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CUT OFF FROM ITS WELLSPRING: THE POLITICS BEHIND THE DIVORCE OF SCRIPTURE FROM CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGY

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With notable exceptions, much of contemporary Catholic theology proceeds in a fragmented way as if each branch developed in a hermetically sealed environment. Catholic theologians study and practice the specific disciplines of systematic theology, historical theology, and moral theology as if each were an isolated field. But no area of theology is so cut off from other areas as that of biblical studies; the diverse theological branches mentioned above share the characteristic of being distant from biblical studies.

Among biblical scholars in the academy, the Bible tends to be studied almost as any other ancient document: Bible scholars pay careful attention to its ancient history through studying Northwest Semitic philology, other cognate languages like Akkadian, Egyptian, and Hittite; they attempt to recover the Bible’s long-gone formative matrices partially uncovered through archaeology; they utilize comparative methodologies from ancillary fields; they run numerous textual variants through carefully constructed textual critical assumptions; and, even more than their colleagues in ancient Near Eastern studies, they search for hypothetical original sources that may have never actually existed outside of scholarly imagination. These are laudable areas of study, but they tend to be pre-theological. This would not be a problem were it not for the lamentable fact that for many scholars such methods have at times drawn attention away from the integrity of the texts and even hindered theological understanding of the Bible as Sacred Scripture, rather than aiding in such theological interpretations as necessary preliminary groundwork.

As Servais Pinckaers cautions:

Scripture scholars … have fixed our attention a bit too much on human factors and on the cultural context which conditioned the sacred authors in their work of composition. We run the risk of forgetting that when we read Scripture, through this historic data we are placed before a Word that has mastery over time and that creates history, the history of a people that listens to it and of each believer personally, beginning with the most lowly. The Word leads them to an encounter with the living God. Certainly we should carefully take into account the historical and human envelope of Scripture, but this should not prevent us from seeing that in its substance it is formed by a Word that surpasses words, ideas, categories, and sentiments.1

Much of contemporary Catholic biblical scholarship has little to do with theology, and, in particular, it offers very little to the study of moral theology.2 Likewise, much of contemporary Catholic theology, including moral theology, fails to engage biblical texts substantively, beyond an occasional highly selective appropriation of ‘assured’ results of historical criticism, which often appear to be little more than proof-texting, utilizing only those conclusions of historical