CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: THE PRACTICABILITY OF CHRISTIAN MORALITY

A. Introduction

Throughout this part I have tried to clarify the norms for living a Christlike life. If Christians must follow any imperative, they must follow this one: Imitate Christ. Chapters twenty and twenty-one clarified what it means to be like Christ, while the other chapters of this part prepared for and dealt with the use of the Christian norms articulated in the two central chapters. Still, one question remains: Is Christian morality practicable for us? Or are we to regard Jesus as a wonderful but impractical ideal?

Some argue that if one takes Christian morality too literally and too seriously, the effort is likely to end in psychological disaster for the individual and in social disaster for the community. Others suggest that Christian morality should be taken literally and seriously, but that care must be taken to avoid rigorism. The standard is a high one, a standard of perfection. If people fall short of such a standard, the argument concludes, the shortcoming should be considered imperfection, not sin.

The older Catholic moral theology was very concerned to avoid rigorism. This concern is legitimate, for it is the other side of the coin of insistence on real conformity with norms. If truly impossible norms are proposed, or if norms possible for only a few are made the standard for all, then the many will give up in despair. Hard games are for the few; Christian life is for all; therefore, it seems that Christian life must not be presented as too hard a game.

To deal with the question of rigorism, I shall discuss briefly the formation of personal Christian vocation, since it is in this context that the Christian modes of response make their full demand and also are fulfilled. In part seven I will provide a more extensive treatise on the strategy for living a Christlike life.

B. In what sense is Christian morality an ideal?

There are several senses in which Christian morality does propose an ideal, and there are three senses in which its norms are practical standards for life, not mere ideals.

Compared with any conventional morality, even compared with the moral standards of reflective and critical nonbelievers, the modes of Christian response require a life above and beyond the call of duty.

The life of the consecrated person who fulfills the counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience also represents an ideal. Although all Christians are called to holiness, not all are called to pursue it in this most apt way, as I explained in chapter twenty-two, section J.

One also can refer to norms whose fulfillment is admitted to be exigent as ideals, insofar as they are principles of a faithful and determined effort. For example, purity in thought in sexual matters can be called "an ideal," not to deny that the deliberate violation of such purity is a sin, but to point out that most people attain it only by a determined struggle, sometimes marred by more or less serious failures through weakness. In this sense, much of Christian morality proposes ideals, for many of the modes of Christian response only gradually gain control of one's imagination and emotions.

Similarly, the perfect love of God--love of Him with one's whole mind and heart and soul and strength--which is the goal of Christian striving is an ideal, for one proceeds toward it only by determined effort carried on through the whole of one's life.

Finally, Christians ought to bear witness to Christ by their common life in a loving community, which would substantiate by its practice what it proposes in the Gospel it proclaims. Yet for any individual Christian, the shortcomings of the Church are insurmountable. Individuals can only work to build up the Church and pray that the Spirit will make their work fruitful. Thus, the perfection of life in a Church fully conformed to the heart of Christ is an ideal. Although the Church should provide His perfect image, the face of Jesus appears in her in an obscure way, due to the sinfulness of her members.

Nevertheless, the norms of Christian morality are practical standards for life, not <u>mere</u> ideals, in at least three important senses.

First, as I explained in chapter twenty-two, section I, not all the Christian norms are supererogatory. The modes of Christian response are not counsels of perfection; they are essential aspects of the Christian character.[1] The counsels mark out the best way to pursue holiness; the modes of Christian response are, as it were, the various facets of the gem of charity, which is the center of holiness. Therefore, as all are called to holiness by a call which has the exigence of precept, so all are called to act in accord with the modes of Christian response.

Second, many (perhaps even all) conventional moralities develop an ideal, a projection of the perfect style with which accepted norms might be fulfilled by someone who lives according to them. An ideal in this sense includes certain esthetic elements, and it is tied to particular cultural conditions. Christian morality has room for ideals in this sense, but Christian moral norms are not themselves elements of such an ideal. In this sense of "ideal," both Thomas More and Elizabeth I express the English ideal. St. Francis establishes a certain lifestyle of his own, which is Christian, but (precisely as distinctive) not essential to Christian life. Christlikeness is not an ideal of this sort. Probably it is fortunate that the gospels give us too little description to make an esthetic model of the life of Jesus.

Third, some moral theories begin by trying to formulate norms for a society in which every member is perfectly upright; they then proceed to try to adapt this wonderful system to the actual world. Kant does this, and many theologians who have been influenced by him have tried to construct an interpretation of Christian morality along these lines. The difficulty with this approach is that among the highest norms of Christian morality are requirements that we love enemies and undergo evil with redemptive intent. Such requirements would make little sense in a perfect community. Thus, Christian

morality does not propose an ideal as if it were designed for life in heaven. On the day of the Lord, His own no longer will need to suffer for His sake.

C. Can Christian morality be taken literally?

Sometimes it is argued that the norms of Christian morality cannot be taken literally. All Christians are subject to certain occasions of sin which could be avoided if they were blind. Are all of them to pluck out their eyes? Is the saying of the Liturgy of the Hours in choir to be forbidden in favor of saying it in one's closet? Are we to offer no resistance to the evil of a kidnapper who is trying to snatch one of our children?

Some suggest that while the teaching of Jesus was meant to be taken literally, it was aimed at the brief interim before an expected, early end of the world. Others urge that if we do not pluck out offending eyes, we have no better reason to remain faithful in a marriage which has hopelessly broken down--for example, if the other partner obtained a civil divorce, remarried, and is having children in this relationship.

There is a difference between taking teaching literally and taking it out of context to impose upon it a simple-minded interpretation. Christian moral teaching, especially that in the gospels, certainly is to be taken literally; however, it must be understood accurately, not misunderstood by superficial reading.

Hyperbole--exaggeration for rhetorical effect--is found in many illustrative examples in the gospels; Jesus clearly was fond of this figure of speech. But if one reads statements in their wider context, one can discern what is hyperbolic from what is not. In the catechesis we find in the epistles, there is nothing about plucking out offending eyes. But the teaching on divorce is stated by St. Paul with the explicit assertion that it comes from Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 7.10-11). Similarly, the modes of Christian response which are articulated in the gospels also entered into the more prosaic formulations of the catechetics of the epistles, as I showed in chapters twenty and twenty-one.

Of course, there are cases in which the precise norm could not be disengaged if one had only the text of the New Testament. But the Bible exists in the Church, and the Church has constantly read and interpreted it. Hence, one can look to tradition to clarify many obscure points.

For example, one might not be certain whether the Christian prohibition of oaths (cf. Mt 5.33-37) is an unexceptionable or a prima facie norm. The tradition makes clear that the norm is prima facie. Christians ought to be consistently honest, speaking as it were always under oath; if they are perfectly honest, they never have occasion to take an oath on their own initiative. However, if a process--for example, in court--requires an oath, then the Christian is permitted to acknowledge publicly that he or she is bound by faithfulness to God's truth also to speak truly under these conditions.

By applying the norm of the Church's understanding of the New Testament's moral teaching, one can be certain that this teaching was not intended only for the interim before the momentarily expected second coming of Christ. The Church always has taken this teaching to be the message to be conveyed to all nations and times. If the New Testament's specific moral norms could be dismissed as an interim program, there would be nothing revealed there for us.

It also is worth considering that if we are to be exempted from moral norms because they are impractical to live by in a world not momentarily expected to end, then it seems inconceivable that Jesus should have expected anyone to live by these norms for, say, one month. For if one can live up to Christian moral norms for one month, one can as well live up to them for two, and so for the whole of one's life--which, after all, will end quite soon.

Not only is reasonable literary-critical interpretation of the body of Christian moral teaching necessary, sound theological methodology also must be used in applying it. The whole body of norms must be considered together; one cannot accurately determine the duties of a Christian by looking at a few norms in isolation and ignoring many others. Prima facie norms limit what otherwise might be taken to be one another's fields of application. Thus, if one must avoid making a show of one's piety, this avoidance does not rule out public, communal prayer. And if one ought not to resist evil as a strategy for dealing with it, one still ought to protect one's children from kidnapping, if necessary by using force.

However, the use of a sound theological methodology for the application of Christian morality is one thing; the substitution of principles at odds with Christian norms is quite another. The latter procedure is not interpretation and application. Thus, as I explained in chapter sixteen, section P, consequentialism cannot be used as a tool for "reformulating" Christian morality.

D. Is it possible to fulfill the norms of Christian morality?

"Possible" and "impossible" are words with many meanings. In the context of discussions of moral norms, one needs to be careful to give them a precise sense.

Morally, one cannot be responsible for anything about which one cannot make a choice, except to the extent that one's present voluntariness was conditioned by a past failure to choose or to make a right choice. This fact is important, for if one is not responsible, one certainly is not guilty. If one is not guilty, one cannot repent and one need not amend (what one, after all, has not done).

But under what conditions is it impossible for a person to make a choice about something which has the characteristics of an imaginable action?

Obviously, one cannot make a choice if the imaginable action never occurs to one. Much Christian morality is impossible for this reason to most people who have never heard the Gospel.

Again, one cannot make a choice if the imaginable action is suggested, but one can see no point at all in doing it. Thus, a child told (not by a parent or someone in authority) to give still more of his or her share to another child who already has unfairly divided a candy bar will not find the suggestion possible to accept, for the child will see no point in acting thus. Given the same suggestion by a parent, the child would find

it puzzling, but perhaps possible to accept with reluctance out of obedience. Given the suggestion with some explanation of the Christian reason for acting in this way, and also given parental example of such a way of acting, the child might willingly begin to act like a Christian.

Finally, one cannot make a choice of an imaginable action, even if it occurs to one and seems interesting, if one cannot think of any way even to begin to do the act. For instance, if a person who knows no German is given a book written in German, he or she might imagine reading it and be curious about its content, but be unable to choose to read it, for lack of any idea as to how to begin. Similarly, someone who is depressed and is told: "Pull yourself together and cheer up!" is unable to choose to do this, for lack of any idea of how to begin trying to do it. An adolescent boy told simply to avoid the occasions of sins of impurity is likely to have a difficulty of this sort.

On some of the preceding grounds, the fulfillment of Christian moral norms can be impossible for some people. However, the preaching of the Gospel and catechetical instruction calls these norms to the attention of Christians and also provides some explanation which shows--more or less vividly--the point of trying to live up to them. Furthermore, anyone who receives sound Christian moral instruction and spiritual direction is never confronted with something which cannot be chosen because nothing is offered which one could even begin to try to put into practice.

Hence, in the strict sense, Christian morality is not impossible. One could choose to try to put its norms into practice. If one ought to do so and does not, moral responsibility and guilt follow.

When Christian moral requirements are said to be impossible to fulfill, ordinarily one of two things is meant. First, sometimes the meaning is that the Christian norm is absolutely incompatible with a contrary commitment, which a person (or many people) will not give up. For example, Christian morality concerning honesty in business is impossible for people who are in business, who are determined to survive in competition with dishonest rivals, and who simply cannot survive while remaining honest themselves. Second, sometimes the meaning is that the Christian norm is not easily integrated into one's whole being, so that although one usually wills to fulfill it, one sometimes gives in to temptation and violates it by a sin of weakness. In a discouraged frame of mind, for instance, a person struggling against sexual temptation, alcoholism, or a volcanic temper might say that the Christian standard is impossible.

"Impossible" in these cases is not being used in a strict sense, for one knows what is good, sees the point in choosing the good, and knows how to do something, at least, toward fulfilling the requirement. In fact, one chooses freely not to respond to the good or to give in to temptation. (In the latter case, guilt often is mitigated. Sin of weakness will be discussed in part six.) Therefore, "impossible" probably is used in such cases as part of an effort at self-deception, to deny moral guilt which nevertheless is freely accepted.

Very often nonbelievers and those who use "impossible" in the loose sense argue that Christian morality is incompatible with human nature. It is unnatural for a person to be honest when everyone else is cheating, and to maintain this honesty even to the point of losing his or her livelihood and means of supporting dependents. It is unnatural for a person to live without sexual satisfaction. It is supremely unnatural to love enemies, to retaliate by doing favors, and to willingly accept suffering for the benefit of those who are inflicting it upon one.

This argument is not wholly without its foundation. Christian responses are incompatible with fallen human nature; children of Adam as such--merely natural men--are bound to sin. But nothing is impossible with God (cf. Lk 1.37). Those who are dead in sin can be raised to new life; the miracle of moral regeneration is demonstrated by miracles of bodily regeneration (cf. Mk 2.1-12; Mt 9.1-8; Lk 5.17-26; Jn 11.1-44; Rom 5.12-19). With faith, one is borne up; without faith, one sinks in one's sins (cf. Mt 14.22-23). Human nature is not static; its sinful condition is open to radical transformation (cf. GS 5).

In Christ, the old nature is put to death and a renewed one given (cf. Rom 6.1-11). Jesus liberates from the confines of fallen human nature, and His Spirit provides a new principle of life (cf. Rom 7.24-25; 8.7-11).

> The grace of God has appeared, offering salvation to all men. It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires, and live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, as we await our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of the Great God and of our Savior Christ Jesus. . . . We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, and far from true faith; we were the slaves of our passions and of pleasures of various kinds. We went our way in malice and envy, hateful ourselves and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our savior appeared, he saved us; not because of any righteous deeds we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the baptism of new birth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Ti 2.11-13; 3.3-5).

Human nature truly is renewed. God's grace is sufficient both to convert the sinner and to sustain the faithful person in his or her weakness (cf. 1 Cor 10.13; 2 Cor 3.5, 12.9). "Impossible" ought to be excluded from the language of Christian life. One can keep the commandments, for one can choose to do what one can and pray for God's grace to make the impossible possible. He will give this grace (cf. DS 1536-1539/804).

E. Is the Christian life likely to lead to disaster?

If it is admitted that life according to the norms of Christian morality is not impracticable in the sense of being utterly impossible or unsustainable by men and women empowered by God's grace, still it will be argued that any consistent and thorough attempt to live the Christian life will end in personal and social disaster.

That living the Christian life will end in personal disaster in this world cannot be denied. Suffering and persecution are part of what Christians are promised. These must be accepted with faith as one's share in the redemptive work of Christ.

Very often today one hears the argument that Christian life is bound to lead to

psychological disaster. The strain of fulfilling the standards of Christian marital morality, for example, is pointed to as a cause of marital disharmony and as a reason for approving contraception. This objection is insubstantial in theory, yet it is formidable for people engaged in pastoral activity and counseling, and so it deserves some consideration.

The psychological difficulties which arise for those who try to live according to Christian moral standards probably stem from two sources. First, if one lacks insight into the personal and human value of fulfilling the Christian norm, one undertakes to live up to it, if one undertakes this at all, only for the sake of ulterior considerations, such as fear of mortal sin and the threatened punishment of hell. Second, if one lacks a helpful and supportive community and yet tries to do anything which is very difficult, the strain can become unbearable for an individual. This is especially so if one is trying to live in a way which is at odds with almost all of the people with whom one is in daily touch.

The remedy for the first source of difficulties is more adequate instruction, especially in Christian moral principles. The faithful need to be helped to see the intrinsic connections which form a tight chain between their act of faith and their motives for making it, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the difficult requirements of Christian life. If the faithful are not so instructed, they might undertake to live according to Christian standards out of obedience to the Church's teaching for the sake of attaining heaven and avoiding hell, but this undertaking will be unnecessarily burdensome and can lead to psychological difficulties.

In saying this, I am not suggesting that the hope of heavenly reward should be deemphasized. Quite the contrary. The morality of Christian love demands that this motive be greatly emphasized. If one loves one's father, one does what he wishes in order to obtain the rewards he promises, when it is clear that he wishes one so to act. Likewise, if we love God we will be eager to gain our heavenly reward, for He has made it clear He desires this of us.

What I am suggesting is that the meaning of this heavenly reward as fulfillment needs to be explained to Christians who find it hard to live their faith. They can be helped by understanding the intrinsic relationships between life in this world and heavenly fulfillment (which was the subject of part two), the reason why Christian life in this world must be difficult if it is to be worthwhile (which was the subject of part three), the way in which faithfulness to the Church's teaching helps Jesus complete His redemptive work on earth (which was the subject of part four), the beauty of the gift one can offer to God by living a life like that of Jesus (which is the subject of the present part), and the process of growth in holiness which truly is possible and necessary (which will be the subject of part seven). Understanding these things, Christians who find living up to their faith hard will nevertheless find it meaningful, not meaningless suffering.

The Church's teaching never has left these intrinsic connections wholly obscure, but they need to be made clearer, and they can be and are being made much clearer today. If priests and teachers will do the work necessary to understand these matters deeply and to convey richly and abundantly what they come to understand, good fruit for Christian life can be expected.

The other problem of a psychological kind arises from lack of an adequate, supportive community. "Help carry one another's burdens; in that way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6.2). Here, too, the Church always has offered help and still does. Yet much more is needed. The Church consists in sinners struggling for salvation; it needs to have something of the character of a flourishing chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. Its members suffer repeated experiences of shipwreck; it needs to have something of the character of those groups who by mutual support and common effort have survived shipwreck and sailed to safety in small boats over thousands of miles of open sea. Its members feel weakness and loneliness; it needs to have something of the character of the mother whose capacious lap and soft breast offer comfort to her little ones. The Catholic Church has shown less of these qualities in modern times than have various Protestant churches. Much work needs to be done to make the Church the home and family which it ought to be.

From a social point of view, also, many express the fear that life according to Christian principles would be utterly destructive. For example, what would happen to a nation which refused to violate human and Christian standards of morality by carrying on war in its modern forms?

Three things should be borne in mind in thinking about this question. First, it is largely hypothetical. People with real Christian convictions hardly are likely to gain and stay in positions of great worldly power. Second, Christian norms would not rule out altogether carefully restricted uses of defensive force. The exclusion of violence is a prima facie norm, but Christians also are required to fulfill their responsibilities by defending the weak, and the fulfillment of such responsibilities can justify the use of deadly force and cooperation in such activity, as I explained in chapter twenty-three, sections K-N. Third, the machiavellianism of nonbelieving politics also leads to human disasters of great scope. If the current strategies eventually lead to a large-scale thermonuclear war, as seems likely, it will be clear that the world might have been better off if some participants in current power struggles had preferred policies more in accord with Christian standards.

F. A further note on Christian responsibility in social matters

Throughout history, those who seriously tried to live in accord with Christian moral norms have been accused of social irresponsibility. In ancient times, refusal of service to the pagan gods by the Christians was blamed for the decline of the fortunes of the Roman empire in its confrontations with barbarians. Today, advocates of violent revolution condemn as squeamish Christians who resist this approach. The argument is that one should be more concerned about human misery and less concerned about moral purity. Those who refuse to dirty their hands in the cause of revolution are said to lack

humane compassion.

This line of argument might be telling against a stoic, who so exalts the importance of moral rightness as to make a veritable idol of this human value: "Let right be done, though the heavens fall!" A person who takes this view and who makes no clear connection between moral uprightness and perfect human fulfillment is in an embarrassing position. Even a sound rational morality, which cannot show that integral human fulfillment is more than an ideal, asks for a great deal when it demands that palpable human misery be endured for the sake of an ideal possibility.

However, Christian faith proposes that fulfillment in Christ is the real future of humankind. Morally upright action in this life is not demanded for its own sake, as if morality were the ultimate value. Rather, moral goodness is necessary for the sake of human fulfillment. The upright acts of men and women will contribute materially to fulfillment in Christ; these acts are destined to last forever.

The resistance of faithful Christians to doing what they believe wrong as a means to mitigate social evils is based partly upon the conviction that these evils simply do not compare in significance with the heavenly fulfillment which is to come: "I consider the sufferings of the present to be as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us" (Rom 8.18). Nor is this a hope for purely individualistic salvation; it is a hope for humankind as a whole, and even for the entire universe (cf. Rom 8.19-25). Christians are most perfectly fulfilling social responsibility when they work energetically and unselfishly to spread the redemptive truth and life of God to all humankind. By the same token, the Christian who is satisfied to keep the faith as if it were a private possession does show frightful social irresponsibility.

Christians also resist doing what they believe evil because they realize that the seemingly rational methods of violence really will not prove effective in dealing with human misery. Revolutionary violence leads immediately to tremendous misery; marxism, for instance, has inspired acts which already have caused hundreds of millions of deaths and much suffering. At the same time, such methods do nothing to overcome evil, for evil is not an obstacle to be demolished or a problem to be solved, but rather a privation to be healed by redeeming love.

Those who conform to the mind and heart of Christ by refusing to do evil in an effort to overcome evil are not afraid of dirty hands so much as they are reluctant to cut off the hands of the unjust in an effort to prevent their unjust deeds. Deprived of hands, the unjust can find hooks to use in creating misery even more efficiently. The Christian way is to allow one's own hands to be pierced, and then with pierced palm to shake the hand of the evildoer. In washing from himself the blood of one who will not do violence, the evildoer is offered a new opportunity to look at his own hands, and to allow them to be cleansed of evil.

G. How do people organize their lives?

The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with the question about rigorism. Christian moral norms specify the common norms of morality; therefore, failure to fulfill them on the part of those who are aware of them and could fulfill them is moral evil. Any morally evil act or omission is a sin. And so failures in Christian humility, dedication, detachment, faithfulness, mercy, devotion, conciliatoriness, and self-oblation are sins.

Of course, not all sins are mortal sins. But failures in Christian modes of response are not mere shortcomings, imperfections, or less than ideal (yet nevertheless good) ways of acting. Many will consider this position too strict--rigoristic. I will try to show that it is not. As a basis for showing this, I first explain how people organize their lives.

Even before a child makes any free choice, its life has a certain degree of intelligible order. The intelligible goods are willed by simple volition, and possible actions understood as conducive to these goods are willed by spontaneous willing. Moreover, having acted and experienced a participation in an intelligible good, a child can spontaneously will to have and enjoy experiences of that sort. Thus, a child comes to have likes and dislikes, and it tends to do what it likes to do and to avoid what it dislikes doing.

A child of four or five can plan and carry out a project of some complexity to try to obtain something he or she wants. For example, a child can try to obtain a number of items in order to have a party. Such a scheme involves ordering a number of actions to definite goals, all of which are subordinated to a complex act in which the desired satisfaction will be attained. Children of this age also are able to do and refrain from doing a variety of things out of obedience. Obedience is accepted as a means to attaining or retaining the conditions necessary for satisfying many likes and dislikes.

As I explained in chapter nine, section F, this development of a child prior to its first choices is not without moral significance for its later life. The likes and dislikes the child develops, its patterns of scheming, its relations to those who make demands, and thus the whole organization of its life will be the framework within which choices will be made. The child will not choose anything it cannot think of as a live option. It will find difficulty in choosing anything which runs too heavily against its established identity.

The patterning of the life of the child continues after it has begun to make choices. To the extent that these choices are morally good ones, the developing likes and dislikes, the increasingly large projects, and the general organization of its whole life will remain open to integral human fulfillment. But to the extent that these choices are morally bad ones, the child will develop likes and dislikes, adopt objectives, relate to authority, and thus organize a life which is more or less nonrationally limited and indisposed to wholehearted love of intelligible goods.

Many people probably do not organize their own lives beyond the level of structuring which is based upon spontaneous willing with its development of likes and dislikes, the selection of some definite goals and objectives, and the making of choices within their existing framework. Within the context of a conventional morality which never is

radically questioned, people can live their entire lives without ever reflecting independently upon the meaning of life, taking a personal stand with respect to various basic human goods, and so establishing a personal identity by commitments. Choices, although free, which always presuppose a framework of existing likes and dislikes, and a set of accepted goals can be understood to a great extent in terms of these prior factors. Hence, if there are no commitments, the radical character of the capacity for free choice does not become apparent. This fact helps to explain why free choice is fully appreciated only within the Jewish and Christian tradition (as I explained in chapter eight, sections D-E).

Some people also take greater control of their own lives and cause themselves to be in a more radical sense by making commitments. Commitments, as I explained in chapter nine, section I, are free choices of a special sort. In making commitments, persons do more than assert likes or dislikes and adopt determinate goals to be reached by projects of however large a scale. In making commitments, persons take a stand with respect to an aspect of one or more of the existential goods, and also in relation to one or more other persons. The making of the commitment demands at once only some minimal outward performance, perhaps only a symbol. It remains to shape many later choices.

By commitments people form and join genuine communities. By commitments people also establish their own identities, by deciding to be something through dedication to a good--for example, to be a scholar or a priest. Commitments people make obviously introduce a new dimension of organization into their lives. The possibilities for commitments are more or less limited by what one already has become. But commitments can cut against many existing likes and dislikes, can demand the abandonment of old projects and the excogitation of new ones, and can enthrone genuine authorities.

Moreover, commitments, because of their open-ended involvement with intelligible human goods, provide a principle for living life creatively. A person whose life is shaped by commitments has far greater scope--and a different sort of scope--for creativity than does a person who lacks commitments. For a person with commitments tries to think up ways of serving goods, and thus projects possibilities in situations which do not suggest themselves if the situations are looked at merely in terms of likes and dislikes and projects.

H. Why do the lives of many Christians seem to become stalled?

Christian faith is a commitment. It is the acceptance of participation in the redemptive act of Christ, as I explained in previous parts, especially in chapter twelve, section E, and chapter thirteen, section G. As a commitment which has potential significance for every interest and relationship, the act of living faith should organize life and generate continuous growth toward Christian perfection. There are various reasons why in many cases no growth is apparent. Here I sketch a common situation, which at least partially accounts for the immobility in many Christians' lives.

To begin with, the faith is presented, as it should be, as a covenant which has moral implications. One who believes must keep the commandments. However, as I explained in section E, above, the commandments are not easy to keep, especially if the intrinsic connections between faith and these moral requirements are not made clear and if a vital community does not support and encourage the efforts of its members.

The specifically Christian modes of response are preached, especially and universally in the liturgical readings. The faithful know that some demand is being made by this teaching, yet to a great extent they remain unclear about exactly what is required. Some gestures toward fulfillment on an occasional basis seem sufficient. Thus, humility is served by an occasional self-deprecating remark when one is tempted to brag, mercy by occasional donations to charities, and conciliatoriness by trying to get along with an especially obnoxious associate at work. In practical terms, what else exactly can one make of these fascinating but rather frightening sayings one hears on Sundays?

Meanwhile, one has developed--as every child does develop--a whole set of likes and dislikes, and a whole variety of projects. These make their own demands. Whatever one might take specifically Christian moral teaching to mean, it is only a set of prima facie norms, and these are in practice limited by one's existing organization of life.

Perhaps apart from faith itself there is no other important commitment in an individual's life, and faith often is understood less as a commitment which demands anything affirmative than as a commitment which forbids various otherwise interesting possibilities--acts which would be mortal sins. Perhaps there are some other commitments, but these are made without respect to faith--not against it, but simply without any definite relationship to it. For example, a young person might become seriously interested in studies, in social justice, or in some art or sport and make a genuine commitment to a group which is concerned with such goods, yet see no connection between these concerns and his or her act of faith.

As the young person reaches the end of adolescence, life is likely to be organized more or less as follows. Some rather strong likes and dislikes control a large part of the action. Among these are the liking for pleasure in experiences and for personal gratification in accomplishments, especially in relations with other people--for example, gratification in helping them, in winning their admiration, in receiving their praise, in defeating them in competition, and so forth. Some of these lead to the selection of some very long-term projects--for example, the setting of a career objective, understood as a state of affairs in which maximum gratification of a most desired kind will be able to be obtained.

There might also be some genuine commitments apart from faith, which open areas for personal, creative development, but which also render likely the emergence of tensions between loyalties to these groups and to the Church, should the commitments which are not integrated with faith require something forbidden by the Church's teaching.

Faith itself remains as an overarching commitment. The Christian life of such a young person is not necessarily insignificant. There can be a real effort to live within the framework of the Church's essential moral teaching. Yet faith has no bite on most of life's activities. Religion is a concern, but only one among many. Most of the time,

specifically Christian teaching simply has no relevance. What does self-oblation have to do with getting through a professional program, which is necessary so that one can have a career one will enjoy? What has mercy to do with football weekends?

Under these conditions, even the making of certain choices which unquestionably have the character of commitment can be colored to such an extent by mixed motives that they do little to organize life in accord with faith. Thus, a young couple might marry, yet regard marriage more as a project of mutual gratification than as the acceptance of their proper way of living their Christian lives together. Some men enter the priesthood more as a project for self-fulfillment than as a way of service. (It is no wonder that those who enter upon life with such motives are impatient with preparation. They regard it more as an obstacle to be surmounted, than as the first and most important part of the service to which they are committed.)

Lives organized as I have been describing lack the structure of personal vocation or are very partially and ambivalently organized by this structure. The commitment of faith is more or less isolated and in competition with many other cares and interests. The possibility of mortal sin--at least from time to time--is considerable; the possibility of a determined refusal at some point to repent is real. This latter refusal can lead to loss of faith. But even without it, and even in a life with few or no mortal sins, the lack of affirmative and thorough organization by faith blocks any significant growth in holiness. Most of every day's activities are hardly touched by living faith; at best, they coexist with it in a condition of indefinite détente.

I. How personal vocation can organize life

Personal vocation has been discussed in chapter twelve, sections F and G. Here I wish only to add a few remarks which will help to clarify the way in which one's Christian vocation can organize one's whole Christian life. Because the religious life does this job most simply, I begin with it.

A person who enters upon the religious life undertakes a major commitment which clearly implements the commitment of faith. The decision to enter religion probably is made with certain mixed motives. Nevertheless, preparation to take the vows and living in accord with them brings the commitment to bear against the individual's likes and dislikes. The vow of obedience tends to remove the possibility of developing projects which will provide means for one's own gratification. Other commitments must be held in abeyance or subordinated to the commitment to religious life. In being subordinated to it, they are also brought under the commitment of faith. Thus, rather quickly, an individual who enters religion (assuming a sound community with an adequate formation program) organizes all--or at least much, and increasingly much--of his or her life to implement the commitment of living faith.

The simplicity and effectiveness of this way of organizing one's life in the light of faith is one reason why religious life is a very apt means for pursuing holiness. The content of the religious life is another, and probably more important, reason. But one certainly cannot love God with one's whole mind and heart and soul and strength if most of oneself exists without any affirmative integration with one's commitment of living faith.

In simpler and less affluent cultures and societies than our own, the commitment to Christian marriage could function for those who undertook it in a truly Christian spirit very much as does the commitment of the religious vows. A couple who committed themselves to indissoluble faithfulness, to a common effort of mutual sanctification, and to having and raising children for God expressed their faith in the form of marriage and family life. A simpler culture left them with few other commitments to make. Many men worked simply to support themselves and to care for their families; their social life and community involvements were oriented back toward the welfare of their families. Most women had no life except that of family and Church. With faithfulness to the family commitment, virtually the whole of life was brought under the sway of faith working through love.

As I have said before, one should not think of personal vocation solely in terms of these large-scale commitments. The child who undertakes to become more like Jesus each day is making a commitment to implement faith; such a simple commitment is a basic one for personal vocation. It is later defined and articulated in a more sophisticated way; it need never be replaced.

Similarly, a person who enters religion or marriage as a major vocational commitment has various other commitments of various sorts--for example, to justice in civil society, to groups of friends, and so on. And after taking one's religious or marital vows, one still has occasion to make additional commitments compatible with them. These need to be united to form a single, integrated identity. If they are, then the whole, complex personal self formed by commitments is determined by faith and counts as one's personal response to God's unique vocation.

In our society, where greater complexity and affluence make for greater liberty, everyone faces more choices and has a more complex task if the whole of life is to become the fulfillment of one's personal vocation. A special difficulty is that in a pluralistic society, a person with faith associates and cooperates with those who have no faith, and tends to acquire worldly attitudes toward various activities. The association and cooperation cannot be excluded, but Christian life will be blocked from its proper integration if any commitments are made which do not affirmatively express faith or come under the sway of those that do. Moreover, Christian integration will be blocked if there is room for activities in the service of likes and dislikes, projects aimed at various desired states of affairs, which fall under no commitment at all.

J. How does the organization of life in response to vocation lead to progress?

The fact that a Christian's life is organized as a response to personal vocation does not guarantee progress in holiness or even minimal perseverance in grace. One always can be radically unfaithful. However, once life is organized in this way, one who

is not radically unfaithful is almost compelled to make progress, slowly or quickly, toward holiness. There are several reasons for this.

First, to try to live out one's vocation is an attempt to put the rest of oneself in the service of the source of vocational commitment--namely, living faith. But integration of the self with living faith is precisely what progress toward holiness is. One loves God with one's whole mind and heart and soul and strength by putting one's whole self to work to carry out the commitments one makes out of this love. Of course, the commitments themselves are initially imperfect. However, the effort to live them brings out their imperfections and enables one to purge them more and more of the mixed motives which originally contaminated them.

Second, as one tries to live out one's vocation, the residual elements of other organizations of the self are challenged. For instance, a married person who enjoyed hobbies for their own sake now must fit them into family life or give them up. If they are rightly subordinated to the family, these domesticated interests also come within the sphere of faith.

Third, the specifically Christian modes of response begin to take on clearer and more definite meaning as soon as one views one's whole life as a personal response to one's unique vocation. Understanding one's life in terms of a commitment of faith to God, one is likely to begin to ask Him for things and to realize that goods come from Him, and so humility develops. Knowing one's life to be a response to one's call, one accepts one's role and its difficulties with resignation. Detachment and faithfulness begin to take on definite meanings. One's Christian vocation implies responsibilities which go beyond what others could justly expect, and so the demands of mercy take shape.

Fourth, the inescapable, intrinsic dynamics of Christian transformation takes hold. To avoid mortal sin and its occasions, to get rid of dispositions to sin and temptations, one is compelled to deepen and purify one's Christian commitment, to seek to overcome evil with good, and to accept suffering for Christ's sake. For example, in the needs of sick or defective children, in difficulties about finances, in the problem of family limitation, and in all the stresses and strains of their common life a married couple come to find the precise shape of their own cross. For every person who sees life in terms of personal vocation, the time comes when actual moral options narrow down, and the chance to be a Christian without fully responding like one no longer exists.

If one's life has not been organized as a response to a personal vocation, the same sorts of difficulties arise, but one is not very well prepared to meet them. Discouragement easily sets in. The absolutely minimal limits of moral demands are investigated, and even these are breached with a more or less clear consciousness of responsibility and by a more or less firm choice. Nevertheless, the possibility always remains that one struggling along in such a marginal Christian life will recognize its inadequacy and undertake a renewal of commitment to Christ.

K. How can Christian perfection be demanded without rigorism?

The preceding sections have clarified the ways in which people organize their lives, and especially how Christian lives can be most perfectly organized, namely, when the whole of life is lived as a personal response to one's unique vocation. In the light of these clarifications, one can see how the specifically Christian norms which flow from the modes of Christian response can have the exigence of precepts, so that failure to fulfill them is sin, without Christian morality becoming rigoristic in a way classical moral theology rightly sought to avoid.

The solution is that the modes of Christian response are affirmative and the norms they generate are prima facie. One is bound to fulfill them only to the extent that one becomes aware that they require something definite here and now, and that the requirement is not limited by some other moral norm.

A person whose life is not ordered in the form of personal vocation is not clearly aware of many definite requirements beyond those which flow directly from the common modes of human responsibility. Such a person is not directly bound by requirements of which he or she is not aware. To the extent that one is aware of specifically Christian responsibilities, they become exigent. But this awareness grows only gradually as one's life unfolds. Often the awareness begins with a realization that a major commitment must be made and that it cannot be made rightly except in fulfillment of one's faith--for example, that one cannot rightly enter marriage except by committing oneself to it as a sacrament, with the implication of absolute indissolubility.

When the older moral theology insisted upon the need for a serious effort to strengthen oneself against temptation and to avoid even less obvious occasions of sin, it implicitly insisted upon a responsibility to fulfill specifically Christian modes of response. If these were not recognized as duties in themselves binding under pain of sin, their more than optional character nevertheless was recognized at the precise points at which they do become binding. In practice, what I am saying is not more rigoristic, for I do not suggest that there is grave matter where the Church has not said so, and I do not even suggest that imperfection is venial sin until the obligation to move toward perfection is recognized to be such.

What the older moral theology lacked was a clear understanding of the intrinsic and dynamic relationship between the demands of natural law and the life of Christian perfection. These were thought of as two worlds, each complete in itself, existing on different levels.

On my account, the relationship is more organic, like that of an animal's vegetative and sentient life. For an animal, unlike a plant, a complete system of growth, nourishment, and reproduction without sensation and emotion is quite impossible. The animal's vegetative life is the foundation for its higher, sentient life; but, at the same time, only by unfolding into the full, animate life of its kind can any animal long survive and flourish even in its most basic vegetative functions. Similarly, according to the explanation articulated in the present part, Christian life specifies human life, and human life can be lived as it should only if one becomes Christian and proceeds toward Christian perfection. For fallen humankind, life in union with the redemptive act

of Jesus is the only way to live a good human life.

No doubt, Christian life is difficult and its demands strict. One works out one's salvation in fear and trembling (cf. Phil 2.12-13). But the fear can become more and more perfect, less a matter of anxiety and more a matter of reverence, and the trembling less a sign of self-conscious nervousness and more a sign of the movement of the Spirit and one's eagerness for the good things He gives.

Rigorism is relative. To ask fallen men and women as such to live as children of God is too strict; to ask adopted children to live the divine life of and by themselves still is too strict; to ask adopted children of God to live as His children by living in Christ is not too strict (cf. Jn 15.4-7). Christians can do the works Jesus does and greater; to ask this is not to ask too much, not because any human person can live so by human power, but because the Father gives those who believe the power of the Holy Spirit of Christ (cf. Jn 14.12-18). Mary and the other saints are only human persons; what God has done in them He wishes also to do in every Christian, because His will is our sanctification (cf. 1 Thess 4.3; 2 Tm 1.9).

The gift of the Spirit is love. Love makes possible, even easy and joyous, what without it would be impossibly difficult. Without minimizing the requirements of Christian life, without compromise, love finds a way--the way which is Jesus, the way of the cross, the way to resurrection and eternal life. Following this way, Christians moved by the Spirit create new and beautiful lives, which they offer to God. Thus in exchange for the gift of His Son and His Spirit, of His own truth and love, we return to the Father the gift of our own lives, truly human but also with Jesus and in His Spirit truly divine.

L. A note on the complexity of the moral methodology

The moral methodology articulated in this part is likely to seem very complex. Students will wish that a simpler "system" might be used for moral-theological reflection. Unfortunately, I do not think that the complexity is avoidable. The situation here is not altogether unlike that in medicine. There was a time when a physician could learn what was needed rather easily; the practice of medicine was not too complicated. Today, a competent physician must be able to practice in accord with contemporary knowledge of bodily functions, diseases, drugs, and so on.

However, the situation is not as difficult as the analogy suggests. Moral theology articulates faith. The complexity of the methodology is not greater than the richness of faith, upon which one ought constantly to meditate. The present theological reflection is more complicated than the older moral theology mainly because it interprets systematically a wider range of the data of faith, making explicit many connections which formerly were left implicit.

One ought not to be impatient with this explication, which makes for complexity. In part, it is needed today for more effective pastoral work. One can see this to be so, for example, in the obvious unsatisfactoriness of merely insisting on the Church's moral teaching as a set of norms to be obeyed when it is possible to make their intrinsic sense clearer in the light of fundamental truths of faith.

Even more, complexity is needed so that today we can create and offer to God the new and different gifts a richer understanding will make possible. Our lives will not necessarily be holier than the lives of saints of former times--certainly, for example, not holier than the life of Mary. But her holiness already exists; it is in place in Christ. From us God wants something else: lives in which divine love and human action are more consciously--and so more humanly--integrated. For making this particular gift, a more completely articulated moral theology is a necessary instrument.

Nevertheless, Christian life is not reserved for an intellectual elite. No one's holiness is limited by his or her intelligence quotient. From each, God asks only what is possible: the open heart of faith which accepts the gift of divine love, and the willingness to follow Christ in the light of that faith and by the power of that love.

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This part is being completed on the Third Sunday of the Year. The readings today make clear the vast difference between the law of Moses and the new law of Christ. When the people of Israel heard the law of Moses, they were so dismayed by its burdensomeness that they wept (cf. Neh 8.9). The law seemed an extrinsic imposition; all were held to its observance in every detail, regardless of personal differences.

Christians, by contrast, are closely united as members of the one body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12.27). What is required of each is nothing but what he or she must contribute to fulfill his or her proper function--a personal vocation--within the life of this one body. The body of Christ enlivens and perfects every one of its parts. The principle of power and vitality need not be sought for each part by itself; this principle belongs to the whole body, for Christ is anointed with the Spirit (cf. Lk 4.18). The law of Christ is an inner exigence of love; each of His members is called to respond to love's call when and as it makes itself personally heard.

Note to chapter twenty-four

1. Ignace de la Potterie, S.J., and Stanislaus Lyonnet, S.J., The Christian Lives by the Spirit (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1971), pp. 197-219, show how St. Paul teaches the universal call of Christians to perfection.