By the Power of the Holy Spirit
Discernment of Spirits and Moral Choice

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Catholics need to reclaim the significant role of the Holy Spirit in moral decision making. The Holy Spirit’s activity permeates the Catholic moral tradition via the process of discernment of spirits that complements moral reasoning (ratio practica). Ministers need to become familiar with the activity of the Spirit in the moral life.

In our pluralistic, fearful, ecologically threatened world, Catholics need to reclaim the significant role of the life-giving and communion-building Holy Spirit in empowering, sustaining, and enabling them to make moral decisions. As I will explain, the sociology of religion shows some trends that clarify why there is increased attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in morality today. Indeed, the good news is that the Holy Spirit’s activity of inspiring virtue and giving gifts permeates the Catholic moral tradition to its core. In fact, the process of discernment of spirits complements moral reasoning (ratio practica) and mutually engages the moral life and the spiritual life within the life of faith. Because they are frequently asked to assist the faithful in deciding moral issues, ministers need to become familiar with a process of uncovering and recognizing the activity of the Spirit in the moral life.

A Turn to the Holy Spirit—Why Now?

Though the Holy Spirit has been recognized as a powerful force in the moral life from biblical times forward, at various times throughout the church’s

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history moralists have reduced its flame to a smoldering wick or allowed the Spirit’s flame to burn brightly. Some social and religious shifts observed by Douglas Porpora and Charles Taylor provide one possible explanation for the resurgence of interest in the Holy Spirit and moral theology in our day (Porpora 2001, and Taylor 1991, in Mercier).

Douglas Porpora holds that loss of religious meaning today is not rooted in cognitive issues. Actually people continue to believe in God or some kind of ultimate cosmic meaning, while in reality, their belief seems to have less and less significance in their present contexts (Mercier, 47). Three shifts in modern life are at the root of this loss of religious meaning. First, people have lost their sense of social space and subsequently their self-identity has become fragmented. They do not belong in any given place, but rather to the world; their personal space and cosmic space seem to have collapsed into each other. Thus, each person needs continually to create her or his own place to belong. Or, as Charles Taylor puts it, it is increasingly difficult to find the “glue” that holds us in relationship with others and to care for anyone or anything beyond our personal space (Mercier, 48).

Second, with the loss of social space and self-identity comes the loss of a moral horizon (Mercier, 48). Not having a stable context produces the loss of moral norms because norms are in large part shaped and lived out in the context of communities. Thus, in today’s world of multiple belief systems, in debate about acts of terrorism and proofs of global warming, there are few recognizable common standards by which to measure meaning.

What we are left with is only procedural ethics: our ethics are individual, momentary, and episodic (Mercier, 49). Taylor names this phenomenon the “tyranny of freedom” where individuals now must bear the moral weight of what was formerly held by moral communities. People still have human and spiritual needs that cry out for personal moral authenticity, but the very moral horizon necessary for such a phenomenon is absent and moral reasoning is reduced to what Taylor calls “atomism” or self-oriented moral reasoning alone (Mercier, 50). In ways largely beyond their control, disconnected ways of living have demolished the foundations of morality among ordinary people. In this situation, an appeal to an institutional authority is not meaningful or practical because the problem is not the authority of norms, “but their ability to move

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persons to action, indeed caring” (Mercier, 53). In fact, appeal to authority can create further alienation and isolation. Nor is it helpful to retrieve communal narratives such as biblical stories or attempt to reclaim common rituals, because these are *externals* and the problem is *internal*. What is needed is a spirituality that addresses the deep motivating power to reconnect people with one another and form a renewed moral horizon. The largely unexplored theological link between pneumatology and Catholic moral theology has become a fertile field for seeking such a resource. We need to reconnect the activity of the Spirit to the moral life.

A helpful study by Ralph Del Colle distinguishes the mission of the Holy Spirit in terms of three interconnected elements—presence, power, and person (Mercier, 53). Drawing on Karl Rahner’s work, Del Colle addresses the presence of the Holy Spirit by recognizing the ways in which the Holy Spirit and the human spirit are related: “[a]s absolute Spirit, God is the horizon of the humans-as-spirit, beckoning our finite intentionality toward the unlimitedness of the divine” (Del Colle, 325; in Mercier, 55). Del Colle also addresses Moltmann’s notion of the Spirit as “the ‘immanent transcendence’ of God in all things” (Del Colle, 326; in Mercier, 55). It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to be drawn out of ourselves to God, respond to God’s call and know God both as the transcendent One beyond ourselves, but also as the One present with us always and everywhere.

However, Del Colle recognizes that these notions are not useful toward resolving the loss of the moral horizon that is lacking in our day. Rather, he claims that what is needed is greater recognition that the Spirit has and gives power to individuals. Indeed, the actual experience of God is the experience of the Spirit as the “bestowal to creation, rather than intrinsic to it” (Del Colle, 327; in Mercier, 57). From the earliest moments of Pentecost, Christians have known the Holy Spirit as a personal, intentional, bequeathed reality of God intimately present in each person, yet also the one whose presence builds profound meaning and relatedness providing communion among all elements of creation. It is this *experience* of the Spirit that can lead today’s seekers back to a sense of self-identity and on to the connectedness necessary to find a moral horizon.

In Del Colle’s view it is this power of the Holy Spirit internally present in the believer that shifts the reality known by the individual. The world, through the communion-building activity of the Holy Spirit, comes alive with meaning, as

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persons are empowered to move beyond themselves. This is not something that can be brought about by theoretical argumentation but rather through recognition of a “greater power” encountered within (Mercier, 57).

The personal quality of the encounter with the Holy Spirit also breaks into the isolation and alienation that allows for the collapse of the personal and cosmic horizons. It is not an individual that beckons people to yet another option among numerous others, but rather “[t]he person of the Spirit invites one into relationship, with others, with the world, with Christ. The Spirit becomes an ongoing source of relationship that allows the human being to come alive as a person in relationship” (Mercier, 58). Del Colle describes this dynamic process as “our being-in-personed in the Holy Spirit” (Del Colle, 335; in Mercier, 58). With new vitality the person is empowered to connect with others and the world and discover a personal space, identity, and a moral life. Mercier summarizes Del Colle’s observations this way:

In a world devoid of the experience of the meaning of God, the profoundly experiential identity of the Spirit as presence can reinvigorate the empty space. In a world that has lost a sense of moral purpose, a horizon beckons us, the Spirit as power—a power oriented toward the creation of a future intended by God—provides a needed sense of common purpose and vision in which we participate. Most important, though, the Spirit as person, in whom we experience the gift of a relationship with God that creates and sustains us as persons rather than as isolated individuals, beckons us out of isolation into community with God—and with others. In this sense, as the Spirit brings forth life from chaos in the Creation narrative in Genesis 1, so today the renewed emphasis on the work of the Spirit responds to what can seem like moral chaos, inviting us into a space where anew we engage a community of faith and are conformed to the Word of God. (59)

Recognition of the presence, power, and person of the Holy Spirit has been sorely neglected in Catholic moral theology and methods, though it permeated the thought of Aquinas. Because Aquinas’s work is so central to Catholic moral theology, it is to that worthy source that I now turn.

Rediscovering the Relationship of the Holy Spirit to Moral Theology in Thomas Aquinas

The “Intellectualistic Fallacy”

As Daniel C. Maguire has shown, moral choice is both a science and an art (Maguire 1979 and 1991). Moral reasoning involves much more than the intellect only. To hold otherwise is to commit what he calls the “intellectualistic fallacy” (Maguire 1982, 31). Prudent moral judgment requires more than intellectual prowess exercised in logic or mathematics. The “intellectualistic fallacy” involves
ignoring the epistemological reality that there are many ways of knowing and that Christian moral wisdom was garnered through the ages from the affective, mystical, and contemplative dimensions of moral consciousness as well as reason (See Maguire and Fargnoli, 89–98). Maguire rightly points out that Aquinas's moral system is awash in affectivity, as noted in Thomas's discussions of prudence, wisdom, delight, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and faith. He concludes that a “narrow viewing of ratio practica in Thomas that does not touch down on these and other bases of his thought would be reductionistic” (Maguire 1982, 29).

Additional evidence for the Holy Spirit at the heart of Thomas Aquinas's moral system comes from Dominican theologian Thomas F. O'Meara. O'Meara has shown that Thomas's theology of grace is the very context for the virtues. Indeed, in Aquinas's thought on the virtues, “grace is depicted as a special quasi-nature whose capabilities are virtues and their acts” (O'Meara, 258, in Bouchard). What comes into high relief here is a morality that requires interdependence among the rational, the affective, and the spiritual—the thoroughly graced moral life together with the spiritual life.

**Where Things Went Wrong**

Charles Bouchard suggests one reason why this significant interdependence was lost was because the “moral part” (Secunda secundae) of the Summa was severed from the context of the sections on God, creation, and Jesus Christ. Additionally, the influence of nominalism resulted in viewing human morality as a series of independent, radically free acts, and hence in moral legalism (see Bouchard). After the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), moral theology centered on extracting a “proper confession”—giving a complete account of the number and kinds of sin—from penitents.

Moral theology became legalistic, sin-centric, duty bound, and disconnected from striving for virtue lived in the context of the fullness of the Christian faith. Perhaps most deadly in these developments was the exclusion of the Holy Spirit by force of neglect. A mechanistic view of grace resulted from “a separation of moral theology from the rest of theology, a loosing of the moral virtues from the habit of grace now treated apart from dogmatic theology, a view of the Christian life as natural virtuous habits sparked by actual grace” (O'Meara 1997a, 271, in Bouchard).

The gifts of the Holy Spirit that Aquinas saw as necessary for all for salvation became relegated to the “religious” elites who lived the “evangelical counsels.” Significant exemplars of the moral life—Spirit-led prophets, saints, and martyrs—were also deemed beyond the reach of ordinary people. Often the laity was left with a watered-down “moral life” of legalistic, minimalistic, and simplistic application of the Decalogue and the church's moral regulations. This extensive neglect of the Holy Spirit in the Catholic moral tradition has been very difficult to correct.
The Catholic moral tradition is deep, rich, and profoundly imbued with reliance on the Holy Spirit. The virtues are moral skills or habits integrated into our person that enable us quite naturally to do what is right and to be good people. Just as a concert pianist when faced with a keyboard can produce technically correct music with deep feeling, so it is possible for humans to become virtuous persons attuned to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and to discern good from evil—even in the most complex cases. The capacity for virtue is present in each person because each is created in God’s very image and likeness. Because of this similarity to our creator, we are free to recognize God’s self-communication through the Holy Spirit to us in Christ. However, though we are naturally drawn into relationship with God, we are limited by our purely rational mode of operation. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are the very means through which we are prepared “to know the mystery of God in a way that cannot be achieved by natural capacities alone, but are nonetheless natural to us as persons” (see Bouchard).

In short, the gifts of the Holy Spirit allow us to know in ways that are not simply the result of human reasoning. As Maguire reminds us, “Affective knowledge is less like seeing and more like ‘tasting,’ ‘touching,’ and ‘sensing.’ That which is loved is ‘inviscerated’ within the knower with a new and distinct proportion and congeniality” (Maguire 1982, 30). Interestingly, Servais Pinckaers’s word study of the writings of Aquinas shows that the term “instinctus” appears 298 times of which 51 instances refer to the ‘instinct of the Holy Spirit’” (Pinckaers, 213–15, in Bouchard). Furthermore, O’Meara stresses that the emphasis of the Dominican notion of virtues is not ascetical and rational, but rather that they are laced “with a familiarity with the divine that is intuitive and instinctive” (O’Meara 1997a, 276 and 279, in Bouchard).

The reliance on the gifts of the Spirit and the virtues does not excuse us from doing our moral homework. Virtue and spiritual gifts perfect what reason and logic uncover. The classical principle of mediation holds that the Holy Spirit acts and is mediated to us through the ordinary experiences of daily life. The virtues of the Spirit can truly be ours only through diligent preparation for receiving them—indeed, “grace builds upon nature.” However, as O’Meara explains:
Because human beings do not live only rationally and methodically, but exuberantly and spontaneously, Aquinas described beyond virtue a particular heightened dimension of grace... the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. These contacts are not transitory actual graces, but special divinely infused dispositions. Virtues and Gifts are two different modes of grace. The first is frequent, deliberate, thoughtful. The second is intuitive, prompt, supra-deliberative. (O’Meara 1997b, in Bouchard)

These virtues and gifts are most successfully perfected and received in a life of faith within the Christian community. Ongoing participation in catechesis, study of Scripture, the witness of the experience of mentors and models of virtue and faith, liturgical celebrations, involvement in the sacramental life of the church, and deliberate efforts for spiritual growth in prayer and reflection lead to a wholeness, stability, and durableness of ordinary adult Christians that prepare them for moral discernment. The fundamental moral question for each Christian is, “What ought I to do and who ought I become because I believe in Jesus Christ?” One needs to engage in moral reasoning and in moral discernment to discover a fitting response.

Discernment in Real Life and Ministry

Today most Catholic moral theologians use one of two basic methods of moral reasoning, Basic Goods Theory or Proportionate Reasoning (also called Revisionism) (see Salzman). Both the Basic Goods Theorists and the Revisionists of the Catholic moral tradition rely in some way on the Holy Spirit as the ultimate arbiter in moral discernment. While the Basic Goods Theorists seek out direct regulation from the church’s Spirit-guided magisterium and the Revisionists seek the Spirit’s guidance through mutually critical “trialogue” between the faithful, theologians, and the magisterium, it is to the Spirit that they all turn. As Todd Salzman rightfully points out, both schools acknowledge the discernment of spirits as part and parcel of the church’s moral tradition as articulated in Gaudium et Spes, no. 44:

With the help of the Holy Spirit it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in light of the divine Word. In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage. (See Salzman, 122)

Engaging in this task necessitates, on the one hand, that our reason be truly informed by our faith, while avoiding fideism. And on the other hand, it requires our faith
to be grounded in reality and historical consciousness while avoiding Maguire’s “intellectualistic fallacy.”

Numerous models for moral discernment exist. Perhaps the best model is Richard M. Gula’s two-part sketch of “Moral Decision-making and Pastoral Guidance” and “Discernment of Spirits” outlined in his *Reason Informed by Faith* (300–29). There he compares discernment of spirits to gourmet cooking. The norms of the Christian moral tradition are likened to the recipe that the cook carries in her head. Yet, the decision about how much of each ingredient to add to the mixture is determined by taste, not by following the precise measures outlined in the recipe. In a similar manner, moral discernment guided by the Holy Spirit is the way persons respond to God’s call to holiness (the moral life).

Discernment engages the capacity of a person to discriminate degrees of importance among various dimensions of moral significance. It brings together spirituality and morality to sift through various inner stirrings or “spirits”—feelings, hungers, attractions, resistances, intuitions, impulses or inclinations—to determine which course of action is most consistent with who a person is and who she or he wants to become in response to God’s call and offer of love. Discernment is a matter of the reasoning heart that Aquinas refers to as the practice of the virtue of prudence (*Summa Theologiae*, II–IIae, q. 51; in Gula, 316).

Gula names four foundations of discernment as faith, God, Jesus, and the human person. A basic commitment to God in Christ is necessary for discernment of spirits. Through the eyes of faith the Christian sees more than what ordinarily reality might reveal in that everything is seen as a place where God is present and active. Even the most painful and bewildering realities of life are seen as potentially revelatory of God.

What we know and believe about God dramatically shapes our discernment. Central to discernment is the reality “that God is always and everywhere redemptively present to us and calling us through our experiences to a deeper life of faithfulness and love” (Gula, 318). Equally important is to recognize what is not of God. God is not a hard determinist requiring us to fit into a preconceived plan nor the master who holds the “right answers” to a guessing game. The will of God takes human freedom, initiative and responsibility seriously. The question guiding discernment is: “What is God requiring and enabling me to be and to do?” (Gula, 319).

For the Christian, Jesus is the one who embodies the fundamental meaning of human life better than anyone else. He is God with a human face and the normative...
measure of what God is enabling and requiring us to be and to do. Contemplating his life, teaching, death, and resurrection together with our own unique capacities and the relationships that constitute the moral question under consideration provides the grist for our moral discernment (Gula, 320).

The final foundation is the human person. The human person is an embodied subject, historical subject, relational being and one fundamentally equal, yet one uniquely original. Humans are simultaneously bearers of both nature and grace. At the deepest core of a human being is the place of the heart where we know the experience of God within us and we can know the will of God. “[T]he tradition of discernment maintains that what we want in our heart of hearts will be consistent with whom God is enabling us and requiring us to be and with what we are to do” (Gula, 321).

According to Gula there are three major components to the discernment process: prayer, gathering information, and seeking confirmation. Prayer is the focal point of the entire process that begins with, is sustained by, and ends with prayer. Identifying, clarifying, and expressing what is happening within us require our prayer to be listening prayer; trying to hear God’s word for us. Praying with Scripture is an important means of receiving God’s word for us mediated through the stories awakening our moral imagination. Through prayer we can come to know God’s unique love “for me, in particular” (as well as for all) and achieve a kind of healthy indifference that removes our bias or preference for any specific outcome of the discernment (Gula, 322–23).

The second dimension of moral discernment is gathering information. Careful gathering of adequate empirical data and the reasoned analysis of that data are essential for discernment. This involves responding to the reality-revealing questions that uncover the complexities of the situation that concerns us—What? Why? How? Who? When? Where? Foreseeable effects? Viable alternatives? Also, we need to utilize appropriate psychological methods and instruments to uncover pertinent self-knowledge (Gula, 323–24).

In the confirmation stage we bring together all the information gathered and bring it into prayerful reflection while remaining in a listening stance. Here we imaginatively try out possible outcomes to various possible decisions and size them up in light of our response to God’s love. Internal confirmation for a decision is marked by the biblical “signs of the Spirit”—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control (Gal 5:22). By contrast, movement...
away from God and what is right for us is experienced as gloominess, confusion, coldness, and loss of confidence in God’s love and care for us. Prayerful exploration of the experience of desolation and returning to activities that provide consolation can help gain perspective on the way forward (Gula, 325). External confirmation is found when the decisions that are of God bear fruit in giving greater life and deeper love in the discerning person and with all that with which he or she associates. External confirmation also leaves one free from competitiveness and anxiety, rejoicing in the gifts of others and living peacefully with our own limitations. Affirmation of our choice usually comes from those who know us most intimately. However, occasionally, they may challenge our choices. Yet even then, we can trust the Holy Spirit’s signs to confirm our correct decisions (Gula, 326).

“To the extent that we touch the center of ourselves in truth, then to that extent we can touch the living word of God in us” (Gula, 327). Discernment requires psychological and spiritual maturity and good mental health. Doing moral discernment also presupposes a fundamental choice to respond to God’s call and to grow in discipleship. It assumes that one has done the fact gathering and rational analysis to evaluate what is blatantly contrary to the norms of Christian morality. No process of discernment will yield detailed directives, but only indications of whether our heart is centered on God and if our lives are moving in the right direction. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and guided by reason, experience, Scripture, and tradition, each person must evaluate the act, intention, and circumstances of any moral question and then decide for herself or himself (not by themselves) what is right in this time and place.

References


