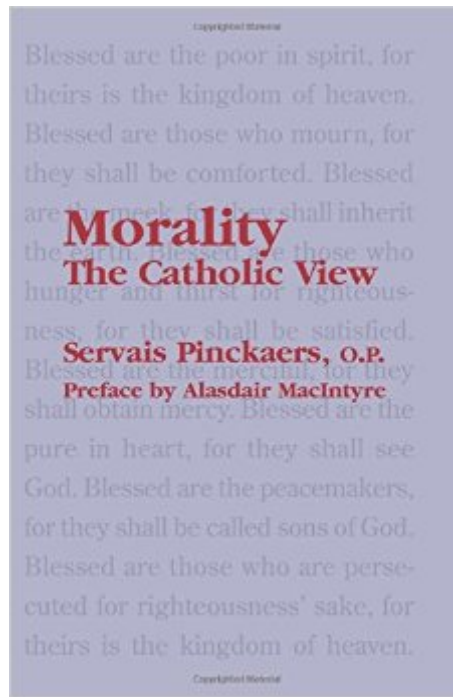


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Morality: The Catholic View



Synopsis

As Alasdair MacIntyre notes in the preface, the work of Pinckaers attracted strong and fully justified notice in this country with the publication in English of his *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. As Pinckaers himself notes in the text, excellently translated by Michael Sherwin, the interest should in no way be limited to Roman Catholics. *Morality* recasts the earlier book in an argument that is both lower and upper case catholic, and is accessible to readers and teachers outside the limited circle of moral theologians and academic ethicists. Pinckaers contends that Christian morality is not first of all about obligations but about happiness, understanding that the happiness of union with God is our natural destiny made possible by grace. The Sermon on the Mount is at the center of an approach to morality that turns on the distinction between freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference, the former understood as human flourishing and the latter as a neutral capacity to choose between controversies. The proposal of *Morality* is thoroughly Christ-centered, humanistic, and faithful to the magisterial teaching of the Church. Warmly recommended.

• First Things: If you want to have the experience of reflecting on Catholic morality as though you were reading about it for the first time, treat yourself to Father Servais Pinckaers' *Morality: The Catholic View*. He has recovered the classical view of the moral life as the quest for happiness and has presented it with disarming simplicity. Bringing us back to the Sermon on the Mount and Romans 12:15, the writings of Augustine and Aquinas, and the theme of natural law, he has freed those texts from the layers of legalism which has hidden their liberating, spiritual powers for moral living. By distinguishing freedom of indifference from freedom for excellence, he has restored a wise vision of freedom. No one has shown better the role of virtues as building blocks for morality. Catechists need to read this book.

• Rev. Alfred McBride, O.Praem., Professor of Homiletics and Catechetics at Blessed Pope John XXIII Seminary, Weston, Massachusetts: "Father Pinckaers has given us a masterful exposition of Christian living. The clarity and brevity of his presentation – captured well by the translator – make this book ideal for classroom and parish use. Readers will find the historical and systematic observations very informative." • Romanus Cessario, St. John's Seminary, Brighton, Massachusetts

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Customer Reviews

This tiny book is, apparently, a condensation of the author's more scholarly "The Sources of Christian Ethics". It is written at a level suitable for those with little or no philosophical background, though even the studied can benefit from his forthright discussion of some of the more difficult topics. The book is divided into two parts : a survey of the sources of Christian ethics, and a proposal for renewing our moral thought by a return to the classical and mediaeval models. Thus he discusses the sources for ethical reflection in the Gospels and the other New Testament documents (notably the Sermon on the Mount), then relates how these ideas were grafted onto the Greek philosophical tradition by the mediaeval thinkers. He dwells at (comparative) length on the structure of ethics as it was conceived by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century; namely, morality is a search for human happiness and fulfillment. He then relates how this ancient ethical tradition was undermined in the late mediaeval period (it is William of Ockham who gets the lion's share of the blame), and how a new conception of Christian ethics as "ethics of obligation" came to dominate in the post-Reformation period. Finally, he discusses the impact of the Vatican II on Catholic moral reflection, in which he sees hope for a return to the ancient model. The second part of the book is a reflection on how ethics might be reconceived in the image of Aquinas' ethics. In particular, he argues that our notion of freedom has to be fundamentally changed if we are to refound moral thought, for the dominant notion of freedom in modern times - what he calls 'freedom of indifference' - is at the root of the chaotic state of morality in western society.

Servais Pinckaers *Morality: The Catholic View*. This is a brief, clear and thoroughly accessible book. Pinckaers exposition of Catholic moral teaching is broken up by a number of tables and charts that expand, illuminate or summarize the points that his points. Pinckaers divides the work between an historical exegesis and a meditation on the nature of Christian morality. According to Pinckaers, Catholic moral teaching is not a mere code of prescriptions and prohibitions; Catholic morality is a

response, he says, to the aspirations of the human heart for truth and goodness, and seeks to educate men for growth. (p. 1.) Morality today is considered the domain of moral obligations, whereas it was historically viewed as the area in which the question of happiness and perfection were answered. (Id.) Pinckaers points to the Sermon on the Mount as illustrating an exhortation to excellence, rather than a code of conduct. Likewise, Paul exhorted Christians in the second part of Romans to a way of life that would conform to their new life in Christ. Pinckaers calls this kind of moral exhortation "paraclesis" from the Greek work "parakaleo" ("I exhort") from which the term Paraclete, signifying the Holy Spirit, derives. Pinckaers points to the other exhortations as an invitation for Christians to live up to a model of perfect Christian behavior rather than simply following a set of rules. The theme of exhortation toward virtuous living continued as a feature of Christian moral thinking. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, subordinated moral obligations to the virtues. (p. 32.) However, over time, particular during modernity, the focus of morality became the calculus of obligation. Aquinas' contributions, such as the treatise on happiness, were forgotten.

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