

Morality

The Catholic View

Servais Pinckaers, O.P.

Preface by
Alasdair MacIntyre

Translated by
Michael Sherwin, O.P.



St. Augustine's Press
South Bend, Indiana
2001

Published in association with the
Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture



VII

The Holy Spirit and the New Law

We can justly deplore the absence of the Holy Spirit in Catholic moral theology during the past few centuries. The action of the Holy Spirit was reserved for the spiritual life, understood as something outside the domain of moral theology, or pigeonholed as belonging to mysticism. From this perspective, it became practically impossible to show how the Holy Spirit acts in the life of every Christian from the moment of our Baptism and intervenes in our moral actions.

The conception of freedom for excellence that we have presented offers us the necessary foundation for restoring to the Christian life its tenor as a "life in the Spirit," in line with the teachings of St. Paul and the desires of the Second Vatican Council. It shows us how moral action flows from within the human person, like a spring nourished by our yearnings for truth, goodness, and happiness. Indeed, this is how the Spirit acts. Even if in the arts or in the realm of ideas, our inspirations seem to come to us from on high, we are still aware that these inspirations move us from within and become ours as we act upon them. Similarly, although the motion of the Holy Spirit flows from a source higher than ourselves, it touches us intimately, moving us to engage in a personal act. This is why the Scriptures particularly attribute to the Spirit the motion of love, an attribution that best reveals what this active communion can be. Yet, by severing freedom from our natural inclinations

and by placing the origin of the moral life in an external law, the theory of freedom of indifference breaks the lines of communication between the action of the Spirit, morality, and law. The rupture does not remain merely on the level of ideas; it penetrates the depths of our moral conscience.

The New or Evangelical Law

We shall describe how the Holy Spirit acts in the life of the Christian by turning to the analysis of the New or Evangelical Law that St. Thomas offers at the end of his study of law (*ST* I-II 106–8). We find there a remarkable theological formulation of the spiritual renewal that was occurring in the thirteenth century, a renewal expressed in the evangelical concerns of that age and embodied in the lives of St. Francis and St. Dominic. Thomas' teaching is nourished directly by St. Matthew, St. Paul, and the most beautiful passages of the Prophets. Unfortunately, over the course of the centuries, this treatise has been almost completely forgotten; moralists are just now in the process of recovering it.

The various elements of the definition of the New Law are the following. It is an interior or infused law. It consists in the grace of the Holy Spirit, received through faith in Christ and operating through charity. This is its primary element and the source of its dynamism and power. This law also contains secondary external elements: It has as its concrete text the Sermon on the Mount, and as its instruments the sacraments. This is its matter.

The Spiritual Elements of the New Law

Let us consider each of these elements. The notion that the Evangelical Law is an interior law was a novel view in St. Thomas' day and continues to be so in our own. Isn't

**The New Law
Is it a Written Law?**

The New Law is the law of the New Testament. But the law of the New Testament is infused in our hearts, for the Apostle says (*Heb 8.10*), quoting the authority of Jeremiah (31.31): "the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah," and explaining what this testament is, he adds: "this is the covenant I will establish with the house of Israel. . . . I will put my laws in their minds and I will write them upon their hearts." Therefore the New Law is infused.

I answer that "each thing appears to be what is most prominent in it," as the Philosopher states (*Nicomachean Ethics 9.8*). Now, that which is most prominent in the law of the New Testament, and in which all its power resides, is the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is given through faith in Christ. Consequently the New Law is chiefly the grace itself of the Holy Spirit, which is given to Christ's faithful. This is clear from what the Apostle says (*Rom 3.27*): "Where is . . . your boasting? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith"; for he calls the grace itself of faith "a law." And still more clearly he states (*Rom 8.2*): "The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has delivered me from the law of sin and death." Hence, Augustine says (*On the Spirit and the Letter 24*) that "as the law of deeds was inscribed on tablets of stone, so the law of faith is inscribed on the hearts of the faithful," and elsewhere in the same book (21): "What else are the divine laws inscribed by God himself on our hearts, but the very presence of the Holy Spirit?"

Nevertheless the New Law contains certain things that dispose us to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit, and pertain to the use of that grace. These things are secondary, so to speak, in the New Law; the faithful needed to be instructed concerning them, both by word and by writing, about what they should believe, as well as what they should do. Consequently we must say that the New Law is primarily an infused law, but secondarily a written law.

St. Thomas Aquinas
Summa theologiae I-II 106.1

the Gospel written and preached, and thus something external, brought to us from outside? Moreover, how can we associate law with interiority? Aren't they contraries?

An Interior Law

The work of the Holy Spirit is to enter within us by touching the two deepest cords of our hearts, the affinity for truth and the yearning for goodness and happiness. The Spirit acts through a quiet light and a gentle motion that produce in our souls wisdom and love. This interior motion is the marrow, so to speak, of the New Law. It is what the prophet long ago had already announced: "I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts" (*Jer 31.33*). Christian experience confirms this when it calls the Holy Spirit the Interior Master: he enlightens us concerning the Word we have heard and moves us to live it with sincerity.

Clearly the term "law" acquires here a new meaning, far removed from any juridicism; it is a deepening and a spiritual enrichment of the concept. The New Law is close to the natural law, whose roots are likewise internal. The New Law also becomes the rule of the love infused by the Spirit. After all, are not these terms at the service of reality and experience?

The Root: Faith in Christ

Faith in Christ marks the starting point of the New Law within us. We have too frequently forgotten that faith in Christ is the mother of Christian morality; we have reduced faith to a few obligations concerning truths to be believed under the pain of sin, and have attenuated the lines that link faith to works. When St. Paul in the letter to the *Romans* encounters Jewish morality, stiffened in its justice according to observances of the Law, and Greek morality, draped in its pretensions to wisdom, he boldly

confronts them with faith in the crucified Christ, who has become for us the wisdom and justice of God. This is the source of the moral life according to the Gospel; it depends on the Holy Spirit, who enkindles faith and teaches from within the wisdom and justice of God.

The advent of faith effects an original and substantial transformation in the moral life. It centers the moral life on a particular person: Jesus, the Christ. In his historical particularity – in his body that suffered and was resurrected – Jesus becomes the source and cause of justice and wisdom. In short, he becomes the source and cause of moral excellence for those who believe in him. Jesus is not merely a sage or a model. By means of the personal ties that faith and love initiate, he establishes such a close spiritual communion between himself and his disciples that St. Paul will present the Christian life as “life in Christ.” He even affirms that, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (*Gal* 2.20). This view is unique among the moralities and religions of the world: For Christians, the person of Jesus has become the center of the moral life, as he is also the center of prayer and the liturgy that nourishes it.

It is appropriate to note that it is here that faith acquires its full force. Faith does not signify, as it often does today, merely a certain opinion about life or a mental adherence to a creed. Faith is a vital act; it commits one person to another forever. In this way, marriage is rooted in an act of faith between spouses who are bound together in their love. This act entails some understanding of their common future, an understanding that is, in a sense, prophetic. Similarly, every fruitful decision, whether on the personal, political, or even artistic level, flows from an act of faith in a “certain idea” that inspires and guides the work to its completion. No science, properly understood, can produce the intuition of faith; it is a knowledge

belonging to a different order. Tied to life and love in their vitality, faith becomes the interior rule guiding one’s creative and constructive actions. It engenders hope, which gives life its energy. Faith in Christ, therefore, is like an interior law for building up the moral life of the Christian.

The Sap of the Tree: Charity

“Working through charity” (*Gal* 5.6). If faith is like the root, charity is like the sap that nourishes the trunk and rises into the branches, the network of virtues, to produce the delicious fruit of good works. It is through this new love revealed and shared in Christ that the Holy Spirit works in us. The primacy of charity among the gifts and the virtues is clearly taught by St. Paul in *1 Corinthians* (chs. 12 and 13) and by St. John, who makes it a new commandment (*Jn* 13.34). This teaching is rich. Because of its force and universality, which extends even to enemies, we can call this teaching specifically Christian. As the doctrine unfolds, it reveals how charity animates all the virtues.

Charity and the Virtues

Charity is commonly described as the mother and form of the virtues. It generates and inspires their organic unity, which theology regards as clustered around the theological and cardinal virtues. The virtues are interconnected, acting and growing together like the members of a living body. We should note, however, that while Christian authors have embraced the philosophers’ conception of the virtues, they profoundly transform this conception, precisely because of their experience of charity. The virtue of the philosophers, no matter how elevated and open it may be, leaves the human person alone in his efforts, always tempted to enclose himself in his own excellence. The infusion of love into the roots of the virtues effects a vital transformation: By placing us in communion with the

person of Christ, charity renders us so receptive to the motion of his Spirit that we can no longer regard our virtues as our own property. Although they remain something deeply personal within us, they have become the property of the one who now inspires them. An interior attitude characteristic of love results from this: an active receptivity, a dynamic welcoming, a cheerful and willing obedience to the Spirit that engenders an action all the stronger for no longer being the action of one person alone. Through charity, this attitude, uniting docility with initiative, is conveyed to the other virtues and marks their actions.

Charity and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

In an effort to offer a more satisfying account of this particular experience, St. Thomas follows St. Augustine and develops his theology of the gifts. In conjunction with the virtues, the gifts make us receptive to the impulses of the Spirit of Christ. The list of seven gifts is taken from Isaiah (11.1–8, as they appear in the Greek *Septuagint*). They are *wisdom, understanding, counsel, courage, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord*. The gifts give our acts a higher vitality and perfection. As we have seen, St. Thomas relates a gift to each of the virtues. In this way, the virtues and gifts form the twin visage of one and the same organism of love that underlies the works of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the faithful.

The involvement of the Holy Spirit in our growth in virtue shows us that the Spirit acts in us through the normal paths of daily effort, rather than through extraordinary revelations, sudden motions, or exceptional charisms. He moves us like sap, whose movement we neither see nor sense, so discrete is he before the activities and projects that engross us. Yet his gradual push, along with our confident fidelity, prepares the way for the flowering of spring

and the growth of autumn. The Spirit, therefore, can produce in us works that are sometimes quite surprising. Unfolding within us as deep inspirations, the gifts can move us beyond the simple measure of reason in the use of goods, and in acts of generosity, courage, and detachment. St. Francis of Assisi, for example, became the lover of Lady Poverty; St. Vincent de Paul and Mother Teresa were devoted to the destitute. There are also martyrs such as St. Cyprian at Carthage and the humble Blandina at Lyons, who, following the model of Stephen in the *Acts of the Apostles*, retained a peaceful, even joyous confidence in the face of torments and death. In this way, the gifts lead the virtues to their perfection.

The Material Elements of the New Law

In a beautiful text inspired by the prologue of the Gospel of John, St. Thomas completes his teaching on the New Law by showing us how the grace of the Holy Spirit comes to us from the Son of God made man. He then shows how the New Law contains the other spiritual elements mentioned earlier: certain sensible realities that in some fashion incarnate this grace in order to convey it to us, as well as certain concrete acts that give us a share in his own labors. No matter how intellectual we are, we are not pure spirits. To receive the Word of God, we need tangible signs. The Word comes to us through our eyes and ears, by what is written and preached. We must also put this Word into practice in our own day. The Son of God walked this path in a surprising way, through the incarnation and the cross. The grace of the Spirit likewise comes to us through material realities: through books, like the Bible whose moral teaching culminates in the Sermon on the Mount; through sacred objects and chosen actions: these are the sacraments and the liturgy that surrounds them (ST I-II 108.1).

The Sermon on the Mount**Text of the New Law**

Endowed with the authority of the Lord, the Sermon on the Mount was considered by the Fathers as the principal source of moral instruction; the Sermon has directly inspired most movements of spiritual renewal in the Church. St. Thomas, therefore, does not hesitate to present it as the specific text of the New Law, analogous to the Ten Commandments for the Old Law.

The Sermon, however, should not be considered in isolation. It is the summit and point of convergence of the moral teaching of the Scriptures, and of the New Testament in particular. We must interpret it, therefore, in relation to whole of the Scriptures of which it is a part. Nor does the Sermon address only personal morality. Like the Gospels, the Sermon speaks to the ecclesial community it helps form. Thus, we can say that the Sermon on the Mount gives the Church its fundamental constitution: It provides the underlying basis of ecclesiastical legislation, as well as of the rules and constitutions that religious communities have developed over the course of history.

Nevertheless, the Sermon is not like other legal texts precisely because it is the instrument of the Holy Spirit in the work of justification and sanctification. Taken only on the material level, the text of the Sermon certainly can no more justify and sanctify a person than the Ten Commandments can. Perhaps it is even less apt in this regard because its demands are so great that they can appear impossible to fulfill. Yet, when the grace of the Spirit of Christ intervenes, with faith and love, the Sermon on the Mount becomes a choice instrument for such work: It describes, at the heart of Christian experience, the paths of spiritual liberation. Animated in this way, it truly merits being called "the law of freedom."

Chapter VII: The Holy Spirit and the New Law

We can find three reasons for justifying St. Thomas' practice of calling the Evangelical Law, the law of freedom.

1. *The Sermon on the Mount does not add any material prescriptions to the precepts of the Ten Commandments.* Instead, viewed from the context of the Gospel, it frees us from the multiple external observances of the Jewish law, retaining only the essential moral precepts. This allows us to concentrate our efforts and attention on the level of the "heart," where, in loving faith, the virtues are formed and blossom. Through this moderation and flexibility, the Sermon prepares and promotes spiritual growth.

2. *The Sermon on the Mount leads us into a new order of things.* Law normally established between people relationships of master to servant. Law was expressed in the imperative, and it sanctioned predetermined penalties. The New Law establishes us in relationships of friendship with the Lord, according to his word:

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. I call you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father (*Jn* 15.15).

In friendship, imperatives and commands are no longer appropriate. Friends interact on a more personal level, through exhortation (as in the apostolic *paraclesis*) or by offering counsel. The New Law differs from other laws precisely because it adds counsels to its precepts. These counsels call for our personal initiative, something which the virtues and the gifts best prepare us to undertake. The goal of the Sermon, therefore, is to teach us how to live our spiritual freedom in the context of our friendship with the Lord and with our brothers and sisters that charity forms within us. St. Paul refers to the freedom of the children of God, distinguishing it from the status of slaves or under-

age children in the house of the Father (*Rom* 8.14–17; *Gal* 4.1–7).

The evangelical counsels are addressed to all Christians, to each one according to his particular situation and vocation. They will later be condensed into the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience that are the underpinnings of religious life, ordered to the perfection of charity and to bearing witness to the Gospel throughout the Church.

3. *One cannot fulfill the Sermon on the Mount from constraint, from obligation or from duty. It is only attainable through the way of love, which rests at the center of its teaching and is the first gift of the Spirit.* This love makes us free because it makes us act of our own accord, by our own inclination and spiritual enjoyment, in imitation of Christ and according to the preferences of the Spirit. We cannot, however, enjoy or exercise such freedom unless we have accepted the detachments and purifications that are necessary in order to learn true love and be freed from our selfish instincts. This is the work of the Beatitudes, which lead us from poverty and humility to purity and peace in hearts that have become entirely receptive to the action of the Spirit.

The Sacraments, Instruments of the New Law

The sacraments are the second material element of the New Law. They are a necessary part of a moral theology that gives the grace of Christ an essential role in the moral life. This grace gives us inner strength and establishes us in a vital union with the Lord, a union expressed in the analogies of the body and its members, the vine and its branches. The sacraments are instruments of the Holy Spirit that communicate this grace to us through words and gestures, sensible and expressive signs, such as the water of Baptism, the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the

anointing with oil and the imposition of hands. The Church has placed the celebration of the sacraments in a liturgy centered on the Lord's passion and resurrection, of which the Eucharist is the "memorial." The Church has also structured the seasons of the year to reproduce in the lives of the faithful the principal stages or "mysteries" in the work of Christ. For the Christian, the liturgy, which is the highest form of prayer, maintains close ties with the moral life. The Church's constant use of the moral and spiritual texts of the New Testament in its ceremonies points to these close ties. According to St. Paul, the moral life is a form of spiritual worship. It generates in the lives of each person what the eucharistic liturgy signifies (*Rom* 12.1).

Ecclesial Institutions at the service of the New Law

Lastly, we can apply our definition of the New Law to institutions in the Church, and show how we cannot set them in opposition to the action of the Holy Spirit because these institutions are also his instruments. Although moral action is quite personal, since it is animated by the faith and love of Christ, it always has an ecclesial dimension. It is always necessarily integrated into the life of the Church, understood as the "Body of Christ" animated by the Spirit. St. Paul always locates his moral teaching within this framework, understood in a vital and realistic way. Like the New Law itself, this communion of life and action is principally something spiritual; yet, it must be incarnated in external visible realities. The institutions of the Church are realities of this type: the ecclesiastical hierarchy, community organizations at all levels, the regulations of canon law, and so forth. These have developed over the course of history from evangelical seeds and provide support for the Church's action.

Institutions in the Church pose certain problems,

depending on the use that one makes of them. They become dangerous when we treat them, by analogy with merely human institutions, as vehicles for personal ambition, special interests or orchestrated domination. The Gospel is emphatic about this, as the words of Jesus to his Apostles testify:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (*Mt 20.25-28*).

This is the interior revolution that the grace of Christ works within us. It teaches us to employ institutions and exercise authority in a spirit of service, with unselfishness and generosity, imitating the "service" of Christ who gave his life "for many." Indeed, when we are devoted to a position of authority that has been entrusted to us, we develop a cluster of different virtues: care for the common good; attention to the needs of each person; discernment about what is appropriate; courage and perseverance in carrying out decisions; fraternal patience and forgiveness in the face of criticism; unselfishness in serving a project that does not interest or pertain to us. Pastoral ministry is one of the consummate forms of fraternal charity and a very instructive school of moral experience.

The doctrine of the New Law, therefore, enables us to present all the dimensions of Christian morality and to order its many diverse elements. It directs a life that is both personal and ecclesial. It is both profoundly spiritual and incarnational. It unites the Spirit to the letter of the

Gospel, faith to the sacraments, interior prayer to the unfolding of the liturgy. It links the breath of the Spirit to the management of institutions and the application of law. Such a work cannot be done without the aid of the Holy Spirit; without living faith; without vigorous and prayerful charity; nor without the support of ecclesial communion. The promises, however, are present, written in the Scriptures and in our hearts.