

May 11, 2012

Sunday of the Paralytic

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Popular morality in current American culture is heavily in debt to both the Nominalism of the Late Middle Ages and the Voluntarism of the Enlightenment. Since I regard this debt as deplorable, it might be good to begin with a brief explanation of these terms.

According to the Nominalism of the Late Middle Ages, our concepts are the creations of our thought. Following this theory, we take information derived from our senses, and we use this data to give coherent form to those abstractions known as "ideas." That is to say, "truth" is a creation of our thinking processes. We share the common "names" (nomina) of things, but not the very truth to which the names refer.

This theory of knowledge forms the basis of Enlightenment Voluntarism. According to this moral school, the human will (voluntas) creates moral norms, rather much as the human intellect creates abstract concepts. Moral reasoning serves a commitment of the will, and moral norms are validated by moral choices. The moral law is based on a moral decision.

Apart from this decision there is no moral law, just as there is no "truth" transcendent to human conceptions of it. The only "moral principle" is an act of decision. All ethics are chosen ethics. There are no abiding moral norms that are really---in re--- "out there." There is nothing "existent" that can dictate precepts to the conscience.

The thought of Kierkegaard comes to mind here. Although faith and morality are different things for Kierkegaard, both rest on personal choice, and neither is based on a rational perception.

Ethical theories of this sort are attractive to certain kinds of Christians. I am thinking of those believers for whom-in moral terms-the guiding principle is simply, "I have decided to follow Jesus." My "following," that is to say, depends utterly on my "deciding." If I have made no decision with respect to Jesus, then there is no imperative for me to follow him. I am free as a bird.

Is there really---in rebus---no universal moral law, however? Are Christians so different from other people that they share no moral principles or moral perceptions?

According to certain recent Orthodox commentators, one might think so. Let me cite a single example of a moral concern about which some Orthodox voices are making major contributions to the confusion: the nature of marriage.

Our dogmatic agreement is clear enough: According to Orthodox sacramental theology, marriage is a sacrament that unites a man and a woman in a holy union which forms an icon of Christ's union with the Church. No Orthodox Christian---certainly not myself---would question this. My trouble is not the sacramental theology of the Orthodox Church.

I have a great deal of trouble, nonetheless, with those Orthodox Christians who pretend that marriage outside the Church can be whatever society or the State wants it to be. Thus, they recognize no problem in the recent disposition to alter the structure and nature of marriage. (Theories like this seem designed to make the Orthodox

Church completely irrelevant to a larger moral discourse; we are limited to talking theology among ourselves, while the world around us starves for moral guidance. We chosen ones have decided to follow Jesus, and everybody else can go to hell.)

I wonder how much this intellectual vacuity and social surrender have to do with the distressing disregard for Natural Law current among Orthodox Christians (I would feel less distress if I thought they were devoted to a more intense study of Kierkegaard.).

Here is my simple thesis: man's capacity for moral perception is native to his created being. Whether or not his perception is enlightened by the Gospel and elevated by divine grace is irrelevant to its origin; there are laws to which all men are bound by reason of the created order.

Moreover, the created structure of marriage---to stick with the same example---is presupposed in the sacramental understanding of marriage.

I invite Orthodox Christians to look more closely at the teaching of St. Maximus the Confessor with respect to the Natural Law in the moral life, because the perception of this law this is what we share with others, and about which we can discourse with others. There is moral inequality among us, wrote Maximus, "because we do not all put into practice (energein) what is natural. If we all equally did what is natural according to our human origin, there would be evident among us, not only one human nature, but one human nature admitting no degrees of 'more' or 'less'" (Disputation with Pyrrhus 93; cf. Gnostic Chapters 58).

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