

# COMMENTARY ON PALAU'S CATECHISM OF VIRTUES PART 2 THE PATH TO AN EROTIC MORAL THEOLOGY

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## **Introduction: Virtue Ethics and Natural Law Theory:**

As we have seen previously, Father Palau's moral theology is to be understood within the context of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is the ethical philosophy in which happiness is the central key to understanding what is good. Now then, happiness should be understood not as momentaneous states of feeling pleasure but as the condition a person can achieve when they attain a certain balance in their life in accordance with human nature. So now we have another problem to solve: What is human nature?

The question about what it means to be truly human and what is considered inhumane or against human nature has been reflected upon throughout centuries. The notion of natural law is a philosophical stance that emerged from antiquity and has developed ever since. It is the theory that humans (and all things) come into existence with a certain nature or essence and that morality, ethics, and legislation should abide by this nature. Denial of this essence would be the source of unhappiness, sin, injustice, dehumanization, etc.

Now then, natural law theory isn't perfect, and it has been deeply questioned for many of its historical failings. Criticism of natural law theory can be summarized as the natural law fallacy, i.e., just because something is a certain way doesn't necessarily mean that it ought to be that way. For example, in this sense, natural law has been used to justify racism, discrimination towards non-heterosexual people, and even slavery. In current society, the predominant philosophical stance of existentialism has come to answer some of naturalism's shortcomings. Existentialism disdains essence, making natural law theory obsolete. For example, in the field of legal philosophy, legal positivism has taken the spotlight and has put legal naturalism aside, sustaining that there are no pre-existing, natural conditions that state that certain things have to be one way or another, rather it is the task of the legislator to create laws according to what it sees fit for society at that moment. Existentialism has helped modern society in many ways but has brought with its ethical relativism and has justified things that – from natural law or even a Christian perspective – are intolerable,

like abortion. Natural law theory is far from obsolete, but it does need to freshen up and rid itself of rigid structures that turn it into deontology or make it too judgmental. Natural law is founded on the idea that essence exists. This calls for a recapturing of metaphysics – the philosophical study of essence – that will guide all of our philosophical, ethical, and theological thought. In this sense, the 20th-century Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar states that “*the Christian is called to be the guardian of metaphysics of our time*”<sup>1</sup>.

## **Palau's Deductive Method for Teaching Moral Theology:**

So let us go back to Palau's virtue ethics. According to the stance of virtue ethics that Palau – influenced by Thomas Aquinas – had adopted, the final goal of life is finding happiness and only “*virtue... makes one happy*”<sup>2</sup>. In our present-day context, defining happiness and identifying its source seems difficult, if not simply impossible. The same goes for defining virtue. For Father Palau, in a world influenced by rationalism, things weren't any better. This is why he founded the School of Virtue, an educational center for laity which had huge success forming many Catholic leaders. His Catechism of Virtue was written as a handbook for this center.

He truly thought that through education, or maybe what some would call indoctrination, people would not only understand what is good but also feel inspired to live according to the standards of a morally good life. This way of thinking is founded on the ancient philosophical notion of transcendentals – the belief that all things derive from a transcendent origin and share to some degree its essential qualities. We shall refer here to three of these transcendentals: truth, goodness, and beauty. Since the transcendentals have a common origin, they are thought to be interchangeable. That is, all that is truthful is also good and beautiful, and vice versa. When Palau wrote the Catechism of Virtue he would find the means for living

<sup>1</sup>Glory of the Lord, vol 5., San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991, p. 656.

<sup>2</sup>CV, introduction, 1.

morally – living a good life – in the search for truth. This book was founded on the idea that morality can be encouraged through a rationally inspired method. The book is a compendium, where the whole doctrine can be found “*knit together in many ideas, and reduced to principles*”<sup>3</sup>. The students “*learn these by memorizing, studying, meditating, and deepening them*”<sup>4</sup>. In another one of his works he will justify this stance asserting:

*“The doctrines of truth are immense material designed to raise the magnificent, sure and firmest edifice of the virtue in the soul. To teach these doctrines without method is nothing but to raise a pile of remiss ideas one on top of the other and in the intellectual world a heap of disjointed, fragmented ideas without connection, not light, but darkness; they are not science, but ignorance; not order but confusion; they are not any design and blueprint plan that can serve to build in the rational soul the splendid edifice of morality, but, on the contrary, the image of a ruined work.”*<sup>5</sup>

This methodological approach comes from a typically limited interpretation of Aquinas’ statement: “*knowledge is the cause of love*”<sup>6</sup>. But, as we shall see, later on in his life Palau came to realize that morality isn’t acquired through rational discourse but sentiment. This realization is well in touch with current research in moral psychology.

Now then, while writing his Catechism of Virtue, Palau was certain that intellectual knowledge of virtue would be enough to possess it. He stated that to possess virtue “*one should know its value and beauty. We cannot love except what we know...*”<sup>7</sup>. But where should one look for this knowledge? At the time of writing the Catechism of Virtue, for Palau the answer was in Christ, but not as an interior master, but rather one whose teachings can be learned through authorized sources, i.e. Sacred Scripture, the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and the teachings of ascetics and mystics<sup>8</sup>. Even though he recognizes the benefits of inductive learning, in this phase of his life he will clearly opt for a more deductive method<sup>9</sup>. Knowledge is attained in a pyramidal manner. Christ teaches his saints, and through them, i.e. their writings, he teaches us. The insistence on truth and method characterizes Palau’s focus on rationality in this period of his life. Later on, even though maintaining the need for a method, his moral theology will focus on another transcendental: beauty.

## Methodological Change

We can perceive this methodological change in his 1862 prayer book, *Month of Mary*, though he will maintain the

<sup>3</sup>CV, introduction, 5.

<sup>4</sup>idem.

<sup>5</sup>SVV, II, 4.

<sup>6</sup>STh I-II q.27 a.2.

<sup>7</sup>CV, introduction, 2.

<sup>8</sup>cf. CV, introduction, 3-4.

<sup>9</sup>cf. CV, introduction, 4.

basic structure of the Catechism of Virtue, i.e. in what refers to “*the different species of virtues that moral theology names*”<sup>10</sup>. In *Month of Mary*, the top-down, pyramidal structure and the insistence of knowledge we saw before as the key to living a moral life are dismissed as useless. The essence of this paradigm shift can be portrayed in these lines that refer to virtue:

*“Practice it, love it, search for it, and it will be revealed and unveiled to you by the same love: love it and you will recognize it; and if you don’t love it, all the definitions and so many explanations about it will be unfruitful, and you will not understand whatever may be said.”*<sup>11</sup>

Before, Palau had insisted that to love virtue one had to understand it first<sup>12</sup>. Now, he has gone from a deductive to an inductive method: virtue must be first embraced through love, and only then can it be understood. The intermediation of authorized sources of wisdom is replaced by firsthand knowledge through love. Love has the primacy; intellectual knowledge without love is useless.

## Love as Passion

To further understand what Palau means by love, we shall appeal to one of his latest works, *My Relations with the Church*. He confesses that since his childhood he has “*been possessed and dominated by a passion called love*”<sup>13</sup>. For Thomas Aquinas, “*it is evident that love is a passion*”<sup>14</sup>. Love should not be confused with the theological virtue of charity. In general, a passion is the effect that something or someone causes in an individual. In the case of love, a certain object can cause in an individual an appetite towards the object itself. From this, we can conclude with Aquinas that knowledge of the object is absolutely necessary for love to exist. But we must remember that Aquinas makes a distinction in the types of love: sensitive love and intellectual or rational love<sup>15</sup>. In his anterior phase, in what relates to moral theology, Palau placed his attention on intellectual appetite as the source for love, i.e., intellectual love. In *My Relations with the Church*, we can see the radical shift towards sensitive love. He talks about how the passion of love always accompanied and tormented him even though he didn’t know exactly what he longed for<sup>16</sup>. On this subject he states:

*“God wrote this law with his own finger in the stratum of my heart: You must love with all your strength... [Dt 6,5; Mt 22,37]. And this efficacious voice created an immense passion in it, which made itself felt from my infancy and developed in my youth. I, when I was young, loved with all*

<sup>10</sup>MM, introduction, 1.

<sup>11</sup>MM, Vigil of the Month of Mary, II, 2.

<sup>12</sup>cf. CV, introduction, 2.

<sup>13</sup>MR, Fragments I, 1.

<sup>14</sup>STh I-II q.26 a.2.

<sup>15</sup>cf. STh I-II q.26 a.1.

<sup>16</sup>cf. MR, Autograph Text 22, 13.

*my strength, because the law of nature impelled me with irresistible impact. What did I love? Who was the beloved object?"*<sup>17</sup>.

We can see from this passage the close relationship between divine and natural law. God writes his law of love in our nature. But even though this love is inscribed in our hearts, its object isn't always so clear to us. This paradox is the arduous task of moral discernment, and this is why it is so important to consider our passions as theological places of discernment. Understanding love as a passion means embracing our concupiscible faculty as our God-given natural drive towards good. According to Aquinas, in this sense, the intention of love – its final goal – is joy and pleasure<sup>18</sup>. This positive underlying perception of concupiscence could have been looked upon with suspicion in Palau's time by Church officials. And perhaps even today it is difficult to talk about concupiscence positively among Christians. In this sense, it is recommendable to take a look into Karl Rahner's famous essay "The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia" in the first volume of his Theological Investigations.

### **Eros: The Search for Beauty**

Palau's life, like all of ours, was a constant search for the object of his love without knowing where or what it really was. Like Augustine, he describes his restless search for beauty as a reckless one until he came upon his Beloved<sup>19</sup>. Only in the Church did Palau finally find the true object of his love:

*"Her presence satisfied my passion, and with her I was happy, her beauty was sufficient for me"*<sup>20</sup>.

Palau was finally subdued by the power of beauty. His experience of the passion of love was the yearning for beauty. He speaks of an image implanted in his mind that represents eternal beauty<sup>21</sup>. This is a very Platonic idea, and also very mystical. It is the understanding that beauty is not subjective, something that depends on the eye of the beholder, rather it is a transcendent reality that must be discovered with the mind's eye. The beauty we speak about here is – in words of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite – an invisible beauty.

There is a simile here to Eros, the Greek mythological being, as described by Plato in his Symposium. Plato describes Eros as "*a natural lover of beauty*"<sup>22</sup>. Eros looks for beauty because he lacks it in himself. His devotion to beauty is justified by the fact that he was born on the feast of Aphrodite (Venus), the goddess of beauty, but because he was born the child of Poverty and Resource, he

is eternally deprived of – yet always diligently seeking – beauty. For Plato, Eros is an intermediate being, existing between the plane of men and gods. In this manner, he can serve as a messenger and reveal divine beauty to men. In the Platonic sense just covered, we can perfectly state that Palau's theology became truly erotic, i.e. a search for invisible beauty. Assuming an erotic theological path means searching for the beauty we lack and desire through the things of this world understanding that this desire (concupiscence) is a bridge towards Beauty itself.

Father Palau, and many more throughout history, have discovered a close relationship between goodness and beauty. Pope John Paul II, in his 1999 Letter to Artists, recalled how the ancient Greeks also saw goodness and beauty as one thing. He even cited Plato's phrase: "*The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful*"<sup>23</sup>. It is relevant that in Month of Mary, Palau recurs to the imagery of flowers to present the virtues. In this stage of his life, ethics and aesthetics are united. In this sense, we could say that Palau's moral theology is on an erotic path, i.e. a passionate search for goodness through beauty. This is why he insisted that virtue must first be sought with love.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, virtue ethics – as taught by Father Palau and many others – indicates happiness as the final goal of life. But it also indicates that it is only through a virtuous morally good life that one can attain true happiness. Furthermore, virtue is considered as living according to human nature, or as human flourishing as it is commonly said in the field of moral psychology. Based on the interpretation we have given of Palau's Month of Mary, virtue can only be attained through the passion of love, not intellectual knowledge; the passion of love seeks beauty; virtue is beautiful and must be sought for its beauty, in it we will find goodness.

Palau made the shift from teaching ethics based on logic to teaching ethics based on the aesthetic. Only a passionate life – an erotic life – directed by true beauty can take us down the path of happiness, flourishing, and everlasting love. Pope Benedict XVI – trying to revindicate eros – reminded us that "*eros tends to rise 'in ecstasy' towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves*"<sup>24</sup>. In this path, we will finally unite with whom we are looking for: God.

With this perspective in mind, we shall continue to explore – in the following essays – Palau's Catechism of Virtues, where we find the main structure of his moral theology but not the methodological innovation of passionate love he discovered later on in his life.

<sup>17</sup>MR, Fragments I, 2.

<sup>18</sup>cf. STh I-II q.25 a. 2.

<sup>19</sup>cf. MR, Autograph Text 10, 14-15.

<sup>20</sup>MR, Fragments I, 3.

<sup>21</sup>cf. MR, Autograph Text, 4,17.

<sup>22</sup>Symposium 203c.

<sup>23</sup>Philebus, 65 A.

<sup>24</sup>Deus Caritas Est, 5.

### **Abbreviations:**

CV = Catechism of Virtue

MM = Month of Mary

MR = My Relations with the Church

STh = Summa Theologica

SVV = The School of Virtue Vindicated

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