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# Review of Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, S.J.'s "John Cuthbert Ford, SJ: Moral Theologian at the End of the Manualist Era"

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**Eric Marcelo O. GENILO, S.J., *John Cuthbert Ford, SJ: Moral Theologian at the End of the Manualist Era.*** Washington DC: Georgetown Press, 2007. pp. 217. ISBN 978-1-58901-181-6. \$49.95.

Reviewed by Jason Paul BOURGEOIS.

This book examines the life, influence, and methodology of John C. Ford, S.J., an influential moral theologian during the 1940s to the mid 1960s that the author portrays as the last of the “manualist” school. Forming a significant backdrop to this story is Ford’s role as author of the minority report of the Papal Birth Control Commission. Ford’s report recommended to Paul VI that no change should be made in the teaching of the Catholic Church on artificial contraception.

After a brief introductory chapter, Genilo outlines Ford’s use of the manualist methods of moral theology in chapters 2-4. Ford is characterized as a moral theologian who can adopt subtle casuistry, and a more probabilistic and permissive attitude, in moral cases that do not involve a change in magisterial teaching. An example of this “standard mode” of Ford’s casuistry is his position that a double vasectomy does not render a man “impotent” and thus unable to contract a sacramental marriage.

However, Genilo has also identified a “crisis mode” in Ford’s casuistry, which was employed whenever a teaching of the magisterium was in jeopardy. Ford employed this mode during the debates of the Papal Birth Control Commission, and made reports to the Holy Office and to the Pope on dissenting theologians within the Commission. He also counseled Paul VI not to change the teaching, when it appeared that the pope himself was vacillating on the issue. Genilo accuses Ford of being inconsistent in his “crisis mode” by placing the need to protect the continuity of church teachings above all other considerations.

Chapters 5-7 form the heart of the book, since they articulate Ford’s underlying moral theological system. Ford believed that natural law was a reflection of divine law, and that the moral norms of the natural law were objective and unchanging. When faced with a difficult pastoral issue, Ford did not argue for a change in moral norms, but rather focused on the issue of subjective culpability to excuse penitents from the charge that they had committed a mortal sin. The prime example of this is alcoholism, and Ford argued that psychological addictions such as this could reduce or eliminate subjective culpability for objectively sinful actions. (As Genilo reminds us, Ford himself was a recovering alcoholic and was a lifelong advocate of the AA program.)

Ford’s emphasis on the objective moral norms of the natural law is contrasted with the moral theology of Josef Fuchs, the author of the majority report of the Papal Birth Control Commission. Fuchs is portrayed as a “convert” from the manualist tradition,

who had sympathy for the difficulty of married couples in following the teaching on birth control, and therefore advocated the use of a “more probabilistic” style of casuistry that would result in a change of the teaching itself. Genilo clearly favors Fuchs’ approach (which he notes is similar to Ford’s “standard mode” of casuistry), and wishes that Ford had not decided to employ his “crisis mode” of moral reasoning in the case of birth control.

Chapter 8 seems somewhat out of place within the broader narrative given above, and feels a bit like an appendix as it examines various unrelated issues that illustrate Ford’s basic emphasis on the dignity and freedom of the human person, and his support of inalienable human rights within the legal system. Finally, chapter 9 offers a brief summary and evaluation of the life and influence of John Ford, while the appendix gives a timeline of major dates and events in his life.

Overall, this book seems to be written with the narrative of the birth control question in mind, and it ends by offering qualified praise for Ford’s insight and contributions while criticizing his moral reasoning on the birth control issue.

The book does not follow the effects of Ford’s influence beyond his authorship of the minority report in the Papal Birth Control Commission. In fact, Genilo does not include a consideration of the moral reasoning of *Humanae Vitae* itself anywhere in his book, nor does he examine the effects of that teaching on the field of Catholic moral theology.

One wishes that Genilo had acknowledged the fact that magisterial teachings of the last 40 years (most especially in John Paul II’s 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*) have consistently supported the idea of objective moral norms based in the natural law, and the immorality of artificial contraception. This would alter the framework of the book by putting the moral reasoning of Ford into the context of being in continuity with that of the moral reasoning of the teaching of the Catholic Church itself.

Genilo’s book is most suitable for graduate students or academic theologians who have a special interest in fundamental moral theology.