

Of Dominicans and Dissertations:
Reflections on the Life and Thought of Benedict Ashley, O.P., S.T.M.,
On the Occasion of His 85th Birthday

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Some Personal Background: Why a Doctoral Dissertation on Fr. Ashley?

It might seem odd that one would write a doctoral dissertation on the thought of Fr. Benedict Ashley. I do not mean odd in the sense that Benedict is not a worthy subject for a dissertation. As all of you know, when the history of twentieth century Thomism is written, Benedict will most surely deserve a prominent place. In fact, when I proposed the project of a dissertation on Fr. Ashley, my proposal approval board at the John Paul II Institute for the Study of Marriage and Family (Washington, DC) – which consisted of such notables as William E. May, Romanus Cessario, O.P., Fr. Francis Martin, Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, and Carl Anderson – thought that the idea was a splendid one. After all, as I had informed them, there was, surprisingly, no existing study of any aspect of his thought. My dissertation was meant to be a first step in remedying this unfortunate situation in the theological community.

However, they were, interestingly enough, concerned with one item: the fact that Fr. Ashley was still living! And as you can see, it is quite evident that Fr. Ashley is, despite his recent open-heart surgery, clearly alive, thank God. But what if Fr. Ashley were to abandon the faith, go mentally insane, or assist with the writing of the dissertation! These were, so I was told, the dangers of writing on someone who is still living.

Now, I was not about to kill off our beloved Benedict for the sake of the scholarly life. Although I was confident that none of the above dangers would ever come to pass, nevertheless, I was worried whether the board would accept the proposal. After all, as a husband with three (now four) children, I would eventually need a job. Still, I am no proportionalist who gets into weighing the good of life, i.e., Benedict's, with the good of scholarship. For me the choice was clear: the board would either approve the topic or I would begin to consider another subject to write on. In the end, praise God, the board unanimously approved the thesis proposal, but suggested a number of minor ways that it could be improved.

But I had other worries about being the first person to write a scholarly study of the moral thought of Benedict Ashley. Firstly, I am not a Dominican, but a married layman. What could I possibly contribute to our understanding of Ashley's theology, so informed was it by the spirituality of the Dominican order? Secondly, I was concerned about the age gap. I, born in 1963, am less than half the age of Benedict. How could I really know this man when I did not have access to those experiences of our Church and world that were so formative of Ashley's work? Thirdly, Fr. Ashley probably is the most well read man that I have ever met, whose reading includes many books and articles in the sciences. How would I deal with the great influence that modern science (and so many other subjects) has had on Ashley's thought? Finally, Fr. Ashley has written prolifically on almost every subject in philosophy and theology. How, then, would I proceed to organize this not only immense, but also diverse, amount of material?

Nevertheless, without going into boring detail, I knew that these problems would not be absolutely insurmountable. While working on my S.T.L. at the John Paul II

Institute for the Study of Marriage and Family (Washington, DC), I was assigned as Ashley's graduate assistant in my capacity as a Father McGivney Fellow. Also, my license dissertation was done under the able direction of Fr. Ashley. Moreover, I was able to learn much from Father in the classroom setting while taking six excellent courses from him at the Institute.

Thus, in the end, as a result of these experiences, none of these problems I have mentioned proved to be serious stumbling blocks. With much prayer and support on the part of family, friends, and colleagues, I completed my dissertation in February of 1998 and successfully defended it in April of that same year before a board composed of William E. May, Carl A. Anderson, Kenneth Schmitz, Fr. Francis Martin, Msgr. William B. Smith, and Fr. Daniel Mindling, O.F.M. Cap.

The dissertation itself, which is entitled, *The Fundamental Moral Theology of Benedict Ashley, O.P.: A Critical Study. Toward a Response to the Second Vatican Council's Call for Renewal in Moral Theology* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1998), includes a personal and intellectual biographical portrait of Fr. Ashley, and chapters on his "River Forest" school of Thomism, philosophical and theological anthropology, natural law theory, and fundamental moral theology. Throughout the writing of the dissertation, Fr. Ashley was extremely gracious with his time and willingness to send me many fine unpublished works that I was able to incorporate into the manuscript.

Moreover, Professor William E. May was no less than outstanding as my director. I know that Bill May's appreciation of Benedict's thought was enhanced as a result of having taken on the direction of this graduate student's critical study of Ashley's thought. Dr. May remains – despite his clear preference for the Grisez, Finnis, and Boyle "basic

goods” school of moral theology! – a big admirer of the work of Fr. Ashley. As Bill told me several years ago, he cannot think of many moral theologians who outrank the Dominican we honor today. And Fr. Ashley, in turn, is, as I know, a big admirer of Professor May.

What Can We Learn from Fr. Ashley? Seven Theses

I would like now to briefly, and albeit sketchily, articulate how I think we should evaluate the thought of this remarkable Dominican. I will offer seven points in the form of “theses” statements, which are, I would argue, Fr. Ashley’s greatest contributions to moral theology. I am sure that my fellow speakers will find other contributions that Father has made in the areas of scholarship, teaching, and administration.

First, *Ashley’s “River Forest Thomism,” with its affirmation of a realist epistemology and natural philosophy, provides the moral theologian with an anthropology that enables him or her to show how morality is grounded in human nature.*

I do agree with Professors Grisez’s and Finnis’ well known point that ethics is not epistemologically derived from human nature, however, I also think it is necessary to indicate in a rigorous and systematic way, especially today in our “culture of death,” the deep ontological foundation of ethics in human nature. While one cannot derive, as Grisez reminds us, an “ought” (value) from an “is” (fact), one can at least show why, for example, the basic human goods are goods for the human being. On this point, I argue that the kind of philosophical anthropology that Ashley proposes in his masterwork *Theologies of the Body* – so informed is it with the data of modern science – is able to do precisely this. It helps to establish, therefore, the connection which Pope John Paul II called for, between an “adequate anthropology” and “theological anthropology.” Thus,

by doing so, Ashley provides the moralist with a sturdy foundation for the study of moral theology.

Second, *Ashley approaches reading the Scriptures in the light of the Church's tradition, while remaining open to the best insights of modern historical-critical scholarship, but favoring what he calls a "symbolic" hermeneutic. This provides the moral theologian with a model for how he or she can use the Bible with complete confidence in its historical reliability. Ashley thus shows, for example, how the moral theologian can draw from both the Old and New Testaments to develop a theological anthropology and morality that is based on the salvific truths that God has revealed to us.* As Ashley has argued: "What every verse of the Bible means for our salvation may not be clear, but it is clear that it means something, and it is the task of the exegete to try to find that meaning. It is also the responsibility of theologians to base their reasoning upon the rock of biblical teaching not on some foundation of sand. We must take the canon as it is and not reduce it to a 'canon within the canon' by a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' that exorcises whatever in the text might expose the falsity of our own opinions" (Ashley, "The Bible Gap," *Catholic Dossier*, Vol. 2, March-April 1996, p. 9). Although many moral theologians are intimidated by the historical-critical method from using the Bible in their work (thus paying only "lip service" to the idea that Scripture should be the "soul" of all theology), Ashley tries to root his moral theology in the solid ground of God's own Word. This involves for Ashley, firstly, as I noted, using the work of biblical scholars, while at the same time being fully aware of their limitations. Secondly, it means relying on "a type of exegesis that does not stop with historical and

literary criticism but interprets the biblical text precisely as the Word of God redeeming our theological systems, not as rewritten to conform to them” (Ibid., p. 12).

Third, *Ashley’s program of using the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) and the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) to structure or organize the moral instruction of the Scriptures provides the moral theologian with a sound method for nourishing moral theology with the Word of God.* In Ashley’s approach, one begins firstly with the inspired Word of God in the Old Testament. Secondly, one then looks to the authentic interpretation of the Old Testament by the New Testament (e.g., in Jesus’ teaching on divorce and in his Sermon on the Mount). And thirdly, one uses the concept of natural law to universalize this (moral) teaching, thus determining which biblical norms are absolute versus those that are non-absolute. Hence, Ashley is able to respond to Vatican Council II’s hope that moral theology would be rooted ultimately, not in a philosophical ethics, but in God’s revealed Word.

Fourth, *Ashley shows, by means of the traditional concept of the “imitatio Christi,” how theological anthropology can be at the service of moral theology. He thus provides moral theology with a way of realizing the Second Vatican Council’s call for moral theology to have a closer contact with the person of Jesus Christ and the history of salvation.* As the “unifying principle” of Christian morality, the notion of the “*imitatio Christi*,” according to Ashley, is able to incorporate all aspects of the diverse forms of moral instruction in the Bible: such as the commandments, the virtues, and the Beatitudes. Moreover, Ashley’s understanding of the “*imitatio Christi*” includes the central mysteries of the Christian faith and utilizes them for moral theology. For

example, such neglected themes as the divine Sonship of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and also his Mother Mary, the Blessed Virgin (the “*imitatio Mariae*”) are shown to have a direct bearing on the moral life. Thus, Ashley’s moral theology is firmly centered on the God-man Jesus Christ and the great mysteries of salvation history.

Fifth, *the “material” or non-normative aspects of Ashley’s natural law theory provide the moral theologian with the intellectual resources for meeting the various modern philosophical objections against natural law theory.* Ashley’s natural law theory, which I refer to as a “teleological ethics of ordered needs,” is, in my opinion, able to offer convincing responses to some of the most difficult questions raised against a (including his own) Thomistically inspired natural law theory. That is, Ashley’s approach is able to overcome the problems associated with, for example, natural law and human freedom, natural law and the notion of a common human nature, and natural law and the development of our moral knowledge (e.g., the issue of the “historicity” of human existence). For Ashley, natural law, which is a work of human reason, presupposes freedom over determinism. It affirms a common human nature and its basic needs. And it also affirms the compatibility of absolute norms and values with the historical character of human existence. (Cf. Mark S. Latkovic, “Natural Law in the Moral Thought of Benedict Ashley, O.P.,” *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly*, Vol. 22, Fall 1999: 2-5).

Sixth, *Ashley’s “formal” or normative treatment of the natural law, whose method he and Kevin O’Rourke, O.P. call “prudential personalism,” is a useful system for moral decision making, especially in the area of bioethics.* This method, which consists of

various ethical principles, e.g., the “principle of well-formed conscience,” that are classified under the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love is a distinctive Christian ethic that is based on the harmony between faith and reason. Their method highlights, indeed centers on, the importance of prudence for making good moral choices. In this I most surely agree, but, as a point of friendly criticism, I also think it is necessary to articulate the process of moral reasoning which is able to derive specific moral norms (from the primary or first principles of natural law) that serve as guidelines for choice. This is so inasmuch as it is by first consistently choosing in accord with these norms that one can acquire the virtue of prudence, as well as the other moral virtues. Thus, it would not seem that prudence is able to derive moral norms in this fashion (On this topic, see the work of William E. May and John Finnis). However, all in all this is an intellectually sound natural law moral theory – one that contributes to theological scholarship and to helping persons make good moral choices.

Seventh, *Ashley’s proposal for responding to the Second Vatican Council’s call for renewal in moral theology constitutes a sound plan for constructing a moral theology that does justice to the Council Fathers’ conception of this discipline.* Ashley’s approach, based on the Scriptures and centered around the theological and cardinal virtues, is clearly in harmony not only with Vatican II’s teaching, but also with the understanding of the moral life presented in Pope John Paul II’s 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In adopting the schema of the three theological virtues and the four cardinal virtues integrated with them, Ashley is able to utilize all of the Word of God for instruction in moral theology – not just its specifically “ethical” teaching. Thus, Ashley is able to help us overcome the disastrous

dichotomy between *parenesis* and moral norms, spirituality and morality, and dogma and Christian moral life that is such a dominant characteristic of much modern thinking – a characteristic that Vatican II charged theologians to do their best to overcome (Cf. Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

Classifying Fr. Ashley’s Moral Thought: “Teleological” or “Christocentric” Thomist?

In a 1992 article titled “Virtue Theory and the Present Evolution of Thomism” (in *The Future of Thomism*, ed. Deal Hudson and Dennis Moran, American Maritain Association, 1992, pp. 291-299), Romanus Cessario, O.P. identified “two leanings among Thomist moralists nowadays.” He spoke first of what he calls the “Teleological Thomists.” These, Cessario states, “emphasize Aquinas’ insistence on final causality as both specifying and energizing the course of a good moral life.” He mentions as examples the theologians Servais Pinckaers, O.P. and Eberhard Schockenhoff. He then, secondly, speaks of the “Christocentric Thomists.” This school, of which the late Ramón García de Haro and Carlo Caffarra would be representative, “share[s] an active interest in the writings of the Angelic Doctor, but they choose to place Aquinas within the larger context of specifically evangelical objectives.” These objectives, Cessario continues, “require that the person of Christ always functions as the starting point of all theological inquiry.”

These two broad categories can be used, in my judgment, to classify Ashley’s own thought. So, which category or school would he fit in? I would respond by saying that clearly Ashley combines elements of both schools, but that since the time of around the late 1980’s, Ashley has been more the “Christocentric Thomist.” This is especially true

in light of his desire to root all of moral theology on a strong scriptural foundation and to center his plan for renewing moral theology on the person of Jesus Christ.

It was during this time from 1988 to 1992 at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, that Ashley began using in his course on fundamental moral theology, drafts of what would later be published as *Living the Truth in Love* (Alba House, 1996), whose subtitle is the revealing “*A Biblical Introduction to Moral Theology*.” However, up to that time, which more or less corresponds to the years just after his *Theologies of the Body* (1985, 1995) was published, I would argue that Ashley was more the “Teleological Thomist,” given that book’s overall focus and emphasis on a teleological understanding of modern science and natural philosophy.

However, even in this book and earlier in his career, there were signs that Ashley was moving more to the “Christological Thomist” position, e.g., in his ideas concerning the close relationship that exists between Christ and the natural law. The latter notion he affirms in *Theologies of the Body* – a perspective not unlike that proposed in Chapter 1 of *Veritatis Splendor*. For example, on this point, Ashley writes: “The ethics of Jesus... and his historical exemplification of ethics cannot be separated from the natural law, but instead becomes for the Christian a way to recover the natural law in its authentic sense” (*Theologies of the Body*, p. 386, my emphasis).

In the end, however, I must say that Fr. Ashley fruitfully combines elements of both of these contemporary schools of Thomistic moral theology, emphasizing the features of either one school or the other, depending on the audience, topic and/or issue he is addressing. This is most clearly seen in his influential writings in the field of bioethics, such as the critically acclaimed textbook *Health Care Ethics: A Theological*

Analysis, co-authored with Kevin O'Rourke, O.P., and now in its fourth edition (Georgetown University Press, 1997).

Conclusion: Fr. Ashley, a “Giant” of 20th Century Thomism

As all of you know, Benedict is a convert to the Christian faith. Having gone through both Humanism and Marxism in the 1930's, Benedict became an admirer of St. Thomas Aquinas during his years at the University of Chicago – finding in the Common Doctor answers to his questions about the ultimate things of human life that Marx could never adequately provide. Moreover, there was the example of two of his closest friends, Herbert Schwarz and Leo Shields, which helped “move” him “toward Jesus Christ.” Still, his conversion to the Catholic faith came as “a complete surprise” to him and was, as he says, a “pure act of grace.” After having been baptized in 1938, we are fortunate that Benedict would three years later, as he expresses it in his recent (and so far unpublished) memoir *A Friar's Folly*, “‘go all the way’ in following Christ and give himself to him in religious vows.” And then, ten years after he was baptized, Benedict was ordained a Catholic priest (For a fuller biography of Ashley, see Latkovic, *The Fundamental Moral Theology of Benedict Ashley, O.P.*, Chapter 1).

Studying the thought of Fr. Ashley has been a great privilege and blessing. His life reads in many ways as a “Who's Who” of twentieth (and now twenty-first!) century Catholicism. For example, he studied under the great Thomist Mortimer Adler while working on a master's degree at the University of Chicago. He also studied under masterful Thomists William H. Kane, O.P. and Yves Simon – the latter while working on a doctorate in political philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, and the former while working on a doctorate in philosophy at the Dominicans' Pontifical Faculty of

Philosophy in River Forest, Illinois. Moreover, he worked closely with such prominent Dominicans as James Weisheipl, O.P. and William Wallace, O.P. Thus, in either reading Benedict's publications or conversing with him, one has the sense that you are in the presence of, in the words that Ralph McInerny applied to him, "a giant."

This paper has only skimmed the surface of the long and outstanding career of Fr. Ashley. There are so many areas that were left untreated. But it is difficult to say everything that needs to be said about Fr. Ashley. After all, there *is* so much to say about someone who was born during the second year of World War I (1915) and who has lived long enough that they will soon turn 85 years old on May 3, 2000. But I am sure that the other speakers on the program will more than adequately cover what was left unsaid in my paper.

In closing, I want to say thank you to Fr. O'Rourke for having invited me to be a part of this wonderful celebration of the life and work of Fr. Ashley. I am sorry that I was not able to attend in person. But having my paper read here gives me the great satisfaction that I can be with all of you in mind and spirit.

And finally, to you Fr. Ashley, I want to extend my gratitude for your many contributions to the spiritual and intellectual life of the Church and for your constant witness to the precepts of the Gospel as a priest for over fifty years. I pray that our Lord lets you grace many of the beginning years of the twenty-first century with your humble and always gracious presence. Although you are short of stature, Professor McInerny still had it right when he said several years ago, in dedicating his McGivney Lectures to you, that you are a "giant," because in so many ways unrelated to physical height you tower over all of us!

