

# **Commentary to Palau's Catechism of the Virtues**

## **Part 1: Palau's Moral Theology in the context of current Theological and Ethical Perspectives.**

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Francis Palau's Catechism of the Virtues (Catecismo de la Virtud) is an intentionally simple text, but by no means is it superficial. In its simplistic and rational structure, aimed at getting to the widest audience possible, it contains deep mystical intuitions along with centuries of theological reflection. In honor of Father Palau's initiative to find new ways to promote ethical education in a changing world, we would like to share some commentaries to this work to enable a richer appreciation of his work, inspire our intents to live virtuously and help give more resources to those who teach Father Palau's moral theology.

It's a well-known fact that his Catechism of the Virtues is inspired by Aquinas' Summa Theologica. So it is appropriate that we look into Aquinas' moral theology to deepen our knowledge of Palau's writings. Aquinas was at the peak of Scholasticism, a medieval school of thought characterized by its strict rationality, dependence on the Bible and the Church Fathers, influence from non-Christian sources, and a literary form based on disputed questions and its solutions. But we must also bear in mind that, afterward, Scholasticism started to decay. Ever since there have been different schools of interpretation of Aquinas. We can say that throughout history there have been two great trends in theology. On one hand, we have a deductive perspective which is inspired by Plato and Augustine. And on the other hand, we have a more inductive perspective inspired by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. By inductive we mean a bottom-up (ascending) theology as opposed to a top-down (descending), deductive, theological perspective. Summarily put, an inductive perspective starts with the contingent aspects of life and ascends to transcendent reality, while a descending or deductive theology starts with general dogmatic principles and tries applying them into different categories and situations. Both of these rival perspectives are useful and complement each other, hence both are needed for the life of the Church.

Oddly enough, we see authors from both spectrums interpret Aquinas according to their perspectives. This is possible perhaps because Aquinas was a master in proposing a middle ground between these opposing views. Surely enough, we will be starting from the more inductive perspectives in interpreting Aquinas and Palau, but at the same time, we will be trying to land in the middle ground that these two saintly men have indicated.

It is important to keep in mind these contrasting theologi-

cal perspectives because they are at the core of the current divisions we see in the Church. A closer look at these differences will show us that these divisions are also present in society. Being faithful nowadays to the Palautian charisma means acknowledging these differences and embracing them as a gift. Not only should the Church get pass current culture wars with the rest of the world but most importantly within itself. Different ideological stances have a direct influence on ethical standpoints and tend to divide the Church from within. We must also state that the inductive approach takes more into account scientific knowledge. Following some of the advances in the study of moral psychology, we pretend to review Father Palau's moral teaching and see how it is relevant in today's context.

Just as in theology, in ethics there are also different conflicting perspectives or rival schools of thought. Since this is an exercise in moral theology, it is important to understand the different ethical standpoints that influence Catholic thought.

We can identify three schools of thought in the field of ethics. They have been somehow present in Catholic moral thought ever since the Gospels to our present-day and age. First, we will give a brief description of each, and then we will review which one of these three was adopted by Thomas Aquinas and Francis Palau. Understanding these differences will help us better understand the importance of Palau's moral theology for us today.

As we said, there are three categories of ethical thought. But before we continue with that, first I would like to recall that in Catholic moral thought there are three things (or "sources") involved in any action that can be considered a moral act, i.e. good or bad, morally speaking. These three aspects are the object, intention, and circumstance of a moral act. These are described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CEC 1750). Now then, each one of the three different categories of ethical thought that we are going to review focuses on one of the three "sources of morality" respectively.

The first category of ethical thought we will discuss is deontology. Deontology is concerned with the observance of principles, duty, rules, and laws. In this sense, it is focused on the object of morality, i.e., the moral act in itself. Intention and circumstance don't matter here, and in this manner, we can say it tries to be objective. Deontology has the

benefit of judging as objectively as possible. But this leads to leaving out the individual in their concrete circumstances, dehumanizing moral judgment. This mindset is typical in the Pharisees when we see them confront Jesus and the disciples. For them, obeying the Law was more important than seeing the neighbor as a person worthy of love and mercy. Unfortunately, we still have many strands of this self-righteous ethical stance in the Church. This mindset has its foundation in a descending theological perspective, where general principles are established in a top-down fashion and must be objectively applied to particular cases. Here, moral discernment is solely based on the observance of the natural or divine law without regard to the intention or circumstances of the subject of a moral act.

The second ethical category we will discuss is virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is concerned with the final goal of human existence: happiness. In this sense, we can say that the focus of virtue ethics is intention. Here, intention is not just positive desire or hopeful wishing. Intention has more to do with tension, i.e., the tension between the subject and their final goal. As Aristotle stated, happiness is the final goal of human existence. Saint Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, would say that the beatitudes are the final goal. In this scenario, ethical reflection has to do with finding the appropriate way to happiness. But in no manner does this mean that the end justifies the means. On the contrary, only means suited to human dignity can lead to true happiness. To help itself maintain its balance, virtue ethics will rely on Natural Law and Divine Law as guides, but it will not be guided blindly. We see Jesus in the Gospels adopt this stance. He can freely break the Law in order to help others in their pursuit of happiness. Ultimately, he abides by a higher standard, which is the maximal expression of both Natural and Divine Law: love. Christian virtue ethics will always have love as its main virtue. Father Palau had full consciousness of this principle and the importance of happiness as the starting point of ethics. We will explore that further along the way. Aquinas, following Aristotle, will also adopt virtue ethics.

There are of course some risks with virtue ethics. A careful balance between subjective intentions and circumstances must also be weighed in with the objectivity found in Natural and Divine Law. In this sense, virtue ethics integrates both descending and ascending theological perspectives. Now then, even though many pretend to follow the virtue ethics of the Catechism of the Church or that of Saint Thomas of Aquinas, their interpretation can sometimes rely too much on Natural Law, converting ethical discourse into deontology.

Another risk in Christian ethics is what we can find in the third category of ethical thought. We will call this third category relativism. In it, we can find different schools of ethi-

cal thought, like consequentialism, utilitarianism, hedonism, and many more. In this category, the end justifies the means. Here, intention is only considered in the short term. There is no recognition of an ulterior meaning of happiness, there is no transcendent goal. In this sense, this category will focus on circumstance. This means that the goodness of a moral act is only relative to its current situation. It also means that its goodness depends on the consequences of the action, independent of the action itself. Human nature is only based on a handful of contingent facts and it is deprived of any transcendence. In the Gospels, this lack of transcendence and relativity is found in Pilate who asks “what is truth?” (Jn 18:38) and even though he is convinced of Jesus’ innocence he proceeds to “wash his hands” from any moral responsibility. A sign of consequentialism is found in the high priest who says “it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish” (Jn 11:50). Unfortunately, Christian ethics can also fall into this trap when it starts from an inductive theological point of view but stays there, unable to transcend. An example of this is found in some of the earlier strands of liberation theology, where some even proposed engaging in armed conflict to obtain social justice. After this long introduction, we can finally start with the first two sentences of the introduction to Father Palau’s Catechism of the Virtues:

“God is the only object who can satiate and satisfy the heart of a person in much more sublime and perfect way of what he can desire, believe and hope for. The virtue, by uniting these two extremes, makes one happy.” (Catechism of the Virtues, Introduction, 1)

Palau takes Aristotle’s concept of virtue as the mean or middle term (mesotes) and gives it a new meaning. There is an abyss between God and every human being. Virtue is the tensed bridge that unites them. It is the mean between two extremes: God and the human person. And it is only in this middle term that we can attain actual happiness in this life. This is the foundation of Palau’s moral theology. It is also a middle ground that necessarily must be conquered in such a divided time.

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Categorías de Pensamiento Ético Fuente de la Moralidad Enfocada	Teología Deductiva	Teología Inductiva	
	Deontología Objeto	Ética de las Virtudes Intención	Relativismo Circunstancia

Cuadro 1: Synthesis of Perspectives, Thoughts and Sources. Own Elaboration.