



Confessions of a Franciscan Ethicist

Confessions are never easy. Typically, the stage is set by a collage of eye-openers. In my case, the events that propelled me headlong into this public disclosure are interlaced with the common thread of what-it-means-to-be-a-Franciscan. First, some while ago, a new acquaintance of mine innocently asked, with clearly spoken italics, "So, what's it like to be a *Franciscan* ethicist?" Second, for the last fifteen years or more I, together with all the members of my religious congregation, have been encouraged to immerse myself in, and be formed by, not only the ideals and vision of St. Francis of Assisi, but also the eponymous religious tradition fathered by him.

And, third, while reading several months earlier Cardinal Ratzinger's 1996 address critiquing moral relativism, I was revisited by an old uneasiness.¹ I kept asking myself: Are you suffer-

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ing from some kind of Franciscan schizophrenia or *what?* My difficulty, in a nutshell, was this. From one side, I was perfectly at peace with the fact that new pope's exposition confirmed me in the way I help my clients, students, and readers to identify the fallacies of moral subjectivism. But, from another side, I was unsettled by realizing that my way, like the pope's, was not Franciscan in approach but Dominican and Thomistic.

The first incident urges me to confess—to *acknowledge*—that until I was questioned I honestly never thought of making a practical connection between being an ethicist and being a Franciscan. The second experience encourages me to confess—to *declare my sin or failing*—that I have dragged my feet when expressly recalling how Franciscan spirituality actually shapes the here-and-now manner in which I “do” ethics. The third episode prompts me to confess—to *admit my belief*—that Franciscans and Dominicans can learn a lot from each other, specifically from the charisms of their respective traditions. For the details of this tripartite confession (and a summary critique of moral relativism to boot), I invite you to read on.

I confess that I previously neglected to give serious thought to *whether* my being a Franciscan could affect my ethics work. Learning from the lessons of life is a lot about making connections. And making connections is all about understanding what things mean. Before facing the question I began with, I confess that “Franciscan” is not one of the adjectives I routinely used to describe my avocation. I was a *Catholic* ethicist; I was a *Christian* philosopher; I was an ethicist who is a *vowed religious*. But I had just not taken that seemingly small step toward saying—and comprehending what it means to say—that I am a *Franciscan* ethicist. In other words, before I did some careful analysis of the matter, being a

Franciscan was just a footnote of, rather than organically related to, my work as a vowed religious ethicist.

So, wittingly or unwittingly, the questioner forced me to confront a real hiatus in my thinking and action. *Why* did I fail to connect the dots of being a Christian, an ethicist, and a Franciscan? The longer I thought about it, the more deeply convinced I became that the crux of my problem was not a rift between my avocation and vocation but my intellectual failure to link my Christian and consecrated-life vocations to my Franciscan calling. I was letting my Franciscan identity wither, and so it was not having its full effect on my life and apostolic work. Lacking attention from me, it was overshadowed by my Christian and religious vocations, becoming a dim semblance of what it should have been.

Suddenly all those instructions I had received before and during my formation began flowing through my mind. To live as a Franciscan is to respond to Christ's call to follow him, to follow the universal call to holiness, the call I received at my baptism, the call to live and think with the church. To be a Franciscan sister is to incarnate the gospel life that inspired Francis to total discipleship through the vows: "go and sell," "take nothing along," and "deny yourself." Hence, distinct but interrelated components simultaneously guide my following of Christ. I have dedicated myself to the evangelical call to holiness, to the long church tradition that draws on prayer and the authentic sources of Christian spirituality, on the recent instructions of the church on the vowed life, and on the particular lifestyle proposed by St. Francis of Assisi.

There it was: the proper frame within which I could think anew about being Franciscan in my work as a Christian ethicist. And, for me, seeing Franciscan identity against its proper background was to understand, as if for the first time, its close relationship to my Christian and



consecrated vocations. Within this frame, I understood why being a Franciscan is essential in my avocation, my vowed life's apostolic mission to be a Catholic ethicist.

I confess that I had never given serious thought to the manner in which being Franciscan did, does, and will affect the way I do ethics. I am confessing here my past failure to explicitly recall the leaven of Franciscan values in the dough of my apostolic service. You see, I had forgotten to note their here-and-now effect, not so much on the content and method of my professional activities, but on the style, manner, and spirit in which I do my work. Once I had explicitly adverted to that leaven, however, I realized I had here a virtu-

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ous circle. Frequent meditation on my Franciscan values fostered an ever more Franciscan self. The more spirited my Franciscan heart, the greater likelihood its values—continual conversion, poverty, humble “minority,” and prayer—would be evident to those I serve.²

First, take the Franciscan charism of *poverty*. Where every consecrated religious takes vows to live as the poor, chaste, and obedient Christ lived, followers of Francis embrace his special love for poverty. Note that, for *il Poverello* (the little poor one), poverty was a code word for living the gospel. As such, the vow encompassed not merely being monetarily and materially poor but also the more demanding challenge of imitating the *kenosis*, the radical self-emptying, of Jesus. For Franciscans, then, special esteem for the vow of poverty means asking for the grace to be formed into the image of the Servant-Lord who washed the feet of his disciples and gave up his

life out of love for sinners. For this Franciscan, then, the ethics consults that are “baked in the cake” of my everyday service afford me the precious gift of correcting and encouraging, praying with and, yes, sometimes sharing a good cry with, my clients, moving them ever more surely, moral choice by moral choice, toward their ultimate end of the Good. I frequently remind those who consult me that, because their love of the Truth and the Good is so profound, our exchange puts me in *their* debt. Indeed, these consultations provide me and them the double blessing of serving Christ in each other.

Second, while every religious order requires its members to conform to Christ by living virtuously, Francis put *humility* at the top of his list. Imitating Francis, I am called to give first place to the truth about myself as well as my abilities. The former lets me see that God can sing through this poor instrument as long as it is emptied of self; the latter helps me to know that all is gift. While it is true that God has blessed me with the ability to inspire people in their pursuit of the Good, I pray that my being a Franciscan shines through in the way I respond to accolades. After a lecture, for example, I always, but always, turn people to the *real* source of their inspiration: “Oh, I am so pleased you were moved by the truth of *Humanae vitae*! Isn’t it a powerful document?” or “I see that the wisdom and holiness of Edith Stein really spoke to you. Thank God for the living witness of his saints.”

Third, all religious congregations encourage living in community as an explicit way to serve fellow religious and strengthen them in their service of the larger society. But Francis wanted friars and sisters to be *minores*, persons who lived together and claimed no special rule or domination or power over anyone. Striving for that attitude as an ethics consultant, lecturer, and teacher, I provide knowledge and advice not in an imperative or domineer-



ing way, not in a manner that makes my moral authority felt, but in a way that appeals to the freedom and dignity of others. In doing so, I reflect and “preach” the value of “minority” by being submissive to those I serve for the sake of God.

Fourth, where the church has always encouraged religious to a deep conversion and self-emptying, St. Francis insisted that *penance/continual conversion* take primacy of place in the mindset and practice of his followers. Pursuant to a Franciscan vocation, the disposition of *metanoia*

means letting oneself be totally captured by Christ. It means unremitting movement toward the Good and avoidance of evil. These are the very desires I continually try to foster in those I serve. Frequently I exhort couples, “You

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will be tempted to give up, to cease wanting to convert to the Lord in the midst of challenging procreative issues. But resist the quick fix ‘solutions’ of contraception, sterilization, abortion, and IVF. The trade-off for expediency in these matters is an attenuated spousal relationship, a weakened family bond, and lost opportunities to lay down one’s life for the other out of love.”

Finally, from his lived experience of the gospel, Francis understood that love must include mission. To demonstrate this he turns our attention to Mary, the perfect disciple. Francis’s way of being Marian was to emulate the boundless love of Mary for her Son, love which flowed into the *spiritual and corporal works of mercy*. Francis

encourages every follower of his to frequently recall the scene of Mary standing beneath the cross, standing in the center of the struggle between good and evil, reminding all—but especially a female Franciscan ethicist like me—that God combats evil through holy men and women, through those who are dedicated to *instructing the ignorant* by teaching morality.

I confess my belief that today's moral climate requires me to morph into a hybrid ethicist: a Franciscan-Thomist. Recall that my uneasiness with the pope's response to moral relativism was largely because his position—and mine—were in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition rather than in the Franciscan tradition. If we had sought a Franciscan answer, it would have come from Bonaventure or his theological successors, Duns Scotus or William of Ockham. Had these men fought a heresy of relativism in their day, they would characteristically have appealed to a voluntarist solution. That is, the best way to avoid the errors of relativism comes from the Platonic way of understanding universal truth, namely, participation in innate ideas. In sum, to avoid the intellectual pride all too easily associated with philosophical speculation, these Franciscan theologians would have insisted that people do best by simply submitting their wills to the universal moral truth brokered by the church's magisterium. The Franciscan/Augustinian solution to moral relativism, then, would not have included rational arguments that yield *a reason why* people should submit their wills to the church's objective moral teaching.³

Against this background, I take personal solace from a central theme of the pope's theology (which is Augustinian, after all): the need to return to reason as a first step in combating moral relativism. The pope proposes, not naked reason, but reason purified by faith—or clarified by the God who is *Logos*, who is reason and the Word. A



faith that opens people to the living God “liberates reason from its blind spots” so it can be “more fully itself.”⁴

Implicit in Benedict XVI’s critique of relativists—those who contend that judgments about good or bad, right or wrong, are time-and-circumstance matters of personal opinion—is his reliance on Aquinas’s philosophical vision of human nature and its transcultural basic needs.⁵ Since all persons unhampered by ideology, bias, or intellectual sloth can see that these natural needs/goods apply to every human being irrespective of time and culture, they should also agree that these goods ought always be pursued and honored and never denied or suppressed.

With these objective human goods in mind, one can set up a series of syllogisms whose conclusions define them as objectively true and universally normative—employing a first premise that has the certitude of self-evident truth and a second premise that cites an observed datum about human nature.⁶ The following example focuses on the human good of life. First premise: self-evidently, all human beings ought to do all those things and only those things that are really good for them. Second premise: as experience demonstrates, being alive is really good for human beings. Conclusion: every human being ought to seek life and vitality. When we apply this syllogistic argument to other human goods such as wealth, family, procreation, friends, society, play, and the higher goods of wisdom, worship, and contemplation, a set of goods emerges that is not relativist, that is, good for this or that person because of his or her desires or cultural preferences, but objectivist and universal, that is, good for all human beings whatever the time and circumstances. Furthermore, since all human beings have a right to this set of real goods, they also have a duty to require legislatures and judiciaries to enact and uphold laws forbidding their destruction or suppression.

Pope Benedict XVI understands why a Dominican and Thomist solution to moral relativism is the way to go. It offers a discussion matrix within which to address the many fellow pilgrims of his who, by dint of being marinated in the skepticism and moral relativism of our day, require cogent persuasiveness for submitting to universal moral norms. And so I must be Aristotelian and Thomist in the content of my moral methods, all the while endeavoring to have the Franciscan spirit shine through the way I do ethics.⁷ To conclude, then, I need only repeat my opening statement: “Confessions are never easy.” But I can honestly add that this tripartite confession has contributed mightily to the lived mission of this Christian, religious, and *Franciscan* ethicist.

Notes

¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today,” available through <http://www.ewtn.com>. See also *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985); *Principles of Christian Morality* (Ignatius Press, German 1975, English 1986); *Without Roots* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), and *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (Ignatius Press, 2006).

² For an historical analysis of Franciscan charisms, I recommend an article by Raffaele Pazzelli TOR on Franciscan spirituality at www.franciscanfriarstor.com/vocations. Also the commentary at another section of the same website: www.franciscanfriarstor.com/resources.

³ In the 13th century the Dominican Albert the Great produced vast commentaries on Aristotle. In them Albert took full account of the work of the great Aristotelian translator and commentator Averroes (Ibn Rushd), while not neglecting to correct his anti-Christian errors. Importantly, Albert began to clarify why Aristotle criticized Plato. The latter had a dualistic notion of the human person that made a correct theory of the human body impossible. It was, however, only with Albert’s pupil Thomas Aquinas that this point was fully developed. Unfortunately, Aquinas’s work got confused with Averroism in the list of propositions condemned by the archbishop of Paris in 1277. As a result the Franciscans thought it best to retain their dedication to St. Augustine and to minimize the influence of philosophy on theology. This is evident in the great works of St. Bonaventure, who tended to think of philosophy as a pagan tradition and



stroved to keep theology free of the errors of that tradition. Later Blessed John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham made more use of Aristotle, but still remained skeptical of the power of human reason. Consequently—and tragically—the Franciscan and Dominican traditions were never reconciled. Ockham became a Nominalist and finally schismatic, and his distrust of reason to prove the existence of God was basic to Luther's thought and the split in the church brought about in the Protestant Reformation.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, §29.

⁵ Mortimer Adler, *Adler's Philosophical Dictionary* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), p. 13. Perhaps the most egregious example of judicial moral relativism is encapsulated in the opinion of Justice Anthony Kennedy in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of the meaning of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."

⁶ Mortimer Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1985), p. 126.

⁷ The Franciscan tradition has made great theological contributions to the church: the understanding of the doctrine of Mary's Assumption, St. Bonaventure's reflection of the Trinity in creation, remarkable advances in natural science in the 14th and 15th centuries, and influential tracts on spirituality. On the other hand, as regards the theology of the body and virtue theory in ethics, the Dominican Thomas Aquinas has been constantly praised as the Common Doctor of the church. Since I work principally in bioethics, I use his contribution and assimilate it to my Franciscan tradition in a harmonious, and not merely eclectic way. I encourage more Franciscans to do research in this field. Franciscan humility, it seems to me, demands as much.