Unfolding the Moral Life

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Unfolding the Moral Life

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It is important to remember that the disciples were gathered in the upper room from the death of Jesus to the Pentecost, moving initially from grieving to the recognition of Jesus as Risen Lord. Attending to their experience of grief and the attendant experience of being vulnerable, they were subsequently incited to recognize the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Believing that vulnerability and recognition are the preconditions for acting out of conscience, as I have developed elsewhere, I propose to connect all four—Grief, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Conscience—to one another as effective ways that the Spirit summons us. My talk is divided into two parts: an extended reflection on grief and then the topics of Vulnerability, Recognition, and Conscience.

Grieving at Pentecost

On Tuesday, May 19, 2015, I received word that my best friend, the Hong Kong Jesuit, Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan had died of a heart attack, having collapsed on a bench in the corridor of the theology department of Marquette University. Trying to get to his office as he was returning from his daily early morning work out at the university gym, Lúcás gave up his last at 6:45 am before any of his colleagues arrived. He was 46 years old, the epitome of healthy living and his death was overwhelming for all us, his colleagues, friends, and family.

His funeral at Marquette would not be for at least a week but on May 24 I was scheduled to preside at the Sunday liturgy at St. Peter's Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts where I have worked for now nearly twenty years. That Sunday would be Pentecost Sunday. Facing Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, the celebration of the Spirit descending into the midst of the gathering in the upper room and sending them out, inspired and with tongues of fire, I asked how could I bring my grief to that liturgy.

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[i] A recording of this lecture can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgqUPhVJFLY.

Moreover, since the community knew me well, many would learn by Sunday that Lúcás had died. I would have to bring his sudden grievous death into my Pentecost homily and this brought me to a new understanding of Pentecost.

I need to tell you that I had known sudden death before. My brother Bob died during an early morning seizure of epilepsy when he was 26 years old. That day, June 2, 1980, changed the lives of all of us. From Bob's death I learned the importance of grieving with others and that grief alone is a dreadful, painful grief. Grief is meant to be shared, whether in Shiva or in a wake.

In preparation for the Sunday liturgy, I began asking myself, what were the disciples of Jesus doing in the Upper Room on the eve of what we now call Pentecost. Indeed they were waiting for the Spirit as Luke tells us, but I believe that they were waiting in grief. In fact, I believe their grieving was constitutive to the process of their recognizing Jesus; their ability to subsequently witness to Jesus, the very message of Pentecost, was prompted by their grieving. The Scriptures bear this out.

In the so-called long "canonical" ending of Mark's Gospel, we learn that the eleven were gathered in the Upper Room, that they were "mourning and weeping" (Mark 16.10). Mary Magdalen knows they are there and reports to them that Jesus is alive, but they do not believe her (Mark 16.11). Again two more come to report to them in the Upper Room that they met Jesus on a road, but again they do not believe (Mark 16.12-13). Later, we do not know how much later, Jesus himself comes to the Upper Room, they recognize him now, he rebukes them for not believing the reports, then commissions them to preach and ascends (Mark 16.14-20).[1]

In Luke, we hear that on Sunday three days after the death of Jesus, the women, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women, discover the empty tomb and encounter the two men "in dazzling clothes" who tell them that he has been raised; they run to the disciples in the Upper Room and the grieving disciples do not believe them, though Peter runs to the tomb and is amazed by the tomb being empty (Luke 24.12). Then the encounter at Emmaus is described where two disciples in their shared grief, for that is what prevents them from recognizing him, talk of Jesus' death, but then in the breaking of the bread recognize him (Luke 24.13-32) and rush back again to the upper room to tell the eleven; as they enter the room, the eleven tell the two from Emmaus that the Lord has risen and appeared to Peter and then the

two make their report (Luke 24.33-35). Unlike Mark, Luke reports that the eleven reportedly believe that Jesus has been raised before Jesus appears, which then occurs as the Emmaus disciples are present. Jesus extends to them his peace, eats fish, and tells them to stay in Jerusalem because he is "sending upon you what my Father promised." He walks to Bethany and then ascends…

In the Acts of the Apostles, after the ascension of Jesus, the disciples return to Jerusalem and immediately go to the Upper Room where we are told the eleven were staying, (Acts 1.13) "devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers." (Acts 1.14)

Luke makes a point that they are there for days (Acts 1.15), between the end of the resurrection appearances and the Pentecost, during which they chose a twelfth to replace Judas (Acts 1.16-26) Then the day of Pentecost occurs, again it seems as they are in the Upper Room, and the Spirit now descends on them (Acts 2.1) and fills the entire house (Acts 2.2).

In John, Mary Magdalene discovers the empty tomb, rushes to report the missing body of Jesus to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, they rush to the tomb and then return to their houses. Mary, however, remains at the tomb and is grieving outside the tomb, distressed that not only Jesus' life has been taken away but also his body has been taken too. Jesus approaches her in her grief and confusion and she does not recognize him until he calls her by name (John 20.1-18). She clings to him, he tells her to stop holding on and then commissions her to tell the disciples. Jesus later that day, John reports, goes to the disciples who are gathered in the upper room and then returns a week later again to the Upper Room to reveal himself to Thomas (John 20.19-31).

When I had to preach on Pentecost I experienced in myself such a grief I was fully vulnerable to the working of the Spirit. In fact I resonated with the disciples weeping and grieving in the Upper Room where they could not believe the news being reported, I resonated with the grief of Mary who first weeps outside the tomb thinking that now even the body of Christ is gone. She cannot recognize Jesus by sight but only later through her grief, when she hears her name. And I resonate with the disciples of Emmaus who had had such hopes that they cannot recognize the fellow pilgrim until he breaks the bread.

Their grief was not an obstacle to their eventual capacity to recognize Jesus but rather the passageway to the recognition. Through their grieving they became vulnerable enough to their love for Jesus that they could recognize his risen presence. These words, grief, vulnerability and recognition, words in the title of this talk are here inextricably linked to the Pentecost story and in particular to the role the Spirit plays in our lives and in the church.

The phenomenon of grief is the willing openness to the loss of love. During that Pentecost, I discovered that my grief was a form of love. In fact whenever I touch that grief, I encounter the love that connected me to my friend Lúcás. Entrance into grief is not solely an encounter with absence but with presence as well. The more one feels the presence of the love, the deeper one feels the loss, and yet the gulf of love remains, like the upper room itself, a place of vulnerability.

When I think of the disciples, Mary, and the others grieving in the Upper Room I think it was there that they gathered to grieve. There, after all, was where they celebrated the Last Supper, a meal that Jesus initiated to be repeated after his forthcoming departure. There they returned after the time in the Mount of Olives, on Golgotha, and from the burial in the tomb. When the twelve are gathered in the upper room with Mary they are grieving with one another.

They're going there because they are sharing their grief. But their grief is not like some check-in; they are not consoling one another by saying: Are you OK? Mary, how are you doing? Peter, are you OK? I think instead that they just talked about all the love that they experienced from Jesus and that they wanted to hear from one another how Jesus was loved by others. And so they wanted to hear how Peter loved Jesus, how Mary the Mother of Jesus loved Jesus, how the Magdalene loved Jesus, how Andrew and John and the others loved Jesus. And it's in the hearing of these narratives that I think that they were consoled. In their shared grief they gave one another to experience their love for and from Jesus. And it was in that space that first Jesus and then the Spirit found its place to enter into the upper room. Into the loving grief of the Upper Room, the Spirit found her place.

The Pentecost is not simply a sign of the Spirit's descent or the birth of the Church as we've always said. It was a moment of people grieving, people consoling one another about the fact that they loved Jesus, who loved them and died for them. Out of that expression of

griefs, they recognized their salvation and found a way to move forward by the Spirit.

In a similar way every Christian funeral is a replay of the Upper Room. When I preside at a funeral I enter into…not the presence… but the felt absence of the person loved, the raw, emotional gut wrenching experience of love exposed because the other has died. Those who believe the promise of the resurrection encounter it, not by negating grief or "transcending" it, but by entering it. The promise is not a quick fix imposed but rather something believers recognize as they grieve. Through grief we experience and can recognize the promise of the resurrection. The felt love with the now deceased remains as the bridge through grief.

The Gap of Grief

Several weeks after my brother Bobby died, I received from another Jesuit a letter with these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Nothing can fill the gap left by someone we love, and we should not attempt to find anything. We must simply endure and hold out. That may sound very harsh at first, but at the same time it is a great comfort, because as the hole that he has left remains unfilled, so the connection with him remains. It is wrong to say: 'God, fills the gap.' God doesn't fill it at all. Rather he leaves it unfilled, and in this way he helps us to maintain our true communion with our loved one, even though it is painful."

Bonhoeffer wrote these words on Christmas eve 1943 to his closest friends, Renate and Eberhard Bethge as he lay in prison in Tegel later to be executed on April 9, 1945.

These words of Bonhoeffer were an enormous consolation to my family; we experienced precisely in the gap of grief the way "to maintain our true communion with our loved one."[2]

I have come to believe that grief reveals human vulnerability which is, I will posit, our ability to be connected. Grief which arises from the separation of being connected is the exposition of our underlying vulnerability. Thus, in the Christian funeral, we do not deny the pain of death but rather touch precisely the loss.

I think that is how the disciples recognized Christ, not in spite of the grief but through it. They dared to feel the loss of Jesus to share the love he had for them and they for him. The grief is integral to their recognition of the resurrected Jesus. The grief made them more aware of their own vulnerability to Jesus, to the love of God and to the working of the Spirit.

Let me add. They grieved his death even after the resurrection appearances. Mary of Magdala grieved that she had to let go of the risen Jesus and could not hold him again, the disciples of Emmaus grieved that he disappeared after the breaking of the bread, and Peter and John assuredly looked for Jesus time and again on that beach. It was that grief that gave them the conviction to preach Jesus raised, but they, like Paul, longed for death so as to be reunited with the one they lost on earth. Peter grieved until he was crucified and Paul too until he was executed. Let us not think that the appearances eradicated the grief, but rather gave grief a new energy, a new reason to hope though grief.

Let us turn to the Scriptures and see this more clearly.

Grieving elsewhere in the Scriptures

We all know the shortest verse in the bible is "Jesus wept" (John 11.35). Note Jesus does not begin to weep when encountered by Martha or Mary, but rather when he literally confronts the reality of Lazarus as dead, that is, when he is brought to the tomb. Grief exposed Jesus' vulnerability to Lazarus. And that is revealed to us in the very next verse. "Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'" (John 11.36) Through grief the Spirit leads us as vulnerable in the face of death through love to hope.

Let's look now at the text, "Blessed are they who mourn," the second macarism of the 8 Mathean beatitudes. In his book, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life*, Lúcás Chan opens up the beatitudes by following the insight of John Climacus that the beatitudes are a ladder of ascent.[3] In this way we see that we can only understand each beatitude through the previous one. We can only ascend the ladder, one step at a time.

Chan notes, therefore, the overarching importance of the first beatitude, where we start by turning our gaze on the poor in spirit who are the most poor of the poor, economically deprived *and* socially alienated. Turning to the second macarism, "Blessed are they who mourn," Chan notes that this is not a command to mourn, but rather the recognition of those who already are mourning.[4] Reading the beatitudes along with the exegetical claims of biblical scholars (Hans Dieter Betz, William Davies and Dale Allison, Jr., as well as the theologian Gerald Vann), Chan argues that "the object of mourning is not so much one's own suffering or sins, but rather the concrete human experience of poverty and suffering encountered by community members," that is, "the poor in spirit.

Mourning points to an other-oriented moral value." Chan adds, "it is about a certain disposition that genuine disciples have with one another, such that if one suffers, the other mourns as well."[5] "Mourning is then the ready subordination of one's own comfort and wellbeing to the suffering of others."[6] and "is the necessary step *prior* to consoling others."[7]

As in the Risen Jesus visiting his followers and as in the Spirit descending on those in the Upper Room, mourning always encounters a responsive God. Just as Jeremiah consoles the mourners of Zion (Sirach 48.23-25) so God turns mourning into joy (Jeremiah 31.13), like a mother who comforts her child (Isaiah 66.13). Still in this second macarism those who mourn are therefore like "The Lord (who) is close to the brokenhearted" wanting to respond to "those who are crushed in spirit," as the Psalmist says (Psalm 38.14).[8]

In his book on the Beatitudes, Chan takes us up the ladder to the third beatitude where we learn meekness so that we can give up our tendency to condescend when we seek to respond to the poor in spirit; to the fourth where we practice hunger and thirst not as protests over the human condition but as ascetical practices so that we can really become the meek people that we seek to become, learning better how to respond to the poor in spirit; to the fifth where we now are able to be merciful because we have cultivated true mourning or human empathy, with meekness and asceticism so as to be merciful to the poor in spirit; to the sixth where by being merciful we are no longer self-centered but rather pure in heart, where following Kierkegaard we are capable of willing one thing and that is the salvation of the poor in spirit; to the seventh where by being now reconciled to all that is alienated within ourselves we can make peace with others as well; and finally at the eighth stage inevitably we will encounter that fateful rejection so deeply the outcome for those who labor with and for the poor in spirit.[9]

Grieving for the other's loss, their alienation, suffering, or death is the beginning of the beatitudinal response of the call to genuine discipleship, that is, of responding to the poor in spirit. It is what the Spirit recognized in the upper room and it is what precedes all else in the ladder of ascent. For the Christian it is not the denial of suffering and death but the encounter with loss and suffering of another, entering into their loss we are led by the Spirit as the disciples were led to not only recognize the Risen Christ but to unabashedly preach him.

I have been writing and speaking on the topics of vulnerability and recognition for the past four years and I do this because I believe that prior to acting in conscience we need to be vulnerable which gives us the capability to recognize. In order to act on that recognition we need subsequently to turn to our consciences to deliberate about what we should do.

My interests these past four years has been to explore what precedes conscience and I argue that what conscience needs is a vulnerable disposition that recognizes what is due.[10] Now, however, here in Saskatoon I am arguing about ways that we get a glimpse of how our vulnerability becomes alive and I am arguing that a look at grief helps us to see how we humans are vulnerable and that precisely by staying in touch with that vulnerability we are led by the Spirit to encounter hope in the face of death.

I know that many, many here have had similar experiences of grief. I am deliberately trying to tap here into the vulnerable experience of grief, because I think the key to life is an ability to live cognitively, emotionally and spiritually with one's own vulnerability while being in union with others' in theirs.[11] In other words the key to life is to be vulnerable.

Indeed I do not think that Peter, the Magdalene, Mary the Mother of Jesus, Thomas, or John ever really left their grief behind. In fact, Paul himself so resonated with the death of Jesus that he therein found his freedom and the promise of life. I think for them as for Bonhoeffer, the gap that death causes was never really closed.

I think this is why Paul in Romans 8 assures us that we are led by the Spirit precisely in our sufferings. We groan through our sufferings into becoming the children of God and this groaning occurs through as Paul notes "the present time" (Romans 8.22). He adds, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." (Romans 8.26) Whether in grief, in suffering, or in the sick self, we experience the Spirit leading us, accompanying us, expressing for us and from us what we yearn and hope for. In the rawest moments of human vulnerability, the Spirit gives us hope by her own actions.

Where we are vulnerable, the Spirit finds her home.

Vulnerability and Recognition

Let us now look at ethical connection between vulnerability and recognition, which I argue initiates the unfolding of the Moral Life.

For the past several years I have begun exploring the question, what gets a person to act in conscience? That is, I have begun asking what prompts moral responsiveness. Interestingly Thomas Aquinas also recognized that there was something that inclined conscience to act but he did not develop that. For Thomas, conscience was **not** the source of moral responsiveness; rather for him, prior to conscience was a human inclination to the good, what he called *synderesi*s.

What many of us know is that in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas wrote that conscience was not a power or a faculty or a disposition but simply an act (*Summa Theologiae* I. 79. 13). When we act in conscience we descend into the particulars about what our moral response should be.

In the *Summa*, in the article prior to the one on conscience, Thomas asked about a closely related aspect of the moral life called *synderesis*. There he argued that *synderesis* is a habit that inclines us to the good and murmurs at evil; this initial habit is for Thomas what eventually launches the act of conscience (*Summa Theologiae* I. 79. 12).

Like Thomas, I want to argue that something precedes conscience, something that inclines us toward the good, the neighbor. In what follows, I want to first examine vulnerable dispositions and then recognition. Then I will close by returning to the Spirit and in particular to the work of Thomas in the Spirit prompting in our vulnerability the needed recognition.

I began these investigations because I saw that in the bible for the most part, moral failure was not about getting things wrong; rather moral failure was prior to that. Moral failure was really the failure to bother to respond *in the first place*. The priest and Levite pass by the man on the road in Luke 10.30-37; the goats don't see the hungry and the naked in Matthew 25.31-46; and the rich man steps over Lazarus in Luke 16.19-31. None of them respond. It's not that they get wrong something in conscience; on the contrary, they haven't even started to use their consciences.

Is there something, then, that starts the ball rolling? Is there something that precedes the act of conscience that considers what am I to do? **Is there something we are not forming that eventually gets one to act in the first place?**

I think the problem is that we teach people what moral action is but we don't adequately consider whether they are vulnerably disposed to the other in the first place. In a similar way, besides

being vulnerably disposed do we know that will they actually recognize the other as well.

I think there are two steps before acting in conscience: being vulnerably disposed and then actually recognizing. I think we teach people what they in conscience should do, but we rarely address the pre-conditions to the conscience act.

Let's look at the Good Samaritan parable. I do not know if the priest and the Levite could have acted in conscience, but I do know two things. Neither were vulnerably disposed to the injured man and neither gave him the recognition that he was injured and in need.

On the other hand, the Good Samaritan's first recognition of the injured man gives evidence of his vulnerability to the wounded man. Then, after he recognized the man as being in need, he in conscience, went about the details of what he needed to do. Acting in conscience, he needed to figure out how to clean the wounds, get him to a safe place, make inquiries about the appropriate place in which to leave him, negotiate and secure from the innkeeper his oversight of the injured man, dispense with his funds, redesign his return to this particular inn so as to take the man with him, etc.

The Good Samaritan's conscience got a workout, but the work of his conscience only began when his vulnerable disposition *recognized* the man; the recognition led then to the conscience question: now what do I do?

Like many others, when I first thought of vulnerability I considered it singularly as being wounded, as primarily a condition that raises in others alarm and concern. From the writings of Judith Butler, among others, however, I began to see vulnerability as less wounded and more capacious and more responsive. Much more like those who emerged from the Upper Room capable of preaching...

When I recognized that the word "vulnerable" does not mean having been wounded, but rather being able to be wounded, then I began to see how it means being exposed to the other; in this sense vulnerability is the human condition that allows me to hear, encounter, receive, or respond to the other even to the point of being injured. Or, as we saw earlier in grief, when we lose someone in death we see the nakedness of love in the vulnerability of grief. There we see that our humanity is identified with our vulnerability.[12]

Being vulnerable should not be reduced therefore to being precarious; precarity being in an unstable or risky situation where

the possibility or the continuation of harm occurs. Butler realizes that too many people think of vulnerability as primarily being in an unstable context. She rather wants us to understand that all of us as human beings are vulnerable to one another and precisely when one's vulnerability is at risk, we vulnerably respond to that other. So wisely she distinguishes precarity as a moment of risk for the vulnerable human. She notes: "Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency."[13]

But our vulnerability is not reduced to precarity, a moment of instability. For this reason I do not identify grief and illness with vulnerability but rather they bring us into contact with the vulnerability that defines our humanity. Following Butler, I think of human vulnerability as the capacity for responsiveness. In shared grief we mutually recognize our human vulnerability. We mutually recognize our capacities to love one another. Vulnerably we continue to love in grief.

I want us to be careful about thinking, however, that we need to suffer in order to be vulnerable. As vulnerable we need to be responsive. We need to be like the mourners, the meek and the merciful in the beatitudes, those responding vulnerably to the poor in spirit as we ascend the ladder of ascent.

The experience of grief shows us, not in need, but as vulnerable. We would not grieve if we were not so vulnerable to one another

Watch how vulnerability works in the Good Samaritan parable. At the beginning of the parable we think the man wounded on the road is the neighbor; surely he's the vulnerable one. But after the priest and the Levite pass by, and we see the Samaritan recognize the wounded one, we recognize in the Samaritan his vulnerability. At the end we want to be like the vulnerable neighbor, the one who showed mercy. Like the notion of neighbor, vulnerability moves from the wounded one to the responsive one.

Watch how similarly vulnerability works in the Prodigal Son parable (Luke 15.11-32). At the beginning the son's own precarious vulnerability is evident. But, while the beginning of that parable focuses on the younger brother's situation, the center of the parable emerges as we recognize the vulnerability of the Father who recognizes his son in the distance, embraces him, re-incorporates him, and works to restore all that was unstable, threatened, exposed, and jeopardized. Like the vulnerable Good Samaritan, the vulnerable father recognizes his son as the precarious one, a humanity not recognized by those who left him to eat with the pigs.

Butler recognizes how fundamentally foundational vulnerability is: "Ethical obligation not only depends upon our vulnerability to the claims of others but establishes us as creatures who are fundamentally defined by that ethical relation."[14] Vulnerability is what defines and establishes us as capable of being moral among one another.

Again, emphasizing the priority of vulnerability, she contends: "This ethical relation is not a virtue that I have or exercise; it is prior to any individual sense of self. It is not as discrete individuals that we honor this ethical relation. I am already bound to you, and this is what it means to be the self I am, receptive to you in ways that I cannot fully predict or control."[15] Vulnerability essentially is what most qualifies my self as being bound to and among others.

She returns to the priority of vulnerability, as prior even to the moan from another in need: "You call upon me, and I answer. But if I answer, it was only because I was already answerable; that is, this susceptibility and vulnerability constitutes me at the most fundamental level and is there, we might say, prior to any deliberate decision to answer the call. In other words, one has to be already capable of receiving the call before actually answering it. In this sense, ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness."[16] Our vulnerability is our answerability, what allows and prompts us to recognize, to respond, to communicate, in short, to love.[17]

Vulnerability in God's Image

Theologically, Butler's natural, created answerableness resonates with a variety of creation narratives that capture the vulnerability of the human. Though not from a theologian, T. H. White's wonderful *The Once and Future King*[18] provides an account of creation that captures it beautifully. On the sixth day of creation, God gathers all the embryos of each and every species of animal life; they are rolling around all over the place and all look like one another. But God offers each embryo the opportunity to ask for an addition that will distinguish their species. The giraffe embryo gets a long neck for tree food, the porcupine asks for quills for protection, and so it goes for the entire animal kingdom. The last embryo is the human, Adam, who when asked by God what Adam wants, responds, "I think that You made me in the shape which I now have for reasons best known to Yourselves, and that it would be rude to change… I will stay a defenceless embryo all my life." God is delighted and lets the human embryo have no particular

protection, to be the most vulnerable of all newborns and says: "As for you, Adam… You will look like an embryo till they bury you."

Behind White's imaginative portrayal of creation is his remarkable vision of the human embryo as the bearer of human vulnerability. By positing the human as willing to remain vulnerable, White is able to disclose further God's delight in that the human now is in God's image, precisely because of the decision to "stay as a defenceless embryo all my life." White concludes his account with God revealing to the human: "Adam… eternally undeveloped, you will always remain potential in Our image, able to see some of Our sorrows and to feel some of Our joys. We are partly sorry for you, Man, but partly hopeful." Human dignity, rooted in the image of God, participates in the vulnerability of God.

This insight of our vulnerability being connected to God's resonates with the great Irish theologian, Enda McDonagh's work, *Vulnerable to the Holy: In Faith, Morality and Art*.[19] There he begins his treatment on vulnerability with God. God reveals to us God's self as vulnerable by the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, his life in Nazareth, and his death on Golgotha. Thus, sounding like White, McDonagh writes that to be made in God's image is to made vulnerable. Our dignity is rooted in God's vulnerability.

Recognition

While there is so much more to say on vulnerability,[20] I turn now to the psychoanalyst and feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin, who studied mutual recognition among infants. Mutual recognition is the central experience of infants among infants; after being the object of the attention of people much bigger than themselves, mutual recognition is where an infant finally encounters another that seems much like itself and yet, not. They want to touch the face of the other child, they are fascinated that this child in front of them is just like them. They mutually recognize each other: in that moment they recognize their humanity.

Benjamin writes, "Mutual recognition is the most vulnerable point in the process of differentiation." She adds, "In mutual recognition, the subject accepts the premise that others are separate but nonetheless share like feelings and intentions."[21] More recently, she turns again to mutual recognition and among other matters finds the language of vulnerability key for recuperating and restoring the experience of mutual recognition.[22] As in shared grief, in mutual

recognition we discover human vulnerability: our connectedness and our responsiveness.

As we mature, the experience of mutual recognition can and should happen time and again as part of our growth as moral agents. The mutual recognition in infancy becomes the foundation for subsequent expressions of due recognition whenever we encounter humanity in its greatest precarity or neglect. From that first recognition where we vulnerably acknowledge the other's and our own humanity, we learn to develop a sense that the other in need is another human being. Of course, as we saw earlier in the biblical stories, overlooking the humanity of another is what gives us the unfortunate "permission" to withhold due recognition. Thus the work of education is to help one another to be vulnerable and vigilant enough so that due recognition and appropriate response to the other is actualized as the worthy alternative to the customary, but harmful stance of overlooking or neglect.

The philosopher Paddy McQueen explains recognition as an insight and a practice that develops, going from first being an awakening; to second, making a form of identification; and finally to appreciating a responsible relationship that broadens our self-understanding.[23]

McQueen's move from recognizing someone familiar to giving recognition to one to whom it is due is, I think, the threshold into the moral life. What we learn in infancy is literally a first lesson: in our vulnerability we recognize that we are related one to the other. Then, we move from an awakening to a form of identification. Later, as children, we realize that that form of identification calls us to a form of responsiveness, especially when the other is neglected, in need, or oppressed. The awakening to and the identification with another's humanity are therefore the first steps across the moral threshold.

We can return to the Prodigal Son parable to uncover recognition's rich relationship with both the vulnerable and the familiar. In the parable, as the vulnerable father attends to the prodigal, he remains vulnerable to his older son as well, who does not suffer from precarity but from dominance, which expresses itself in his resentment. Still, we should not think that the father is surprised by the older son's resentment. When he sees his younger son in the distance, he knows that his movement toward that son will surely trigger the older son's own insecurities that are covered by his dominance. Here then we recognize the father's own

vulnerability that anchors both sons. The stability in the story is the vulnerable father, as the precarious son returns and the resentful one tries to leave; the enduringly vigilant, attentive, and responsive Father is so because he is vulnerable.[24] So when the older son refers to his brother as "that son of yours," the father wants him to *recognize* his brother, "this brother of yours was dead and has come to life." But the brother needs to be vulnerable before he can recognize; without it, due recognition just does not happen.

Prompted by the Spirit

Like the Father in the Prodigal Son parable, the Spirit prompts us to recognize. In his new book, *The Holy Spirit and Moral Action in Thomas Aquinas*, Jack Mahoney notes that the idea of the Holy Spirit "prompting" (*instinctus Spiritus Sancti*) was a phrase often used and dear to Thomas.[25] Prompting is not simply being led or guided, it is an internal awakening, a counsel to take heed, to act, to respond, that is, I dare suggest, to recognize.

Remembering that recognition is the first act that causes us to cross the threshold of moral responsiveness, we read that Thomas asserts that "in every action of the spiritual person, it is the initiative of the Holy Spirit which is the source and the principle of the action and that God's children are truly acted upon" though in such a way that "they themselves act."[26] Noting the principle which Thomas regularly observes that "no habit proceeds to act spontaneously; it needs to be aroused by some agent," I think we can see that the pivotal act of recognition is prompted in us by the counsel of the Spirit opening our eyes to the other.[27] The Spirit helps us to recognize again and again.

In his *Commentary on Romans* Thomas writes that "The Holy Spirit does not just teach us what we ought to be done by enlightening our mind on what we should do; he also inclines our desires to act rightly."[28] That original inclination, that *synderesis*, being prompted, is the act of recognition.

We need also to remember that all basic moral recognition is mutual recognition. Our failure to recognize the homeless on the road, or the alienated one in the hospital, is a failure to recognize the poor inspirit and failing to recognize the poor in spirit, we fail to engage in a true mutual recognition of our shared humanity: whether it's the poor in spirit or the Risen Lord, the act of recognition is an awareness of a common humanity often overlooked.

Let me close, however, prompting you to consider much further the questions that I am interested in pursuing. In my recent writings I do not see recognition as primarily personal or private, but rather social. In the limits of time, I could not explore that, here, but I leave in my bibliography what I have written elsewhere on human recognition. Here in this talk I offered you grief in the upper room as a way of capturing a capacious vulnerability. But let me leave you with another image, another location, so as to appreciate the richness and power of recognition, the first true act of vulnerable people.

The image are the protests that began in Minneapolis on May 26, 2020, the day after George Floyd, an African-American man, was killed during a police arrest. On June 6, an estimated half a million people joined protests in 550 places across the country. The people in the march were recognizing that black lives matter, that George Floyd mattered and, horrendously, that Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and thousands of others who have been killed or murdered matter, though often we overlooked them.[29]

The people in those marches were a people who were grieving, sharing their grief in the shameful public killing of Floyd, grieving the profound racist inequity that marks my country. In their grief they revealed their vulnerability and demanded that we recognize the legitimacy of their lament and the lack of our recognition. They called us and continue to call us to a new mutual recognition, to see that we cannot overlook the injustices that white supremacy has visited on my country since the first slave ships arrived in 1619.

In these past four years there has been much grief and much vulnerability, and it's about time then that we heed the Spirit and begin the process of recognition.

Indeed, if we cannot see the Spirit calling us to recognition in the marches of Minneapolis, after the killing of George Floyd, that Black Lives Matter, then we are never going to understand the Spirit who led the disciples out of the Upper Room.

And that is something we should discuss the next time we meet.

Thank you.

"In the Gospel, Jesus was saying farewell to his beloved ones. Likewise, it is supposed to be a very sad moment, yet he turned the situation into one of great hope for his disciples. "For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you." Of course, from a human earthly point of view, it may be better still to have Jesus around instead of letting him go. Why are we afraid of separation!

I think it is very true when we see our beloved ones leaving us (or we leaving them). Whenever I preach in a Funeral mass, I always remind myself that, if without faith, death would only mean eternal separation. Yet with faith in the Lord, the deceased, the beloved one is actually closer to us than before as he or she is now next to the Lord who is always around to teach, stand by, and walk with us."

Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan
May 12, 2015

Endnotes

[1] Edward Malley, "The Gospel According to Mark," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 20-61.

[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), letter no. 89, page 238.

[3] Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 153, 164. See, John Climacus, *The Ladder of Ascent* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988); Jim Forrest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

[4] Ibid., 171.

[5] Ibid. Hans Dieter Betz, *the Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995); William Davies and Dale Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* vol. 1 (New York: Continuum, 1988); Gerald Vann, *The Divine Pity: A Study in the Social Implications of the Beatitudes* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946).

[6] Ibid., 172.

[7] Ibid., 173.

[8] Ibid., 170

[9] Ibid., 177-229. See Keenan, "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit: A Response to Homelessness by a Reading of Matthew's Beatitudes," *Street Homelessness and Catholic Theological Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), 176-186.

[10] Keenan, "Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism," *Melita Teologica* 68.2 (2018): 129-142; "The World at Risk: Vulnerability, Precarity and Connectedness" *Theological Studies* 81.1 (2020): 132-149, doi.org/10.1177/0040563920907633; "Rethinking Humanity's Progress in Light of COVID-19," *Asian Horizons* 14.3 (September 2020): 713-735; "Linking Human Dignity, Vulnerability and Virtue Ethics," *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6 (2020): 56-73, https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-00601004; "Building Blocks for Moral Education: Vulnerability, Recognition and Conscience," David DeCosse, ed. *Conscience and Catholic Education* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2021). Bringing both into the University see "Vulnerable to Contingency," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 40.2 (2021): 221-236, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/787428/pdf; "The Community Colleges: Giving Them the Ethical Recognition They Deserve," *Journal of Moral Theology* 9.2 (2020): 143-164, https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18040-the-community-colleges-giving-them-the-ethical-recognition-they-deserve.

[11] John Kaag, *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save your Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[12] See the helpful insights in Erinn C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 31-38.

[13] Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26/2 (2012): 134-151, at 148; See also her *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2004).

[14] Butler, "Precarious Life," 141; See also her *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

[15] Butler, 141-2.

[16] Ibid., 142. See also Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays on Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[17] See other theological ethicists who have turned to vulnerability as providing a foundations for theological ethics: Linda Hogan, "Vulnerability: An Ethic for a Divided World," James Keenan, Kristin Heyer and Andrea Vicini, eds., *Building Bridges in Sarajevo: The Plenary Papers of Sarajevo 2018* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), 217-222; Enda

McDonagh, *Vulnerable to the Holy: In Faith, Morality and Art* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2005); Vincent Leclerq, AA, *Blessed are the Vulnerable: Reaching out to Those with AIDS* (New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2010); Roger Burggraeve, "Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30.1 (1999): 29-45; Hille Haker, "The Fragility of the Moral Self," *The Harvard Theological Review* 97.4 (2004): 359-381; Daniel J. Fleming, *Attentiveness to Vulnerability: A Dialogue between Emmanuel Levinas, Jean Porter, and the Virtue of Solidarity* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2019); Charles Mathewes, "Vulnerability and Political Theology," Heikke Springhart and Günther Thomas, eds., *Exploring Vulnerability* (Bristol, CT.: Vandenhoeck& Ruprecht, 2017), 165-184.

[18] T.H. White, Chapter XXI, *The Once and Future King* (New York: Ace Books, 1987).

[19] McDonagh, *Vulnerable to the Holy*.

[20] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Avery Publishing, 2015).

[21] Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 53.

[22] Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[23] McQueen writes: "The term 'recognition' has several distinct meanings: (1) an act of intellectual apprehension, such as when we 'recognize' we have made a mistake or we 'recognize' the influence of religion on American politics; (2) a form of identification, such as when we 'recognize' a friend in the street; and (3) the act of acknowledging or respecting another being, such as when we 'recognize' someone's status, achievements or rights…. The philosophical and political notion of recognition predominantly refers to (3), and is often taken to mean that not only is recognition an important means of valuing or respecting another person, it is also fundamental to understanding ourselves." Paddy McQueen, "Social and Political Recognition," The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://www.iep.utm.edu/recog_sp/#SH3a.

[24] Keenan, "Vulnerability and the Father of the Prodigal Son," Alfonsiana Blog, September 27, 2019, https://www.alfonsiana.org/blog/2019/09/27/vulnerability-and-the-father-of-the-prodigal-son/.

[25] Jack Mahoney, *The Holy Spirit and Moral Action in Thomas Aquinas* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021). 49.

[26] Ibid., 58.

[27] Ibid., 68. See *De Virtutibus* 1. ad 14.

[28] Ibid., 83-83, See *In Rom 8, lect. 1*.

[29] Keenan, "The Color Line, Race and Caste: Structures of Domination and the Ethics of Recognition," *Theological Studies* 82.1 (2021): 69-94; "Vulnerable to Contingency," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 40.2 (2021): 221-236, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/787428/pdf; "The Community Colleges: Giving Them the Ethical Recognition They Deserve," *Journal Of Moral Theology* 9.2 (2020): 143-164, https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18040-the-community-colleges-giving-them-the-ethical-recognition-they-deserve; "Building Blocks for Moral Education: Vulnerability, Recognition and Conscience," David DeCosse, ed. *Conscience and Catholic Education* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2022).

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The Michael Keenan Memorial Lecture

Michael Gregory Keenan, professor and dean of St. Thomas More College, was born in Toronto on 23 May 1937. After elementary and secondary education at Owen Sound and Toronto, he enrolled in psychology at Assumption University in Windsor, receiving his BA in 1961 and his MA the following year.

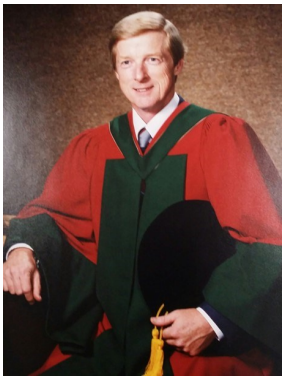
In 1962 he married Patricia Kohlmeier of Rochester, NY. They had three children, Kathleen, Kevin, and Terrence.

From 1963 to 1965 he was instructor at Christ the King College (now King's College) at the University of Western Ontario.

He came to St. Thomas More College in 1965 as a lecturer, on the invitation of the principal, Rev. Peter Swan, CSB, and held this position until 1967 when he left to take up doctoral studies at the University of Waterloo, where he received his PhD in 1971. While at Waterloo, he also served as lecturer at St. Jerome's College.

In 1971 he returned to STM as an assistant professor, and from 1974 as associate professor. In 1975 he was named first dean of the college, and he held this position for two five-year terms. After a lengthy battle with cancer, he died on 31 October 1986.

In December 1986, the Board of Governors of St. Thomas More College set up a memorial fund. In the spring of 1987, the college's faculty administration forum approved an annual public lecture by a distinguished visiting professor on topics reflecting the range of disciplines at St. Thomas More College. The lectures are held each fall on a date close to the anniversary of Dr. Keenan's death.



Dr. Michael Keenan

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