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A journal for restless minds

Colloquī *: to discuss*

Proportional Morality

A circumstantial fairy tale of not so epic proportion

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

Proportional Morality

A circumstantial fairy tale of not so epic proportion

Four months. It has been that long since the last issue of *Colloqui* (Vol 05 No 28, April 15, 2022). No apologies. Life happens and sometimes it simply gets in the way of every well-intentioned thought. In some respects I have forged new paths, writing daily essays or missives as I am wont to call them, succinct and to the point (*Consider this ...*), certainly not of the fullness of thought as *Colloqui*, but *in toto* worthy of a book or two. But then, there are books waiting to be published which I have long promised but have yet to keep. I will, I will, I will, I promise.

At the severest risk of once again poking a hornets' nest with too short a stick, I find myself entering dangerous theological territory ever anew. Not long ago, I received an email from a good friend and fellow Catholic asking for my thoughts and comments regarding an essay written for the National Catholic Register. The title alone discourages no small concern for controversy: "*Understanding Pope Francis: It's the Moral Theology, Stupid.*"¹

Having once too often written uncharitable words concerning our South of the Border Papa Francisco, I was and I am, as you might well suspect, reluctant to reinjure old wounds. However, I did, as is my practice, study the matter with serious research, the severest of diligence and the utmost of care. After all, my friend did ask for comment to which I feel obliged to respond. I will forego any substantive mention of Papa Francisco as the issue I will address stands on its own as a serious threat to the Catholic Church and the rapidly dwindling Catholics still firmly seated in the pews. I will endeavor to make this as quick and painless to understand as possible.

The author, Larry Chapp, Th.D., claims in his essay "that Pope Francis seems favorably disposed to a form of moral theology that has been commonly referred to as

'proportionalism' an outgrowth of 'consequentialism.'

At the very least, I think Pope Francis sees in proportionalism a kind of "corrective" counterweight to what he considers to be an overemphasis in the Church on natural-law moral reasoning with its central focus on certain moral objects as intrinsically evil.

Proportionalism denies that there are intrinsically evil acts and that the morality of an act can only be judged in the light of its outcomes or "consequences." Catholic proportionalists do not deny that there are indeed foundational moral principles (which is how it differs from a straight-up and unvarnished utilitarianism), but that in the light of a rational adjudication of potential likely outcomes, a moral principle can be denied as applicable in a particular instance if there is a "proportionate" reason for doing so.

This form of moral theology was very influential in the post-conciliar era and gained further strength among those who vociferously dissented from *Humanae Vitae*.



There are those like Bernard Häring, a proportionalist moral theologian, who dissents from *Humanae Vitae* and *Veritatis Splendor* on key issues, with whom Pope Francis sets as a "paradigmatic model for how moral theology should be renewed in the light of Vatican II."

Pope Francis seems to embrace a form of moral reasoning, closely allied with proportionalism, that says that in the concrete circumstances of life, circumstances which are often complex, difficult and messy, a person's ability to live the objective moral law might be so limited that he or she may indeed be inculpable for any moral guilt and may, in fact, be doing what God wills for them in his or her concrete existence, despite what the objective moral norm teaches. In other words, the moral principle in question is affirmed, but it may be set aside in certain complex cases that present us with a proportionate reason for doing so. This is different from "inculpable ignorance" of the principle in question since the principle is known and affirmed, but is just "set aside in this instance."

But lest I get ahead of myself, I suppose it would help to say a word or two in explanation of what *Proportionalism* or *Consequentialism*, kindred moral theologies, are all about.

A moral theory is Proportionalist (or Consequentialist) to the extent that it appeals to a comparative evaluation of benefits and harms to determine the morality of acts. An act's morality is assessed by weighing the relative benefits ("goods" or "values") to be gained by a contemplated course of action against the corresponding harms ("evils") being threatened. If good outweighs evil, the act is judged morally right despite the fact that evil may have been done.²

Perhaps a more straightforward explication for the arguably heretical moral theory of Proportionalism comes not from Church canon but from two unlikely and unexpected sources: Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* and Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. Orwell's novel described a world of resigned madness, a world where reality was whatever the Ministry of Truth said it was, where 2 + 2 could be anything other than 4, though sometimes it could in fact be so, where history was memory holed to support the current narrative and absolve the party of any guilt. Solzhenitsyn lived such a dystopian nightmare.

The Revolution had hastened to rename everything, so that everything would seem new. Thus the death penalty was rechristened "the supreme measure"—no longer a "punishment" but a means of *social defense*.³

The problem with Proportionalism is primarily an answer to the question of who is in charge, who then decides? "When it comes to judging human actions, it is perhaps best that God is in charge, and not only because he said so."

The feeble mind of man cannot even remotely begin to have the capability to take into account all the influences on an individual when he acts. Any attempt on the part of man to assume God's role results in miserable failure, as seen in both the heteronomous and autonomous movements in the Church. A heteronomous view of the salvation of man often excludes the role that conscience plays in an invincibly ignorant individual, leaving all the poor non-Catholics with nothing to do but twiddle their thumbs in Hell. Shifting to the opposite extreme leads one to an autonomous view of morality, which denies any sort of absolute moral norms and thereby allows any unholy fiend in human form to stand before the Almighty after sinning in defiance. The

latter case is perhaps the more popular—for obvious reasons—but is just as incorrect and dangerous. Autonomous ideas may take many forms, but one version in the Church at present is what is known as Proportionalism, discussed in Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*.⁴

The sainted Pope sums up the error of the teleological ethical theories (*proportionalism, consequentialism*) quite nicely writing "[Proportionalism], while acknowledging that moral values are indicated by reason and by Revelation, maintain that it is never possible to formulate an absolute prohibition of particular kinds of behavior which would be in conflict, in every circumstance and in every culture, with those values."⁵ As one source argues, "Given the fact that the Ten Commandments, among other teachings, seem very absolute, one would think that it is difficult to hold such a view." Earlier in his monumental encyclical, the Pope noted:

"If a type of action always destroys, damages or impedes some basic element of human good, then no ranking of proportional outcomes can make that action consistent with integral human flourishing."

Certain ethical theories, called "teleological", claim to be concerned for the conformity of human acts, with the ends pursued by the agent and with the values intended by him. The criteria for evaluating the moral rightness of an action are drawn from the weighing of the non-moral or pre-moral goods to be gained and the corresponding non-moral or pre-moral values to be respected. For some, concrete behavior would be right or wrong

according as whether or not it is capable of producing a better state of affairs for all concerned. Right conduct would be the one capable of "maximizing" goods and "minimizing" evils.⁶

The terms *non-moral* or *pre-moral* may require further clarification in order to understand the true nature of Proportionalism. Here, John Paul explains:

The acting subject would indeed be responsible for attaining the values pursued, but in two ways: the values or goods involved in a human act would be, from one viewpoint, of the moral order (in relation to properly moral values, such as love of God and neighbor, justice, etc.) and, from another viewpoint, of the pre-moral order, which some term non-moral, physical or ontic (in relation to the advantages and disadvantages accruing

both to the agent and to all other persons possibly involved, such as, for example, health or its endangerment, physical integrity, life, death, loss of material goods, etc.).⁷

Why then is a calculus of “greater good” and “lesser evil” not appropriate in determining human acts? The problem rests again in who decides what is good over what is evil; it is in the notion that fallible human beings can rationally quantify and thus maximize good. God created man with reason for a reason; man is not God.

The human goods at stake in moral choosing are simply not commensurable. How can one measure the value of human life compared to friendship or knowledge of the truth, or how can one measure the value of my life compared to yours? Human good is not simply “out there” waiting to be maximized. It resides in the heart of a person who has committed himself to authentic human goods prior to their external manifestation, and it endures even if one’s commitment to them fails to produce good results. For example, the commitment of a mother to the well-being of her child has a reality in her heart quite apart from the success of her endeavors to promote her child’s welfare. Her commitment to the good of her daughter does not merely hinge on the possibility of “well-being” which may be realized if all goes according to plan. Or the commitment of a husband to his irreversibly comatose wife. Leaving her for another might very well promise greater benefit. What then justifies remaining faithful to her, perhaps for many years? Certainly no quantitative measure of greater good and lesser evil. Rather, the reverence he has for their marital covenant — his love for his wife and for the reality of their enduring one-flesh relationship; and for the goodness of her life right now, disabled, unresponsive, supine, and yet really and objectively good.

A Proportionalist ethic is also superficial. Morality is not simply concerned with “doing good,” in the sense of maximizing beneficial states of affairs in the world, but about being good. And being good requires committing oneself to reverencing human good as it exists in the integral and full being of individuals and communities (instantiated in bodily life, friendship, marriage, harmony with God, knowledge of truth, etc.).⁸

Put into language one can more readily understand,

there are goods of a kind that if endangered or threatened, could allow the acting subject (actor or agent) to perform as a good act, what, in other circumstances, would be considered an evil act. Thus, in preparing to act, it is incumbent upon the actor to *proportion* or weigh all the factors and choose those that have more values than disvalues. Neat sleight-of-hand if you can get away with it.

For example, if a person were given the choice to place a tiny speck of incense on an altar to Zeus and deny his own God, or face horrible torture and death, the Proportionalists would claim that the values of staying alive, being with one’s family, etc. outweigh the disvalue of what may be only at the surface denying God. The act of saving one’s own life in the face of martyrdom can be legitimately performed as a good act, since the extraordinary circumstances of the individual’s position

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allow for that one exception to the First Commandment. The individual’s judgment of these potentially threatening circumstances thus becomes the deciding factor and the act’s “moral goodness” would be judged on the basis of the subject’s intention in reference to moral goods, and its ‘rightness’ on the basis of a consideration of its foreseeable effects or consequences and of their proportion.” Hence the name “pre-moral”: since the actions are judged by intention and the situational circumstances, both of which happen at the time the agent is faced with a difficulty in his path of action, the

action itself is neutral until the agent’s own circumstances enter into the equation. It logically follows, then, that there can be no such thing as intrinsically evil acts, that is, acts that, by their very nature, regardless of the circumstances, are evil. Speaking in the voice of a Proportionalist, the Pope writes, “Even when grave matter is concerned, these precepts should be considered as operative norms which are always relative and open to exceptions.”

It is precisely because of the conclusion that there are no universal, morally absolute, intrinsically evil acts that the Church entirely rejects the Proportionalist view. Though the Proportionalists may be acting out of good intentions, the Church cannot in any way make allowances for their teachings.... Circumstances and intention *can* play a very important role in moral action, but they “can never transform an act intrinsically evil by virtue of its object into an act ‘subjectively’ good or defensible as a choice.”⁹

It is perhaps telling how little or how much proportional moral theologians (and the nominal Catholic laity) find themselves culpably ignorant of Church teaching on the nature of evil. It requires little effort to refer to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, yet very few find the energy to do so.

1749 Freedom makes man a moral subject. When he acts deliberately, man is, so to speak, the *father of his acts*. Human acts, that is, acts that are freely chosen in consequence of a judgment of conscience, can be morally evaluated. They are either good or evil.

1755 A *morally good* act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together. An evil end corrupts the action, even if the object is good in itself (such as praying and fasting “in order to be seen by men”).

The *object of the choice* can by itself vitiate an act in its entirety. There are some concrete acts—such as fornication—that it is always wrong to choose, because choosing them entails a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil.

1756. **It is therefore an error to judge the morality of human acts by considering only the intention that inspires them or the circumstances (environment, social pressure, duress or emergency, etc.) which supply their context.** There are acts which, in and of themselves, independently of circumstances and intentions, are always gravely illicit by reason of their object; such as blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery. One may not do evil so that good may result from it.

Like so many these days, Proportionalists, like Cafeteria Catholics, “pick and choose” highly parsed sources to support their argument. One of their favorites is St. Thomas Aquinas—but only lines taken out of context. They frequently point to question eighteen, article three: “Whether Man’s Action is Good or Evil from a Circumstance”, specifically claiming that Aquinas writes that “circumstance transforms an action” and that “human action may be

good or evil according to its circumstances.”

Fact Check! Misleading! Missing Context! These statements are found in the objections which Aquinas then proceeds to thoroughly dismantle, arguing that there are two kinds of circumstances, neither of which can make a bad action good; nor can good intent make a bad action good; but evil intent can make a good action bad.

If the Angelic Doctor is insufficiently explicit, the sainted Pope of most recent memory spells it out explicitly in *Veritatis Splendor*—“**Intrinsic evil**”: *it is not licit to do evil that good may come of it* (cf. *Rom 3:8*).

“Circumstances and intention can play a very important role in moral action, but they ‘can never transform an act intrinsically evil by virtue of its object into an act ‘subjectively’ good or defensible as a choice.”

Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature “incapable of being ordered” to God, because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are acts which, in the Church’s moral tradition, have been termed “intrinsically evil” (*intrinsece malum*): they are such *always and per se*, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances. Consequently, without in the least denying the influence on morality exercised by circumstances and especially by intentions, the Church teaches that “there exist acts which *per se* and in

themselves, independently of circumstances, are always seriously wrong by reason of their object. The Second Vatican Council itself, in discussing the respect due to the human person, gives a number of examples of such acts: “Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat laborers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free responsible persons: all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honor due to the Creator.

With regard to intrinsically evil acts, and in reference to contraceptive practices whereby the conjugal act is intentionally rendered infertile, Pope Paul VI teaches: "Though it is true that sometimes it is lawful to tolerate a lesser moral evil in order to avoid a greater evil or in order to promote a greater good, it is never lawful, even for the gravest of reasons, to do evil that good may come of it (cf. Rom 3:8) —in other words, to intend directly something which of its very nature contradicts the moral order, and which must therefore be judged unworthy of man, even though the intention is to protect or promote the welfare of an individual, of a family or of society in general."¹⁰

In teaching the existence of intrinsically evil acts, the Church accepts the teaching of Sacred Scripture. The Apostle Paul emphatically states: "Do not be deceived: neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9-10).

If acts are intrinsically evil, a good intention or particular circumstances can diminish their evil, but they cannot remove it. They remain "irremediably" evil acts; *per se* and in themselves they are not capable of being ordered to God and to the good of the person. "As for acts which are themselves sins (*cum iam opera ipsa peccata sunt*), Saint Augustine writes, like theft, fornication, blasphemy, who would dare affirm that, by doing them for good motives (*causis bonis*), they would no longer be sins, or, what is even more absurd, that they would be sins that are justified?"

Consequently, circumstances or intentions can never transform an act intrinsically evil by virtue of its object into an act "subjectively" good or defensible as a choice.¹¹

Yet, there remains for far too many the argument that circumstances might well act as a mediating agent, giving allowances to a secure Catholic conscience to turn an objectively immoral act into God's will for the good. This contradicts the words of Saint John Paul II who wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*:

"Though it is true that sometimes it is lawful to tolerate a lesser moral evil in order to avoid a greater evil or in order to promote a greater good, it is never lawful, even for the gravest of reasons, to do evil that good may come of it (cf. Rom 3:8)."

They cannot however look on the law as merely an ideal to be achieved in the future: they must consider it as a command of Christ the Lord to overcome difficulties with constancy. "And so what is known as 'the law of gradualness' or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with 'gradualness of the law,' as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations."¹²

This exasperates and frustrates proportional moral theologians, running counter to their progressive moral theories (*proportionalism* and the *fundamental option*.) "For proportionalists, such as the theory's father, Richard

McCormick, moral decision-making is a balancing act. One can choose, in some circumstances, to do something acknowledged as evil if the goods gained are proportionally justified."

For instance, contraception, or even adultery are morally wrong, but not intrinsically evil. One could envision a set of circumstances when they might be appropriate.

The Church, on the other hand, sees truth as knowable, both in the created order (the natural law) and as expressed in divine Revelation. The prohibitions of the Ten Commandments or of the Sermon on the Mount identify "intrinsic evils" which can

never be justified, regardless of circumstances.

The theory of fundamental option has been equally disastrous. It teaches that one's "fundamental option" for God is more significant than this or that evil behavior in determining one's relationship with him.

Such a utilitarian analysis is at the root of the current crisis, as it is behind the hydra-headed institution of dissent in the Church, whether over sexuality, the priesthood, abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, in vitro fertilization, contraception or the Health and Human Services mandate.

Catholics have become accustomed to the Church's morality in the breach, often with a claimed personal opposition to evil, but finding for themselves, and others, the "hard circumstances" that excuse not following Church teaching.¹³

For proportionalists such as McCormick moral decision-making is a balancing act. One may choose, given a particular set of circumstances, to do something evil if the

good to be gained is proportionally justified. For example, contraception may be morally wrong but not intrinsically evil; proportionally there may be circumstances when contraception may be “appropriate.”

The Church, on the other hand, sees truth as knowable, both in the created order (the natural law) and as expressed in divine Revelation. The prohibitions of the Ten Commandments or of the Sermon on the Mount identify “intrinsic evils” which can never be justified, regardless of circumstances.

The theory of the fundamental option has been equally disastrous. It teaches that one’s “fundamental option” for God is more significant than this or that evil behavior in determining one’s relationship with him.

Without fear of offending God in the details of life, especially the sexual details, who needs to worry about personal sin or confession?

A decade ago, within the Diocese of Phoenix, the religious sister in charge of a Catholic hospital permitted the death by abortion of a child. The mother was suffering from life-threatening pulmonary health issues and was “delivered of her pregnancy” by direct abortion.

The ethicist involved, and the many clergy, moralists and others who jumped to her defense, argued that Catholic Teaching permitted such life-saving “treatment.”

The unwanted evil of the death of the child was balanced by the purity of motive of those who participated and the good of saving the mother’s life.

This is a quintessential example of proportionalist logic, a balancing of goods and evils, and the conclusion that the good to be gained outweighed the evil to be endured. After all, they argued, the child would die anyway.

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priesthood, abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, in vitro fertilization, contraception or the Health and Human Services mandate.

Catholics have become accustomed to observing the Church’s morality in the breach, often with a claimed personal opposition to evil, but finding for themselves, and others, the “hard circumstances” that excuse not following Church teaching.¹⁴

Those who have managed to endure my scribbles are now quite familiar with my fetish for the ever quotable Mr. G.K. Chesterton. As someone, somewhere once said—

“Truth has to be repeated constantly, because Error also is being preached all the time, and not just by a few, but by the multitude. In the Press, Encyclopedias, in Schools, and Universities, everywhere Error holds sway, feeling happy and comfortable in the knowledge of having Majority on its side.”

~ Goethe

and if they did not, I must have said it in my mind, “I simply cannot help myself!” What Chesterton has to say on the matter must, however, wait rather impatiently while Emily Reimer-Barry, the Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego professes on her moral hypothesis that *“We’re All Proportionalists Now. But We’re Not Well Prepared For It.”*¹⁵ Not to put too fine a tint to her moral and ethical cant, according to her CV found on *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, her research interests are: Feminist,

Womanist, or Mujerista Ethics; Gender and Sexual Ethics; HIV/AIDS; LGBTQ Theologies; Social Ethics. Her essay published on the website *Catholic Moral Theology*, with a aforementioned subject compliments and supports her misguided moral theology all too well. Her opening says it all: “The moral method known as proportionalism is making a comeback. And this is good.”

For too long in Catholic public discourse, leaders have talked about the moral life as if we have clarity about “absolute good” and “evil,” largely focused on a description of an external act. Catholics have been told not to engage in acts that are “intrinsically evil,” that is, evil by virtue of the object of the act, no matter the intent or circumstances (torture, abortion, birth control, euthanasia). In an effort to avoid so-called “moral relativism,” there has been a reluctance to engage in moral reflection

on complex everyday contexts in which there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to a complex particular problem.

But that won't work for us now. Our moral imaginations need language to capture the complexity of the decisions we face as we navigate a global pandemic and the realities of everyday dilemmas.

That won't work for us now because of our *moral imaginations*? To paraphrase, what's your imagination got to do with it? Try telling that cop the next time you are pulled over for speeding that you cannot imagine such a concept! See what his response is when you explain it too difficult to capture the complexity of deciding what is the proper speed.

In each of these real-life questions, values are at stake. Christians live in the real world and have to make choices every day. Frequently now our discernment involves the weighing of risks and benefits, values and disvalues. We have to figure out how to live our faith in the midst of very real, ordinary dilemmas.

As opposed to unreal-life questions, living in an unreal world? Reading this, one must seriously question the quality of the twelve years of education she obtained from the University of Notre Dame (BA), Weston Jesuit School of Theology (M.T.S.), and Loyola University of Chicago (Ph.D.).

Life, as defined by God, is full of risks and benefits, values and disvalues, "very real, ordinary dilemmas." Our faith is not something to figure out. There is nothing to "figure out" about our faith in God.

Proportionalism helps the person to think about the moral life as a means by which one evaluates human action in order to determine the right in particular circumstances for a particular agent. The misrepresentation of proportionalism in *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) was unfortunate, and led to confusion in pastoral theology. Moralists in the Catholic tradition who invoke proportionalism should not be described as "moral relativists" because they are seeking an objective knowledge of

good and evil; they just locate it differently.

It is ludicrous to consider any reasoned comparison between one of the greatest moral theologians since Thomas Aquinas and this featherweight product of "Catholic" academe. There is no misrepresentation of proportionalism in *Veritatis Splendor*. The misrepresentation is front and center with her proportionalist moral theology.

It is crucially important to ask proportionalists but one abiding question: Who decides what is good and what is evil: God or man? The presumptive presumption of

those who advocate Proportionalism is that, of course, it is man playing God who decides, based on circumstances, what is good or evil; nothing is intrinsically or inextricably determinative. Such proportionalists conveniently ignore Scripture, the Word of God, which, from the beginning, says otherwise. (Gen 2:16-17, 3).

The primary argument, deliberately left unstated, is the necessity for the abolition of history and tradition by those who find the past unpleasant and self-limiting. Chesterton has waited long enough, he is impatient

to explain why modern thinkers such as our professor of proportionalistic moral theology is imagining unreal things.

All the will-worshippers, from Nietzsche to Mr. Davidson, are really quite empty of volition. They cannot will, they can hardly wish. And if any one wants a proof of this, it can be found quite easily. It can be found in this fact: that they always talk of will as something that expands and breaks out. But it is quite the opposite. Every act of will is an act of self-limitation. To desire action is to desire limitation. In that sense every act is an act of self-sacrifice. When you choose anything, you reject everything else. That objection, which men of this school used to make to the act of marriage, is really an objection to every act. Every act is an irrevocable selection and exclusion. Just as when you marry one woman you give up all the others, so when you take one course of action you give up all the other courses. If you become King of England, you give up the post of Beadle in Brompton. If you go to Rome, you sacrifice a

rich suggestive life in Wimbledon. It is the existence of this negative or limiting side of will that makes most of the talk of the anarchic will-worshippers little better than nonsense.¹⁶

In his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio: On the Development of Peoples*, Pope Saint Paul VI made note of the obvious and ongoing generational conflict; a conflict between cultures and civilizations, between the traditional and the progressive.

Furthermore, the conflict between traditional civilizations and the new elements of industrial civilization break down structures which do not adapt themselves to new conditions. Their framework, sometimes rigid, was the indispensable prop to personal and family life; older people remain attached to it, the young escape from it, as from a useless barrier, to turn eagerly to new forms of life in society. The conflict of the generations is made more serious by a tragic dilemma: whether to retain ancestral institutions and convictions and renounce progress, or to admit techniques and civilizations from outside and reject along with the traditions of the past all their human richness. In effect, the moral, spiritual and religious supports of the past too often give way without securing in return any guarantee of a place in the new world.¹⁷

In this confusion the temptation becomes stronger to risk being swept away towards types of messianism which give promises but create illusions. The resulting dangers are patent: violent popular reactions, agitation towards insurrection, and a drifting towards totalitarian ideologies. Such are the data of the problem. Its seriousness is evident to all.¹⁸

The problem with Proportionalism is not that there are circumstances which occupy every human decision—to deny such would be to deny reality—but circumstances cannot alter or abolish nature and God's immutable law. Though not addressing the theories of Proportionalism and Consequentialism *per se*, Ludwig von Mises wrote "The history of mankind is the history of ideas. For it is ideas, theories and doctrines that guide human action, determine the ultimate ends men aim at, and the choice of

the means employed for the attainment of these ends."

The sensational events which stir the emotions and catch the interest of superficial observers are merely the consummation of ideological changes. There are no such things as abrupt sweeping transformations of human affairs.

In nature there are no such things as liberty and freedom. There is only the adamant rigidity of the laws of nature to which man must unconditionally submit if he wants to attain any ends at all. Neither was there liberty in the imaginary paradisaical conditions which, according to the fantastic prattle of many writers, preceded the establishment of societal bonds.

The laws establish norms of legitimate action.

Mortal men are liable to error, and legislators and judges are mortal men.¹⁹

While von Mises' point may, at first blush, seem out-of-place, and certainly inconsequential to proponents of proportionalism, I suggest quite the opposite (otherwise, why would I inject them into this dialectic?) What proportionalists refuse to acknowledge is the immutability of God's law and the objective reality of the natural law, that

there is only the adamant rigidity of the laws of nature and the immutable law of Nature's God which nothing and no one can either alter or abolish. In a real sense, the proportionalist suggests, though never fully admitting to such a thought, "that Catholic theology is a human corruption of a divine revelation, that it means learning from man instead of learning from Christ."

Christ constituted the Apostles and their successors as the teaching body (magisterium) of His Church: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20); the subject matter of their teaching clearly and distinctly defined. With those words Christ constituted the charter of the Church as a teaching body "to the close of the age."

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:16-17).

But, teaching body though she be, the Church may not originate her own teaching. What she had to teach was strictly prescribed. “Teaching them,” Christ said, “to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” The body of doctrine thus confided by Christ to the Church’s keeping, we call “the deposit of the faith.” The Church might not add to nor subtract from that. But she had to guard it. *Depositum custodi*—guard the deposit—is St. Paul’s injunction to Timothy (1 Tim 6:20). And, as time went on, ever-increasing vigilance would be needed in its guardianship. As time went on, this or that doctrine of the deposit would be called in question, the Church would have to defend it. This or that doctrine would need clearer exposition, the Church would have to expound it. This or that doctrine would have to be declared in its full significance, to be worked out in its details, in its consequences, in its conclusions, to be traced back in its legitimate development, to be studied in its relation to other doctrines, in its bearing upon the whole field of truth, natural and revealed, and for these purposes men had to exercise their reason upon revelation.

It is not from any professor’s chair that we accept Christ’s teaching, it is from the *Cathedra Petri*—the chair of Peter—and no conclusion of theologians, though it may call for respectful consideration, can command our assent, unless it comes to us ratified, directly or indirectly, by that supreme authority. The See of Peter is the divinely appointed guardian of the deposit of revelation. And in the task of guarding that deposit, theology has its proper place, an important place indeed, but a place that is secondary and subordinate.²⁰

Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft asks whether there are any moral absolutes, then answers absolutely: “Moral laws are absolute, objective, and universal.”

This is the proposition denied by the modern world. The modern world wants to believe moral laws are relative, subjective, and particular. That way, we are not under an absolute obligation to obey them. They depend on our subjective belief or unbelief in them, and I can always make particular exceptions when supposedly universal rules would limit my “freedom” too much for my liking.²¹

Kreeft goes on to ask whether freedom means “creating your own values?” Of course not, he writes, “No more than it means creating your own mathematics, or your own history.... We cannot ‘creatively’ make murder and lying and greed and lust good. We are *not* free to ‘create’ values. We are free to choose to obey or disobey them.” He then adds, “Relativism is *not* humane. It is tol-

erant *only* as long as it feels like being tolerant. Once it feels otherwise, no moral law prevents it from becoming dictatorial.”

That, in a nutshell, is the kernel of truth that Proportionalism rejects, objectively and absolutely. Moral theologians who promote and defend Proportionalism are telling themselves and anyone who will listen a circumstantial fairy tale of not so epic proportion. Beware! There is no bright cloud overshadowing, nor a voice saying listen to them.

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Matthew 7:13-14).

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Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy

Venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen

Longmans, Green & Co., 1928;

Cluny Media, 2019, 322 pages.

Religion Without God

Venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen

Longmans, Green & Co., 1928;

Cluny Media, 2019, 270 pages.

The Everlasting Man

G.K. Chesterton

Dover Publications, 2007, 270 pages.

After Humanity

Michael Ward

Word on Fire Academic, 2021, 241 pages.

Homo Americanus

Zbigniew Janowski

St. Augustine's Press, 2021, 259 pages.

The Cardinal Müller Report

Gerhard Cardinal Müller

Ignatius Press, 2021, 221 pages.

Knowledge and Decisions

Thomas Sowell

Basic Books, 1980, 422 pages.

Intellectuals and Society

Thomas Sowell

Basic Books, 2011, 669 pages.

Enemies of the Permanent Things

Russell Kirk

Sherwood Sugden & Company, 1984-88, 311 pages.

The Dying Citizen

Victor Davis Hanson

Basic Books, 2021, 420 pages.

PERIODICALS

First Things

www.firstthings.com

Touchstone

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Catholic Answers Magazine

www.catholic.com

Catholic Herald

www.catholicherald.co.uk

Chronicles

www.chroniclesmagazine.org

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The National Catholic Register

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www.catholicexchange.com

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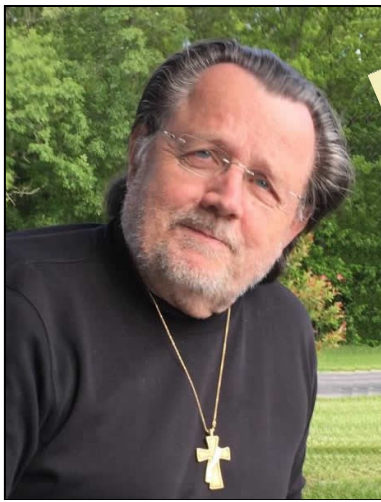
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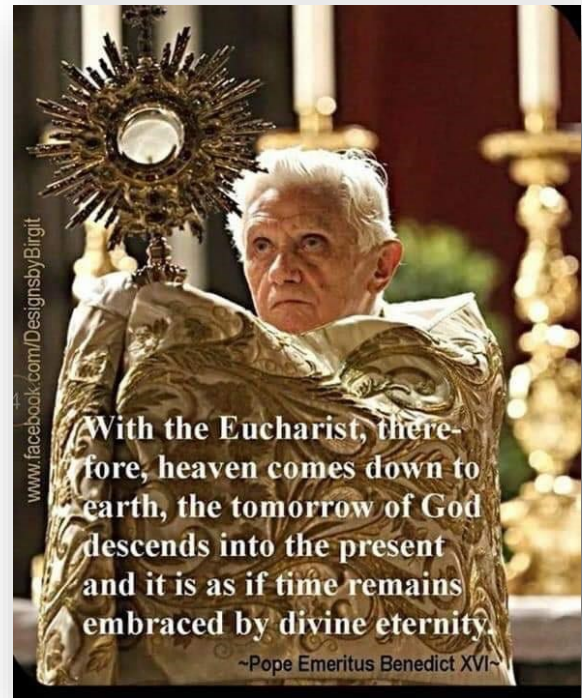
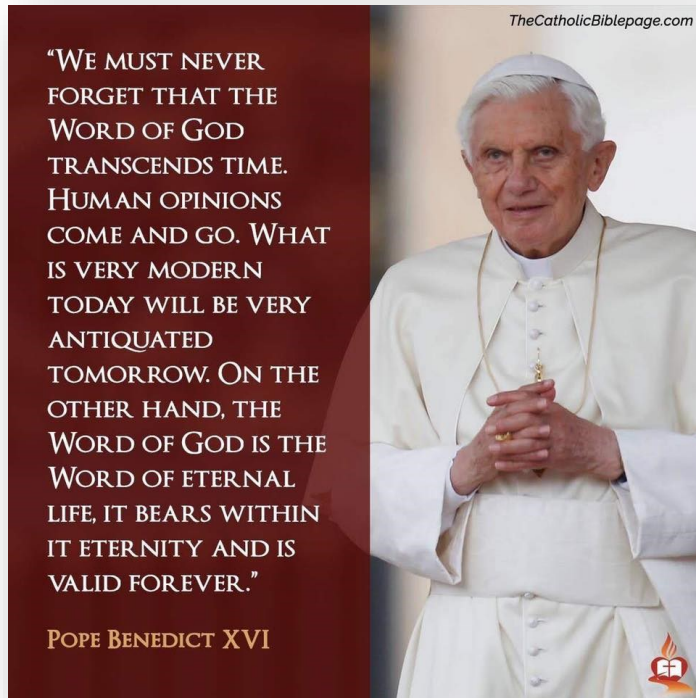
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Deacon Chuck Lanham is a Catholic author, columnist, speaker, theologian and philosopher, a jack-of-all-trades like his father (though far from a master of anything) and a servant of God. He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and has written over 500 essays on religion, faith, morality, theology, and philosophy.

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