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Charity is the best response to a broken world

by Arlene Monteverchio

MORALITY IN SOCIAL LIFE

By Sergio Bastianel

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In *Morality in Social Life*, Sergio Bastianel combines questions of fundamental moral theology and political philosophy with concepts from more modern approaches in narrative ethics. While questions of conscience, free responsibility, good versus evil, and charity versus justice are always important, he contends these questions cannot and should not be separated from the communities and stories that shape them. This being said, it follows that consciences communicate in the social sphere, that the personal is political, and that "it is not possible to privatize the ethical experience."

The author, who has written several works and teaches at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, has given us a book that is densely packed and tightly reasoned and proves worthy of the concentration required. In essence, he returns the church's social tradition to its proper place in moral theology -- by connecting questions of social interaction to the stories of scripture, the covenantal relationship with God, and communion with God through Christ.

Though he uses traditional categories to lay out a systematic inquiry of the relationship between personal morality and social responsibility, Bastianel re-imagines them in a countercultural way: "To become morally responsible means accepting the fact that the encounter with the other person redefines the horizon of existence and the whole of one's life ... assuming the other not as an object with which to build an exploitable relationship ... but as a person, as center of meaning and generation of meaning, in a relationship redefined by the possibility of living as indebted-acknowledged."

Bastianel's examples of such encounters include Jesus' temptation in the desert, the parable of the Good

Samaritan, and the disciples' experiences as a community of believers, all of which led to radical ways of living out God's story. Relationships, whatever their historical or cultural contexts, enable humans to respond to God's gratuitousness through charitable acts and through an increasingly charitable disposition.

Frequently referencing John Paul II's *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, the author reminds us that charity and solidarity are not meant to be general, vague responses to those who suffer in society. Instead, charity is the "governing criterion" for the Christian life and "the soul of Christian morality."

This return to virtue ethics and the ways in which Jesus embodied charity and solidarity is refreshing and carefully constructed.

Bastianel writes: "In reading the experience of the disciples in the various New Testament texts, we can say that what they saw, in the relationships that Jesus had with them and with others, was encouragement, patience, mercy; it was finding themselves always placed before him and placed in conditions to be able to extend the space of possible communion. For them Jesus was above all, and to the end, the one who cared for sinners and poor people. He took the initiative in creating familiarity; he did not expect their perfection, but from the start he trusted their journey."

The author briefly looks at political issues such as hunger, human development, economic systems, and the use of force, but he does so carefully and without much detail, careful to uphold the value of human relationships as outlined in revelation: While institutions should be made up of individuals living in solidarity and working for the common good, both of these realities depend upon consciences formed through the gift of charity. It is here that the author could have drawn on the work of both Pope Benedict XVI (to reinforce the primacy of charity as a response to those in need) or the traditions of feminist and liberation theology (to overcome structures of sin).

Morality in Social Life is a valuable work on the centrality of relationships, story and virtue to morality in the social sphere. Those who are quick to advocate for public policies based on theological principles will be disappointed in this work, but they would do well to remember Bastianel's central thesis: "Christian faith is not a totality of theories about the Christian life; nor is it simply a collection of religious news and experiences. At the basis of Christian belief lies not only a human effort, but God's gratuitous initiative, not simply the revelation of one or another truth, but God who communicates himself in the man of Nazareth, in his gestures, words, his human way of living out relationships on this earth, in his living and dying, in his remaining present through the gift of the Spirit."

If we pay attention to "the man of Nazareth," and each of our own encounters with the other, we may better live the gift of charity as the best response toward a broken world.

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