

Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics, edited by Reinhard Hütter and Theodor Dieter

reviewed by [Paul Nelson](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

*Edited by Reinhard Hutter and Theodor Dieter, Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics: Protestants engage Pope John Paul II's Moral Encyclicals. (Eerdmans, 295 pp.)*

Were more Roman Catholic theologians to give Pope John Paul II's recent moral encyclicals anything like the respectful, painstaking attention they receive in this book, he could afford to lift what, in the eyes of his critics, amounts to a proclamation of martial law within the church. But the relativism, subjectivism and individualism pervasive in the world and the proportionalism/ consequentialism rampant in the church make John Paul feel obliged to take strong measures.

In 1993 he issued *Veritatis Splendor*, the first extensive magisterial statement on the foundations of Christian morality. Two years later, in *Evangelium Vitae*, he dealt with abortion and euthanasia as elements in an "objective conspiracy against life." Not surprisingly, these encyclicals generated considerable argument among Catholics. In this book Protestant theologians join the debate.

Reinhard Hütter and Theodor Dieter bring together the papers presented at a consultation sponsored by the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France, and held at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. Eight Lutherans (Hütter, Dieter, Karl P. Donfried, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Lois Malcolm, Gilbert Meilaender, Risto Saarinen and Bernd Wannenwetsch) and an Anglican (Oliver O'Donovan) discuss the encyclicals, and two Catholics (James F. Keenan, S.J., and Eberhard Schockenhoff) respond. Six of the contributors are from the U.S., the rest from Germany, Finland and England.

After several decades of ecumenical dialogue, the churches of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican are nearing agreement on a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, thereby abandoning the mutual condemnations that originated in the 16th century. Though such initiatives get attention, serious interconfessional discussions of moral theology or ethics are rare. Indeed, James Gustafson's *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement*, published 20 years ago, remains the benchmark. Therefore, Hütter and Dieter's

volume is most welcome. It explores the prospects not merely for rapprochement but for a common understanding of the Christian moral life.

While the Protestant writers discover in the encyclicals much to be applauded, they feel obliged to demur on a number of points. Elshtain praises John Paul for "embracing the absolute ontological equality . . . between man and woman"; Malcolm lauds him for employing a personalist understanding of freedom"; and Wannenwetsch credits him for emphasizing the moral significance of the body, concrete responsibility for the neighbor, and the value of suffering if avoiding intrinsically evil deeds requires it. Where these scholars fault John Paul, their critique proceeds from axioms fundamental to the Reformation tradition.

Donfried, for example, is critical of the pope's penchant for ahistorical biblical prooftexting. *Veritatis Splendor* reads as if the authors of the New Testament were "primarily concerned with formulating commands and prescriptions that ought to govern the lives of Christians." John Paul's convictions about the immutability of natural law and intrinsically evil acts lack a scriptural basis. Donfried concurs with William Spohn's observation that *Veritatis Splendor* promises a christonomous ethics of discipleship but delivers a "hieronomous ethics of the Church's magisterium."

Meilaender takes issue with the pope's interpretation of the encounter between Jesus and the young man in Matthew 19. For John Paul, grace is that which makes possible "the keeping of the law which constitutes the way back to God." Assessments of persons and their works are so tightly connected in the encyclical that Meilaender finds no room for the possibility that "I might in my actions be journeying away from God, while at the same time, through faith taking shelter in Jesus as the One who has acted on my behalf." Although the encyclical echoes the Reformation doctrine of *sola gratia*, it fails to reckon with the correlative doctrine of *sola fide*-a critical omission in the eyes of a confessional Lutheran.

John Paul makes God's law (eternal, natural and revealed) the centerpiece of his account of the moral life-a position with which Protestants are in sympathy. But Hütter thinks the pope's interpretation of natural law and its relation to eternal law is too legalistic-perhaps because it is so informed by the 19th-century "classical neo-Thomist position" rather than the more supple, nuanced perspectives of 20th-century Aquinas scholarship. Had John Paul recognized the convergence between Luther's theology of grace and Aquinas' theology of grace and justification, the encyclical might be a better basis for ecumenical ethics.

Two of the authors argue that at crucial points John Paul fails to give adequate reasons for his claims. Saarinen notes that it is possible to share the pope's fundamental convictions about the inseparability of soul and body, culture and nature, and freedom and law, as Scandinavian Lutherans do, and yet "draw opposite ethical conclusions on the issues of contraception and divorce." Dieter observes that the encyclical asserts strong correspondences between the subjective conscience and the objective moral law and between individual reason and magisterial authority without ever showing on what these assertions are based. Such unsupported assertions can only undermine the credibility of papal moral teaching.

The Anglican contributor, O'Donovan, examines *Evangelium Vitae*'s brief and ambiguous treatment of capital punishment. O'Donovan worries that by removing the death penalty from the continuum of coercive punishments at the state's disposal but allowing it as an extraordinary measure in emergencies, the encyclical is both excessively restrictive and excessively permissive. The pope here has adopted a curiously modernist idealistic view of the state. O'Donovan thinks his position "implies an inevitable drift toward statism; for once the power of the sword is notionally set free from the constraints of justice in extremis, there can be no function for the sword but to enforce the state's grip." The root problem is theological. The encyclical fails "to achieve a clear focus on the resurrection and [tends] to put the cross in its place, central to the salvation history of life but unrelated to the phenomenology of death." Lacking is a link between judgment and mortality.

At the end of the volume, the Roman Catholic respondents make several significant observations. Schockenhoff warns that we should not confuse *Evangelium Vitae* with a philosophical treatise, a handbook of moral theology or a collection of bioethical analyses. Its true worth lies not in the persuasiveness of its arguments, but "in the prophetic power with which it exposes the life-contradicting tendencies that proceed from the spiritual vacuum of meaning and the moral crisis of orientation of our time." Keenan attributes the inadequacy of *Veritatis Splendor*'s use of scripture to its failure to escape the legacy of the medieval penitentials and the confessional manuals they inspired. However, Keenan argues, in another respect the encyclical is genuinely innovative. John Paul has given new meaning to the concept of the sanctity of life. Traditionally, the phrase has meant that God has dominion over life and death and that humans must not usurp his prerogatives. But here the sanctity of life is ascribed to us because we are created in God's image. "Human life is thus

given a sacred and inviolable character [in se] which reflects the inviolability of God."

The insight and subtlety of the essays collected in this volume bespeak a deep level of engagement with Roman Catholic moral theology. A serious ecumenical venture in ethics could do no less.