



## Christocentric Exemplarism and the Imitation of Jesus

Stephen J. Pope

---

### Abstract

This article examines the version of Christocentric exemplarism recently proposed by theologian Patrick Clark, whose Thomistic virtue ethics incorporates features of Linda Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory. This article suggests that Clark and similar approaches to Christocentric virtue ethics would be better situated to appropriate Zagzebski's insights into exemplarity if it gave more prominence to the imitation of Jesus.

### Keywords

exemplar, virtue, admiration, emulation, Christ, Jesus

### Article

In her Gifford Lectures of 2016, philosopher Linda Zagzebski laid out carefully developed contribution to contemporary ethics which she calls “exemplarist moral theory.”<sup>1</sup> A novel feature of her project is its attempt to derive an account of the meaning of moral terms from the widespread human emotion of admiration evoked by particular exemplars and the subsequent desire to emulate them. Zagzebski's decades of meticulous normative work in moral epistemology, philosophy of religion, and virtue ethics is noteworthy, among other things, for its willingness to take seriously the findings of psychological and other social scientific research on various features of human behavior. Her Gifford Lectures thus incorporated extensive empirical work on the psychological, neurological, and social bases of admiration, exemplarity, and imitation. Zagzebski's work on exemplarity and emulation seems to offer a helpful philosophical resource for Christian theological ethics, particularly when it comes to the imitation of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10.

<sup>2</sup> See Mt 10:38, 16:24; Lk 14:27; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II,186,5.

*Patrick Clark's Christocentric exemplarism*

Theologian Patrick Clark argues that Thomists have a lot to learn from Zagzebski's theory of exemplarity. He draws upon her 2004 *Divine Motivation Theory* to call attention to the way her theory is compatible with Christian convictions. Zagzebski's appeal to the doctrine of the incarnation, he writes, shows the possibility of uniting the particularity affirmed in narrative ethics and the comprehensiveness stressed by moral universalists. As Clark puts it, "that universal Good became a human being, able to be encountered as an individual among individuals."<sup>3</sup> Clark maintains that Zagzebski's philosophical account of exemplarism is compatible with recent developments in Catholic moral theology that stress the Christocentric character of the Christian moral life.

Clark sees a convergence between Zagzebski's work on exemplarity and the Christocentric ethics promoted by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical on moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor, The Splendor of the Truth*. In it the late pope built on a famous line from *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council's key document on how the church ought to engage the modern world. Paragraph 22 reads: "It is Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, who fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear..." Moral theology must therefore take its bearings from Christ and so must give a kind of primacy to the study of Scripture rather than say, philosophy. John Paul II regarded Christ as the source, the mediator, the final end, the model, and the teacher of what it means to lead a moral life. Thus, the pope writes, "Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality."<sup>4</sup>

Clark's Christocentric approach to theology thus led him to say that "the decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, *or rather is Jesus Christ himself*."<sup>5</sup> John Paul II supported this claim by appealing to *Gaudium et Spes*: "it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man."<sup>6</sup> The operative word in this sentence is "only," but the pope does not say we *only* know moral truth, we can only identify virtues and vices, if we rely on divine revelation. He says only Christ "sheds light" on the "mystery

<sup>3</sup> Patrick M. Clark, "The Case for an Exemplarist Approach to Virtue in Catholic Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3.1 (2014):54-82, at 58. Clark develops this account more fully in his *Perfection in Death: The Christological Dimension of Courage in Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2015), esp. chs. 6 and 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 2; emphasis added by Clark, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, citing *GS*, no. 22.

of man.” He does not follow this line with an explanation of what he means, or the Council Fathers meant, by “mystery.” It might be taken to mean that Christ sheds the greatest light on the ultimate source of salvation, which surely is a “mystery” in the sense that it refers to a reality that lies utterly beyond common sense, human calculation, or philosophical reasoning. But it does not ring true if taken to mean that Christ renders useless all other sources of insight into human nature, including those provided by psychology and the social sciences.

### *Thomistic ethics*

To follow Christ means to imitate Christ’s radical self-giving love. Clark fills out what it means to imitate Christ by drawing on Livio Melina’s *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*.<sup>7</sup> Melina emphasizes distinctively “Christian theological claims about the good.”<sup>8</sup> Christ is *the* exemplar of the Christian moral life, *the* embodiment of virtue. Clark’s and Melina’s strong Christocentrism might make one wonder about what Christian morality has to learn from other sources. They recognize of course that we can learn more about Christ from saints, martyrs, and mystics who saw with special clarity and depth what is already present in Christ. But can contemporary psychology of exemplarity enrich theological exemplarism in a way that is somewhat analogous to how it enriches Zagzebski’s exemplarist moral theory?

Clark praises Melina for wanting to keep to the “edifice” of Aquinas’s theory of virtue while at the same time following John Paul II’s Christocentric reconceptualization of Christian morality. Most important is the human person’s “transformative encounter with the person of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> It would be helpful to understand more about the meaning of such an “encounter,” which seems so radically unlike any other experience.

In any case, Melina maintains that there is a deep harmony between the vision of the moral life developed by Thomas Aquinas and John Paul II. But the latter’s strong Christocentric approach to virtue seems a world apart from that of Aquinas, who says practically nothing about Christ in his treatment of habits and virtues in the *Prima secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*, Questions 49–70. Even in Q. 62, where he treats the theological virtues, he (surprisingly) only mentions Christ twice (once in the body of article 1 and the second time in article four, but only in the context of an objection). Aquinas does of course discuss Christ extensively in the first article of Q.

<sup>7</sup> *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Clark, *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

68, on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but he doesn't mention Christ even once in the next two Questions, which take up, respectively, the beatitudes (69) and the fruits of the Holy Spirit (70).

Theologians have debated the significance and reason for this scant treatment of Christ, and Jesus of Nazareth, in Aquinas' ethics as well as in other sections of the *Summa Theologiae*.<sup>10</sup> Aquinas certainly did not lack interest in Christ, whom he discusses extensively in the final and in many ways the key part of the *Summa*. Neither should the paucity of Aquinas' references to Christ in the philosophically focused section of the *Prima Secundae* be taken to suggest that Aquinas' account of ethics is not theological. On the contrary, as Clark rightly argues, Aquinas' account of the moral life is deeply grounded in the theology of the Trinity developed in the *Prima pars*. Thomas' philosophical reflection on the nature of human acts, passions, and virtues is only put into its properly theological context when Aquinas develops his theology of grace and the New Law (I-II, 106–114). As theologian Thomas O'Meara, O.P., points out, "Aquinas's theology is not an Aristotelian psychology grafted onto some phrases about Christ. Aquinas employs an Aristotelian philosophy of nature to explain aspects of Christian revelation, a revelation that is, as he sees it, of realities believed and not just of beliefs. The Christian life is a kind of physics and psychology of a supernatural realm grounding human and Christian life in God's special presence as revealed in a history of salvation."<sup>11</sup> Aquinas' theological anthropology thus made it possible for him to see the relevance of Aristotle's account of habituation for his account of the virtues.

### *Moral exemplarism and Thomistic virtue ethics*

Clark draws on Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory as a helpful supplement to what he calls John Paul's "Christocentric exemplarism." Writing before Zagzebski published her 2017 *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, he makes the most of her early ventures into exemplarist theory.<sup>12</sup> He argues that Aquinas and Zagzebski are two members of a "common methodological family" that he calls "exemplarism of the virtues."<sup>13</sup> He makes much of Aquinas' epistemological starting

<sup>10</sup> See Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), ch. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas O'Meara, O.P., "Virtues in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997):258.

<sup>12</sup> Clark relies primarily upon Linda Zagzebski, "Exemplarist Moral Theory," *Metaphilosophy* 41.1-2 (2010):41-57, the central lines of which we developed in her Gifford Lectures.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, *ibid.*, 68.

point in the senses. Our knowledge of the world depends upon sense experience of particular objects from which we then form abstract concepts.

Clark connects, in an analogous way, Aquinas' focus on the apprehension of particular objects in sense experience to Zagzebski's and Melina's attention to how we come to identify moral goodness by attending to particular human beings whom we spontaneously recognize to be good. Melina knows all human beings naturally learn how to identify what is good and to distinguish it from what is bad, but he is so focused on the Christocentric basis of Christian moral theology that he ignores the prior anthropological basis of how we come to be moral beings in the first place.

In his recent book, *Perfection in Death: The Christological Dimension of Courage in Aquinas*, Clark appropriates Zagzebski's proposal that the motives of moral exemplars constitute the heart of moral goodness.<sup>14</sup> Christ, the moral exemplar for Christians, was so permeated by an absolute love of God that he was able to sacrifice himself for the salvation of the human race. He thus argues that Zagzebski's moral exemplarism can fill out this important lacuna in Melina's moral theology. She maintains that we form our moral understanding when we experience various concrete exemplars of moral goodness. Clark argues that Melina and John Paul II can take from Zagzebski the "vital insight that direct reference to individual agents constitutes a basic and constant feature of the epistemic structure through which we come to identify and describe the various qualities that form the content of our moral judgments."<sup>15</sup> Clark thus agrees with Zagzebski that we move from personal experience of concrete embodiments of particular virtues like courage, hope, and compassion to a broader understanding of them that enables us to think about how we can instantiate them in our own lives.

Aquinas' use of paradigmatic acts of the virtues is also seen by Clark as converging with Zagzebski's moral exemplarism. Jean Porter maintains that Aquinas' conception of particular virtues often takes its starting point in "general paradigms for virtuous behavior—our images of what it means to be an honest person, to behave reliably, and the like."<sup>16</sup> Concrete experience of particular virtuous acts enables observers better to understand the particular virtues therein displayed. Aquinas' virtue ethics depends upon concrete examples, "paradigmatic instances," of what it means to

<sup>14</sup> *Perfection in Death: The Christological Dimension of Courage in Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2016), ch. 6, p. 249.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 70. Citing Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 179.

enact particular virtues and on the basis of which we are able to formulate intellectually clearer conceptions of the kinds of virtues they embody. Greater understanding ought to enable us to act more reliably in virtuous ways and to become wiser people. Paradigms enable us to identify the most important broad domains of human action within which we are routinely called upon to act. These are most fundamentally the areas of life that are best negotiated by agents able to exercise the cardinal virtues. Human flourishing is best facilitated by regularly acting well in these domains.

Jean Porter offers a helpful account of how the excellences displayed in particular virtues perfect particular human powers within a broader conception of the good human life taken as a whole. Yet we come to understand how particular virtues function only by attending to concrete paradigms of virtuous acts rather than from the much broader conception of what it means to be good or virtuous in general. For this reason, Aquinas' virtue ethics is marked by substantial dependence on the inductive discovery of the nature of particular virtues as they are concretely embodied by particular virtuous exemplars. Clark, following Porter, finds moral wisdom emerging in a fruitful dialectic between greater understanding of the functioning of particular virtues and greater understanding of the good life overall.

Moral exemplarism understands individual exemplars as establishing what Clark calls the "given horizon of the human good." He argues that Porter's attention to particular paradigmatic acts calls for complementary, and prior, appreciation of the role played by the paradigmatic individuals who perform them. Whether or not we explicitly advert to them, these exemplars influence our moral vision. Sometimes the values endorsed by various exemplars do not cohere with one another. The singular focus of Melina, and John Paul II, on Christ the exemplar provide *the* ultimate criterion in terms of which Christians are to assess all other candidate exemplars.

Clark finds a parallel to this Christocentrism in the *Tertia Pars* of the *Summa*, where Aquinas claims that the Incarnation enables the believer to participate directly in God. Jesus Christ in his humanity teaches us the way to God. Clark argues that Aquinas, like Melina and John Paul II, regarded Jesus Christ as the measure of the Christian life as well as the way to union with God. Because of the Incarnation, Aquinas held, the imitation of Christ, *the* image of God, is a kind of human participation in the divine that allows us to grow *in* or *toward* the image of God (*ad imaginem Dei*). Aquinas thus develops his understanding of the significance of Christ for the moral life in the culminating final part of the *Summa*. The Christian life therefore consists in the imitation of Christ, the exemplar of what it means to be human.

John Paul II's Christocentric exemplarism and the Incarnational theology of Aquinas, Clark argues, can be complemented by both Zagzebski's philosophical exemplarism and Melina's theological exemplarism. He believes that assigning a prominent role to exemplars in the formation of moral agency can clarify how "the exemplarity of Christ *perfects* human agency *qua* human."<sup>17</sup> While such a move is made possible by a prior commitment to the Christian faith, it would be interesting to know whether, or the extent to, which non-believers might in some way be able or willing to regard Jesus as a moral exemplar. In any case, Clark raises the question of whether such a singular Christocentric account of exemplarity meshes with Aquinas' philosophical account of moral normativity and its assessment of the rightness of human action in terms of an act's object, end, and circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

These two important dimensions of moral theology—the philosophical and the Christological—need not be opposed. Aquinas develops his general philosophical analysis of human acts as preparation for his richer analysis of human life under the influence of grace. Because nature is perfected by grace, moral theology incorporates the structures of natural human agency analyzed by Aristotle and other moral philosophers.

Aquinas' moral theology makes little use of personal exemplarity, as Clark himself notes. In this way, his ethic is clearly different from Zagzebski's. Aquinas' theology begins with faith as a response to divine revelation. He regarded faith as based in a decision, made possible by grace, to trust in the authority of Christ and his church. The unique status of Christ, as Clark notes, makes the imitation of Christ "the basis for Christian ethics in a way that the imitation of 'person-models' cannot for a purely natural account of morality."

### *Imitating Jesus*

Clark is highly focused on one particular Exemplar—Christ, and what he teaches us about the path to God. Critics might wonder, though, whether the high Christology developed by John Paul II, Clark, and Melina might lead some people to regard Christ as a less likely candidate for moral exemplarity than would a "lower" Christology that focuses on the particular acts and virtues of the prophetic figure who lived in Nazareth, attracted and taught followers from Galilee, and was executed in Jerusalem. Christians of course affirm that we only properly grasp the significance of the life, teachings, and particular

<sup>17</sup> Clark, *ibid.*, 79

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.



acts of Jesus when we view them from living faith in the risen Lord. Yet while imitating Jesus cannot be divorced from faith in Christ, neither can faith in Christ be understood as diminishing the significance of the concrete way of life displayed by Jesus.

Despite his deep interest in exemplarity, Clark does not ask whether Jesus of Nazareth, the complex figure depicted in the Gospels, can be taken on his own terms as a moral exemplar of the virtuous life, alongside Socrates, Abraham Lincoln, and other widely acknowledged moral exemplars. Christians of course would not want to regard Jesus as merely “one among other exemplars.” He is not only the concrete embodiment of true virtue, but the one and only perfect exemplar.<sup>19</sup> But fully acknowledging Jesus’ humanity as well as divinity suggests that fidelity to the Son of God consists in striving to imitate the man Jesus.

Zagzebski helps us sharpen this point when she notes that someone can function as a moral exemplar for us only to the extent that he or she must be *recognizably like us* for only in this case can we think that we might be able in some ways to emulate him or her. She gives special attention to imitating not only an exemplar’s behavior but also his or her motivations, aims, and intentions (inasmuch as they can be discerned). This point challenges any conception of the imitation of a Christ figure that is abstracted from the concrete person Jesus. Clark’s *purely* high Christological exemplarism might have the unintended effect of making Jesus seem less relevant to people looking for models who are recognizably like them enough to make some kind of imitation of him a realistic possibility. Even strong claims about radical nature of Christian conversion and the transformative power of grace should not deny that grace builds upon as well as elevates our natural human capacities.

### *Complementing Christocentric exemplarism with the imitation of Jesus*

Much of the work done in the past few decades on the relevance of Scripture for virtue ethics has underscored the significance of the particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, the particular narratives transmitted about him in the gospels, and the particular community of disciples he established.<sup>20</sup> This work can be seen as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, the Christological exemplarism of Clark, John

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.54.7.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Joseph J. Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996), Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., and James F. Keenan, S.J., *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges Between New Testament and Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), and Richard A.



Paul II, and Melina. Two works can illustrate how Clark's Christological exemplarism might be complemented by more attention to Jesus as exemplar.

First, William Spohn's *Go and Do Likewise* offers a creative blend of insights from narrative theology, virtue ethics, and Ignatian spirituality to depict Jesus as the "concrete universal of Christian ethics, the paradigm that normatively guides Christian living."<sup>21</sup> Rather than focusing primarily on Jesus' commands and teachings, Spohn calls our attention to spiritual practices that help to develop our skills of moral perception so that we see the world more truthfully, and particularly so that we become more adept at imitating Jesus' ability to see everyone he encountered as neighbor. Spohn suggests that allowing the parables to shape our moral imaginations and affective dispositions can bring us closer to acting concretely in the manner of Jesus.

Second, Biblical scholar Richard Burrige's *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* builds upon his previous work on gospels as written in the genre of ancient *bioi*, exemplary lives that ought to be imitated.<sup>22</sup> Burrige shows how each of the four gospels presents the deeds of Jesus for the reader's imitation as well as instructions that ought to be followed and descriptions of the Reign of God whose coming he inaugurated and announced. Among these deeds Burrige stresses Jesus' concern for the least, outreach to outcasts, open table fellowship, and formation of an inclusive community.

### Conclusion

*Dei Verbum* famously described Scripture as, "the soul of theology" (n.24). The Decree On Priestly Formation, *Optatam Totius*, moreover, suggested that moral theology "should draw more fully on the teaching of Holy Scripture and should throw light upon the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world" (n. 16). Spohn and Burrige offer two distinct but complementary ways of promoting the Council's agenda for moral theology. The concreteness and

Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> William Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Virtue Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Richard A. Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

specificity of their accounts of what it means to imitate Jesus can enrich and deepen Christological exemplarism. It can do so in a way that goes beyond but does not negate Aquinas' understanding of Christian exemplarism.

*Stephen J. Pope*  
*popest@bc.edu*