note a series of other texts that are often equally rich. The order in which they appear in the Scriptures is as follows.

1 Corinthians: Paul first examines a series of “cases of conscience,” concerning incest, recourse to pagan tribunals, fornication, and so forth, which he resolves through rational arguments and chiefly in reference to Christ (chs. 5–11). Paul then in chapters 12 and 13 presents the hierarchy of the Spirit’s gifts. Principal among these gifts is charity, which holds the body of Christ (the Church) together and inspires the other virtues, ministries, and charisms.

Galatians 5: Paul offers a description of spiritual combat that opposes the works of the flesh against the fruits of the Spirit, beginning with charity.

Ephesians 4.1–5.32: an exhortation to preserve the unity of the one Body and the one Spirit by casting off the “old self” and putting on “the new self . . . created in God’s way in justice and holiness of truth.”

Philippians 2.1–17 and 3.1–4.9: an exhortation to imitate the attitude of Christ in humility and obedience to the cross in order to participate in his glory and to become imitators of Paul, who strains in his race to seize the prize that is knowledge of Jesus.
Colossians 3.1–4.6: an exhortation to love in Christ in order to put on the new self “which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” We note as well the two great introductory hymns of Colossians and Ephesians (Col 1.15–20 and Eph 1.3–14), which describe the mystery of salvation in Christ, offered as the object of Christian hope and contemplation; they reveal our destiny according to the divine plan.

1 Thessalonians 4.1–5.28: an exhortation to holiness and vigilance in waiting for the Day of the Lord. We are to wait as children of the light in the imitation of Christ, an imitation that underlies one’s imitation of the Apostle and of one’s brothers and sisters (1 Thes 1.6–8 and 2 Thes 3.7).

Let us add several references to other New Testament writings that present a moral doctrine.

James, with its wise teaching, so concrete and pungent.

1 Peter, which is a veritable jewel of moral paraclesis, whose teaching is often close to that of Paul and the Sermon on the Mount.

1 John, with its great and characteristically Johannine themes: the light of the Word and the darkness; sin and the world, charity and faith.

Two Poles of the Moral Teaching of St. Paul

In conclusion let us turn to the two major poles of the moral teaching of St. Paul that will guide later theology.

1. In the face of Jewish moral teaching (which laid claim to justice) and Greek moral teaching (which alleged to have wisdom), and in light of their inadequacy, Paul puts forward a moral teaching that has a new source: the person of Jesus who shares with his disciples the justice and wisdom of God, through faith and the work of charity poured into their hearts by the action of the Holy Spirit. Christian action, therefore, is equally a life “in Christ,” and a life “in
the Spirit.” The trilogy of faith, hope, and charity control the other gifts and virtues.

2. At the same time, Paul invokes the creative work of God in nature and in the conscience of the human person, in harmony with the Gospel. Two texts stand out in this regard: according to Romans 1.19–20 and 2.26, the pagans can both know God by his works and know the moral law written in their hearts. Paul recommends to the Philippians that they have concern for “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just . . . if there is any virtue and if there is anything worthy of praise” (Phil 4.8). This is an invitation to receive with discernment whatever is just and best in the teaching of the philosophers, even among the pagans; Paul himself does not hesitate to borrow at times from popular stoicism, and to offer reflections that appeal to human common sense in the judgment of cases of conscience. This double foundation, supplied by faith and by reason, grace and nature, will be taken up continuously in the teaching of subsequent generations, but the emphasis will vary greatly from one period of the Church’s history to another.

Lastly, let us note a fundamental rule of interpretation for all of these evangelical texts: one cannot understand fully their moral teaching unless one puts it into practice in a spirit of faith. The interior experience of living these texts reveals their reality and truth, which can be compared to a rock on which one can build solidly. We are not dealing here merely with a collection of beautiful ideas, but with a Word that grounds existence and gives life to those who docilely and actively receive it.