

Thomas Fleming and Mother Teresa: Undoubted Motives in the Morality of Everyday Life

by Hugh Barbour, O.Praem.

"Name one."

—Anonymous

**The Morality of Everyday Life:
Rediscovering an Ancient Alternative
to the Liberal Tradition**

by Thomas Fleming

Columbia, MO: University of Missouri
Press; 270 pp., \$44.95



Too bad that, since 1966, they are no longer adding titles to the *Index of Prohibited Books*. My more than ten years as diocesan *ensor librorum*—was it this past distinction that gained me the happy task of writing this review?—would lead me to grant Thomas Fleming's *The Morality of Everyday Life: Rediscovering an Ancient Alternative to the Liberal Tradition* an *imprimatur* after a few nugatory adjustments, but what a book such as this really needs is a condemnation. Let me explain. A place on the Inquisition's *Index* would recommend this text to three groups of potential readers. The first are readers who already are in sympathy with the author's sound principles. They would compare him to the soon-to-be-Blessed (imagine the Church of the 22nd century giving this honor to Dr. Fleming! Stranger things have happened since Pentecost A.D. 33) Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, whose *Five Wounds of Holy Church*, a work of similar courage and good sense, was later removed from the list of offending texts. The second are those liberals who would in principle support the diffusion of any work that was the victim of censorship. (They might even get *The*

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Morality of Everyday Life in major bookstore windows, with reviews in *America*.) The third group needs most of all to read this book. They are well-meaning old movement conservatives and neoconservatives, the folks who read publications that depend for matters of social ethics on authors whose works figure on the *Index*, like Locke, Hume, Comte, Acton, and Mill. So, if you read *National Review* without being outraged, or *First Things*, or even *Latin Mass*, then get your confessor to let you read *The Morality of Everyday Life*.

The penitential context for reading this work is most apposite to Dr. Fleming's main thesis, since he calls for a return to premodern casuistry in the evaluation of the morality of human acts, a casuistry whose apogee, after centuries of development, was the 18th-century *Theologia Moralis* of St. Alphonsus

Liguori, whose method he judges "a mature and humane approach to moral problems that has never been equaled." This book of informal essays, written in a style that is accessible to the casual reader while remaining intellectually sumptuous, has, as its main thesis, that genuine moral reasoning

is based on two principles: first, that there are general and universally applicable moral laws governing human conduct; second, that these laws may not be applied simplistically and uniformly to the great variety of human circumstances and situations.

The subtitle, *Rediscovering an Ancient Alternative to the Liberal Tradition*, however, should make clear that this set of essays is not merely a serene, positive exposition of this thesis but, more importantly, a rhetorical refutation of the opposing rationalist ethics that both dogged post-Cartesian "mere conservatism" and willingly accompanied post-Kantian revolutionary voluntarism, while having perhaps the most plausible success with their milder ally, Anglo-American utilitarian empiricism. Dr. Fleming shows a wide acquaintance with the principal texts of this modern philosophical tradition in ethics, yet his greatest strength lies in his domination of classical and vernacular literature in finding the *loci* most adapted to his arguments. Add to this a keen eye for the realities of ordinary family and professional life and the surrealities of contemporary social and political relations, and you have the concrete synthesis (almost a redundancy!) that I have just de-

scribed as intellectually sumptuous, and I mean after the manner of one of the better Sunday brunches (or dinners, if you prefer) available in your area. You will gladly graze on the well-presented fare served up—and with a smile this time, I promise—by the good *chef-maitre* of Rockford.

The prospective reader should not, however, expect a kind of ironic Chertonian romp, triumphant and carefree. Dr. Fleming has two characteristic modes of expression: the practical and the poignant. The former is predominant, and rightly so in a work promoting classical casuistry. The essay chapters “Too Much Reality” and “Growing Up Unabsurd” will convince any *Chronicles* reader that the magazine should feature a regular *Dear Tommy* column—if I may risk the *crimen laesae maiestatis* in so naming it—answering *casus conscientiae*. The poignant mode, though, takes you by surprise, and there are passages in the essays “Problems of Perspective” and “The Myth of Individualism,” and the “coda” in “Goodbye, Old Rights of Man,” which will make you weep, or want to.

If there is a statement among these closely consequential and yet self-contained essays that presents the most fundamental moral perspective for the resolution of cases of conscience, it is the following:

For non-liberals—that is, nearly everyone in the history of the human race—there is simply no dilemma. Family relations take precedence over any claim from any stranger no matter how good or holy, and Christians are under no less obligation than nonbelievers. “If anyone does not take care of his own,” says St. Paul (1 Tim. 5:8), “and especially of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

From this perspective, you can make all the proper judgments about the claims of government, employment, friendship, and philanthropy and desecrate as well the proper realm of heroism, which consists not so much in leaving behind this most particular of contexts as it does in sacrificing all to preserve it.

Perhaps the most practically trenchant and applicable analysis offered among those found on literally every page in the book is the brief treatment of “the pornography of compassion.” The in-

sight offered here, if applied to one’s use of the media of communication, could alone provide the lion’s share of the moral *ascesis* needed for persevering in the good nowadays, dealing as it does with what is most peculiar to precisely contemporary moral dilemmas. In this, as in practically everything else, Dr. Fleming shows himself to be a disciple of Aristotle, who is the single most often cited author in these essays. The author for whom one suspects Dr. Fleming has the most affection and respect, however, is Samuel Johnson. The contrast of his moral attitude with Voltaire’s, which Dr. Fleming so revealingly expounds, has made me resolve to take up Boswell again for my benefit.

Here, I hope, is an accidental boon of this work: to get the reader to go back and read the literature he has been lacking or has forgotten. Like a kind of latter-day St. Isidore of Seville, Dr. Fleming (we keep canonizing him by analogy) has extracted the essential nectar from so many stories and provided us with a *florilegium* in essay form that provides a model of the intelligent use of literary authorities. The ensemble of concrete example and literary precedent is a fine and attractive argument *a posteriori ex usu* for a robust classical education. One can see clearly how, even in the absence of a formal moral theory, rightly determined literary culture can provide a man with the necessary matter for sound practical judgment.

Yet alas, Dr. Fleming’s strongest point also reveals a defect, albeit a venial one. Although he is a master of letters, he is still a student of theology. There are a few errors in the work, which a *censura praevia* would have excised. One is his description of the differences between Saint Peter and Saint Paul regarding the observances of the Mosaic law. A closer reading of the case as it develops in Acts and in the epistles will show that the case is not just as Dr. Fleming describes it, but far more nuanced, evidence in itself of an original Apostolic casuistry.

Another error that is more to the point regards the characterization of Saint Alphonsus’ moral teaching as “probabilism.” Quite precisely, his theory is called “aequiprobabilism.” This school of casuistry holds that the opinion favoring liberty over law may be followed if it is intrinsically probable, all things being equal. This last condition means that, in cases where there is question of the cessation of a law that has already been in force, the opinion favors the law even if the other

opinion has probability, but, when there is question of the law having yet come into force, the opinion favors liberty. The simple probabilist holds that any truly probable opinion may be followed, even if an opposing opinion may be more probable. An equiprobabilist holds the same view but gives greater weight to laws already presumably in force. In casuistic practice, however, these views are merely useful for persuading the penitent, because the confessor may not impose his theory’s resolution of the moral case in question on the penitent, if there exists another view not condemned by authority. In reality, the only two systems of moral evaluation condemned have been *rigorism* (as in the case of the Jansenists) and *laxism* (as in the case of some Jesuits), so all the others are practically probable and certainly licit. The Q.E.D. is that the probabilist view wins out, if the penitent wants it to and the confessor keeps within the bounds of his authority. The Thomist Dominic Pruemmer explains in his classic *Vademecum*:

If one prescind from rigorism and laxism, each of the systems described is tolerated by the Church, and so the confessor has no right to impose his system on the penitent, or strictly require anything of the penitent which he is not bound to do according to the approach of another legitimate system. Thus the confessor may prudently counsel safer or more probable opinions, but he cannot strictly impose them (that is, in preference to merely probable ones). In practice let him choose those opinions which, considering all the circumstances, he foresees will produce the best fruit for the spiritual health of the penitent.

Thus, Dr. Fleming’s intuition is fundamentally sound: Probabilism, which favors liberty because of a respect for circumstances, is the default system of classical Roman Catholic casuistry. Even so, it is not Roman Catholic casuistry he is promoting but rather a return to any casuistic system at all (including Talmudic or Caroline) within the traditions that have made up our society, for such systems by their very nature harmonize with life as it is actually lived and use morality to preserve and strengthen rather than to break down and overturn ties of blood and soil and common endeavor. Apart

from those few things one may never do under any circumstances—such as blasphemy, murder the innocent, commit unnatural acts, or steal from a man poorer than oneself—it is almost impossible to indicate specific acts that must always be done regardless of circumstances. For this reason, then, there must be casuistry, since the possibilities for doing good are literally infinite.

For every manual of casuistry, there needs to be a speculative presentation of general principles. Otherwise, the ethics inculcated may be merely a kind of positivistic integralism, a “this is the way it’s always been, so don’t ask questions” attitude, unable to defend itself from the critical and revolutionary spirit. This companion volume to *The Morality of Everyday Life* has yet to be written, but here the reviewer dares to present a suggestion as to what its overarching, unifying insight should be. The exposition of nominalism in the sixth chapter points in the direction of the deepest level of moral reasoning. Whereas Dr. Fleming’s interpretation and application of the genesis of the notion of individualism is not one to which I would subscribe, this is the one place in the book where he brushes up against the larger philosophical issue underlying any account of the morality of human acts and transcending any given

instance of moral reasoning.

In his *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, book 12, lesson 5, St. Thomas Aquinas makes the following observation:

The opinion of Plato in positing eternal substances is of no worth . . . for we cannot explain permanent movement by making up some eternal separated substances . . . For the Forms posit nothing other than separated universals, but *universals as such cannot move another, for every active or moving principle is something singular.*

To his grandmother trying to make him eat his greens by saying, “Remember the starving children in Ethiopia,” we can imagine a little Thomas Fleming responding as did an old acquaintance of mine when asked the same imperative-masked-as-question. “Name one,” he said. Morality is in the end about cause and effect, indeed about the “road which must take many a twist and turn” on the way to final causes and ultimate perfections. “The good cannot be found in mathematical entities,” said Saint Thomas, because they are mere universals that cannot exist as they are defined.

And yet it is the good that must move us, and, unless the good is a concrete good and not an abstraction, it cannot effectively move us. This holds true whether we are receiving or bestowing a good. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (here comes the third hagiographical parallel), whose one-person-at-a-time ethic so closely resembles Thomas Fleming’s, had this to say, much in the line of the overly clever turnip-green hater:

Sometime when I encounter parents, I tell myself if [*sic*] it is possible that these parents worry about those who are hungry in Africa, in India or in other countries. It is possible that they dream of ending the hunger felt by any human being. However they live unaware of their own children, of having that poverty and that hunger of heart in their very own homes. Moreover, they themselves are the ones who cause that hunger and that poverty.

One last question: Does Daddy really love faraway Fatima and Hajar as much as he does Jenna and Barbara? We hope not, but I wish Dr. Fleming would send the White House a complimentary copy of his book very soon. The *Index* is passé, but there is still the PATRIOT Act. <e>

The Morality of Everyday Life: Rediscovering an Ancient Alternative to the Liberal Tradition

by Thomas Fleming

What passes for conservatism today is really nothing more than the impossible moral and social theories of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, in which universal abstractions, such as democracy and equality, are presented as hard truths, when, in fact, they have never existed in any society in human history. Nonetheless, they are to be applied worldwide, at the tip of a spear (or cruise missile) if necessary.

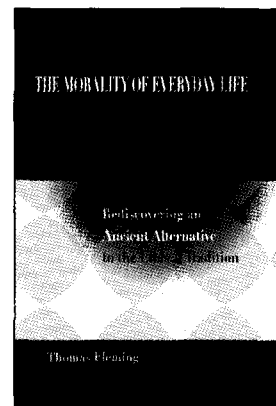
Dr. Fleming’s alternative is rooted in “everyday life,” the local realities of blood and soil, custom and tradition, friendship and faith, and in the wisdom born of the experiences these realities beget. This wisdom finds expression in folktales and fables, in ancient Hebrew Scriptures and Greek philosophy, and in medieval casuistry. It is the method to solving ethical problems great and small, and it is the method that undergirds authentic conservatism.

“This book is a pleasure to read, filled with telling and memorable examples—both erudite and popular—and continually stimulating in its account. Its rhetoric blends something of a Nietzschean subversion with the humane balance of Hume. It is the most devastating critique of liberalism since MacIntyre.”

—Donald W. Livingston
Emory University

“Writing much more accessibly and knowledgeably than most modern professional philosophers, Fleming revivifies the body of thought with which civilization was created and without which it is disintegrating.”

—Ray Olson
Booklist



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Toward the Heavenly City

by Thomas Fleming

**The Last Soldiers of the King:
Wartime Italy, 1943-1945**

by Eugenio Corti,

translated by Manuela Arundel

Columbia: University of Missouri Press;
304 pp., \$24.95



Eugenio Corti should be well known to *Chronicles* readers as the author of the terrifying war diary *Few Returned* and *The Red Horse*, one of the finest novels of our time and perhaps the greatest piece of Christian fiction published in my lifetime. *The Last Soldiers of the King* is a very slightly fictionalized account of Corti's experiences in the final years of World War II, when he and other Italian officers took an oath to serve under the Italian king against the German occupiers.

I am not a soldier, but the soldiers I have known described their experiences with the same unsentimental realism Corti displays in all his work. The life of the Italian soldier is compounded of dust, discomfort, and tedium punctuated by bursts of violence. When Mussolini was overthrown by his own party and the king in 1943 and the Italians declared an armistice, Corti was stationed outside of Rome. The German attack was devastating, and the author and his comrade Antonio Moroni walked south to find the British across half the length of Italy. The narrative of their rambles is a classic description of Italy's great diversity. It is not an idyllic journey, and, in their weariness, the two young men, who begin the march as fast friends, quarrel frequently over nothing.

Young Eugenio and Antonio are naive Lombards (though Eugenio had survived the horrors of the Russian campaign), and they are continually astonished by the goodness and evil they encounter. In Lucania, Eugenio meets a young woman who is going to enter a convent, and, when she reproaches him for idling in bed, the young Lombard tells her he does not like her "Bourbon church . . . with those painted cardboard saints fitted with real beards. In fact, it offends my faith, especially all the tinsel attached to their garments." When he complains that all that

glitter is a survival of paganism, the girl agrees. "But tell me," she asks, "are you sure that there are no leftovers of paganism in the great art of the cathedrals you love[?]" The young officer is speechless, but "Don't trouble yourself," she added at once, compassionately, "this is our fate: we'll never succeed in completely transforming the Earthly City into the Heavenly City."

Despite his respect for the Allies, alongside of whom he served, the young Corti is remarkably free of both hatred and ideology. He is fighting the Germans, not because of any race-hatred or commitment to the abstract principles of democracy. He is Italian, and they, who are occupying Italy, must be expelled. Faced with the desertions, incompetence, and, indeed, cowardice of many Italian soldiers, Eugenio feels unequal to the task, but he imagines the faces of friends and feels "ashamed for having begun to give up; we simply had to continue behaving like men, that was all." And yet, as he confesses, "The discomfort remained and was deep enough to border on anguish." I have read no better account of how a conscientious man wrestles with adversity, and, since the young soldier is neither a saint nor a libertarian, he is strengthened in his duty not by self-will or out of devotion to a cause but by the memory of conscientious friends.

Several years ago, when I was staying with my good friends Giuditta and Giuseppe Podestà, Dr. Corti (he has a law degree) picked me up and drove me to Bergamo, perhaps the loveliest city north of the Po River. He called up an old friend, who apparently lived in a beautiful house he wanted me to see. We spent several hours strolling around the fine art museum, and, when I admired several works by the great painter of Bergamo, Giovanni Battista Moroni, Corti told me that his friend had many Moroni paintings. He was, in fact, a direct descendant of the artist and had inherited his house and art collection. I recalled the name, and Corti confirmed that this friend was the Antonio Moroni with whom he had tramped across Italy. They had not seen each other since. After showing us the house, Moroni (a successful architect) offered us drinks in his studio, and the two veterans, who had maintained some written correspondence, cautiously picked up the threads of their old story.

For months, I have been hoping to find another reviewer for this superb book. My reluctance to undertake this project

had nothing to do with any reservations about the work or its author. I am an unreserved admirer of both. As a friend of the author and the man who suggested that the work be made available in English, however, no one could accuse me of impartiality. Impartial or not, I unhesitatingly recommend this as a good read and a wise book. It is a perfect gift for military veterans and for Christians of all ages and levels of education.

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Chronicles and president of
The Rockford Institute.*

Dropping the Masks

by Sean P. Dailey

The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde

by Joseph Pearce

San Francisco: Ignatius Press;
411 pp., \$19.95



The 1997 movie *Wilde* opens with a shot of Oscar Wilde (played by Stephen Fry) being lowered by bucket into a Colorado silver mine, where he recites his poetry and chats with shirtless, sweaty miners, who are obviously thrilled at a visit from such a renowned visitor. I thought it was at least half Hollywood fantasy until I came across the same anecdote in *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* by Joseph Pearce, who writes, "At Leadville in Colorado he was lowered in a bucket into a silver mine" where "he spent most of the night deep in the heart of the earth, talking to the miners, before being brought down the mountain by a special train at half past four in the morning."

If nothing else, the episode illustrates, intentionally or not, the importance of literature in society in the days before television, when everyone hungered for it, regardless of class or background. After its promising opening, unfortunately, the movie degenerates more or less into one sexual romp after another, with no real examination of Wilde's literary importance. And even the opening foreshadows what is to come, with Wilde casting an occasional keen glance at the young, wiry miners. That the movie takes this tack comes as no surprise, since it is based on Richard Ellmann's salacious *Oscar Wilde*, considered by many to be