'Still Spiritually Alive': Remembering Bernard Häring

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The exciting life and wide influence of the ‘pivotal figure’ in 20th-century moral theology are remembered.

'Still Spiritually Alive'
Remembering Bernard Häring

IN A LETTER DATED June 22, 1998, Bernard Häring, C.Ss.R., informed me of his poor health: but all the same, he accepted and encouraged my request for a visit with him later this summer. He had suffered a total blockage of the heart, followed by five minutes of reanimation that left, he said, some “dead points in my brain” and a failing memory. He hoped I would not be too disappointed and added, “After all, I am still spiritually alive.”

Of course, it was precisely the spiritual vitality of this renowned Redemptorist moral theologian that had led me to write my doctoral dissertation on his understanding of the relationship between the sacraments and the moral life. I will not, however, be able to make that visit and meet the person who has profoundly shaped my thinking and practice of the Christian faith. Following a stroke, Bernard Häring died in a hospital in Haag, Germany, on July 3. He was 85 years old.

HÄRING’s three volume work, The Law of Christ (1954) has been described by one of his students, the Rev. Charles Curran, a U.S. moral theologian, as the “most creative and important accomplishment in moral theology in the century.” The Protestant ethicist James Gustafson has called Häring the “pivotal figure in the history of moral theology in the 20th century both in the Catholic tradition and in an ecumenical perspective.” Although his work has ceased to inform contemporary morals, there is rarely a student of Catholic moral thought who has not encountered the writings of Häring and discovered in them a theologian who loves the Scriptures, has a profound understanding of human nature—if at times rather too optimistic—and who is a Christian of deep and profound faith, a holy man who has always been quite spiritually alive.

Bernard Häring was the key figure among the moralists who broke ranks with the tradition of neoscholastic textbooks and laid the foundation for new approaches to Catholic moral theology. Included among his achievements is the integration of Scripture into a discipline that was once nearly devoid of biblical references, let alone built upon biblical images or ideas. Häring relies heavily on Johannine and Pauline images that emphasize rebirth in Christ, the inner assimilation and imitation of Christ and a freedom born of the power of the Spirit. The Bible, according to Häring, must be the central source of moral theology, though not its only source. He also turned to the philoso-
Häring recalled: “I told my superior that this was my very last choice because I found the teaching of moral theology an absolute crushing bore. He mollified me with the answer, ‘We are asking you to prepare yourself for this task with a doctorate from a German university precisely so that it can be different in the future.’”

Häring enrolled at the University of Tübingen in September 1940, but his studies were interrupted by World War II, and his dissertation was not completed until 1947. He served as a medic in the German army and was stationed in France from September 1940 to May 1941. His division was then deployed to the Polish-Russian border until the end of the war. This experience and his encounter with the terrible realities of the church. The moral life, for Häring, was nothing less than the full response to God’s initiative, a response grounded in prayer and in a communal worship that extends to the world.

Bernard Häring was born into a Catholic family on Nov. 10, 1912, in Bottlingen, Germany, the 11th of 12 children. He joined the Redemptorist congregation on May 4, 1933, and was ordained a priest five years later. He chose the Redemptorists, he said, in order to become a missionary, after declining an invitation from the Jesuits to become a professor. The Redemptorists promised him that he would be sent to Brazil after his ordination. Just before his departure, however, his provincial superior informed him that the community needed someone to be trained in moral theology. In his autobiography, My Witness for the Church (1992), Häring recalled: “I told my superior that this was my very last choice because I found the teaching of moral theology an absolute crashing bore. He mollified me with the answer, ‘We are asking you to prepare yourself for this task with a doctorate from a German university precisely so that it can be different in the future.’”

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AFTER THE WAR Häring sought to continue pastoral work, but his community called him back to Tübingen to finish his doctorate. Teaching was not, however, his
only ministry. Until 1953 he assisted Catholic refugees in areas of northern Bavaria where no Catholic pastoral work had been organized. Along with his colleague Viktor Schurr, Father Häring devised an experiment called "Refugees' Mission," which he described in his autobiography. "We wandered from place to place and visited all the families, who often were living in miserable quarters. We shared their poverty, slept with the poorest, often together in a single tiny room. We preached the Good News in rented dance halls.... Before this experiment I had carefully worked out 15 sermon outlines. Not one of them was ever used. After the first home visit it became clear to me that it was not I who should be determining the topics. What should happen was that I ought to respond to the real life problems, fears, hopes, and needs of these men and women. Again and again I learned a responsorial pastoral work went hand in hand with a responsorial moral theology."

This pastoral experience, combined with his education at Tübingen, significantly shaped the young Häring. At Tübingen he was influenced by the work of such Catholic thinkers as Karl Adam, Romano Guardini and Theodore Steinbüchel. He was also able to attend the lectures of the Protestant theologians Helmut Thielicke and Friedrich Ruckert. All this brought him into contact with scholars engaged in historical, biblical and liturgical studies and introduced him to the philosophies of personalism and value theory. His dissertation, Das Heilige und das Gute (The Sacred and the Good: Religion and Morality in Their Mutual Relationships), published in 1950, analyzes the relationship between religion and morality in the work of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann, and Emil Brunner. From these comparisons, Häring concluded that religion and morality are deeply related to one another yet are distinct and separate realities that must be understood and analyzed as such.

IN 1947 he became professor of moral theology and moral philosophy as a member of the faculty of religion and theology at Gars, Germany. Not long after his arrival, he began lecturing on the family and on religious sociology. His academic career shifted when in 1950 he was contacted by the newly elected superior general of the Redemptorist order, Leonard Buijs. Häring recalled in his autobiography: "He spoke with me about his plans to help overcome an ancient error in Catholic moral theology. For a long time the religious superiors and bishops had sent all of their prospective professors of moral theology to study canon law or both canon law and civil law in Rome. That served to confirm institutionally the legalism of Catholic moral theology. He envisioned a theology faculty which would specialize in moral theology in its complete thematic breadth and theological-philosophical depth in order to train authentic moral theologians and to
prepare them for their real task. He wished to begin on an experimental basis as quickly as possible, starting with a program mainly for Redemptorists. He placed great stock in getting a professor from the Tübingen school—for this he had his eye on me.”

From 1950 to 1953 Häring taught one semester each year at the newly founded Academia Alfonsiana in Rome. He offered two classes, one on conversion as a foundational perspective for Catholic moral theology and another titled “What Can We Catholic Moral Theologians Learn From Protestant and Orthodox Christians?” When The Law of Christ was published in 1954, it enjoyed immediate success. Within a year, it was reprinted three times, and within three years it had been translated into 14 languages.

Häring retained a permanent position at the Academia Alfonsiana and remained there until his retirement in 1988, when he moved back to his hometown in Gars, Germany. He also served as professor of moral theology and professor of pastoral sociology at the Pastoral Institute of the Lateran in Rome and over the years lectured at many other institutions both in Europe and the United States.

During the 1950's, while in Rome, he became active in the movement toward theological renewal that preceded the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). At the council itself, Häring was a member of the preparatory theological commission and served on several subcommittees that reviewed the status of such topics as chastity, virginity, marriage and the family, religious freedom and the laity. He also served as coordinating secretary for the editorial committee for the council’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (1965). In addition, like many theologians at the time, he was able to influence, through lectures and discussions, many of the bishops at the council.

Häring was deeply committed to the teachings and reforms of Vatican II, and after the council he traveled extensively in order to lecture about the council to religious and lay groups. In Ongoing Revisions in Moral Theology (1975), Charles Curran noted that Häring’s moral theology has great similarities with the council’s overall tone and approach. But one consequence of these travels was that Häring could not continue to make scholarly contributions to the field of moral theology. “As the 1960’s moved on,” Father Curran wrote,

...and the postconciliar period of the church opened, I was somewhat disappointed to realize that Häring’s publications were no longer breaking new ground in a systematic way. We had a discussion about this while he was a visiting professor at Yale Divinity School in the 1966-67 school year. Häring pointed
out that he was devoting much of his time and energy to bringing the idea of renewal in the church to an even wider public, for he felt this was the most important need for the church at the present. One can say without fear of contradiction that no one has spoken to more people in more countries about contemporary Christian moral life than Bernard Häring. In the process it has been impossible for him to publish on a high, scholarly level, and thus he has not been able to continue charting the future course of moral theology.

Father Curran has rightly called Häring a “missionary for renewal.” Nonetheless, even if his strictly scholarly work ceased, Häring continued to be a prolific writer, publishing a new book nearly every year from 1963 to 1980. Many of these works sought to explain the teachings of Vatican II; some addressed specific moral questions—for example, in medical ethics—and others focused on sacramental and spiritual topics. His writings on sexual and medical ethics were challenged by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and he underwent an examination by the congregation from 1975 to 1979. At the time he was suffering from throat cancer.

HÄRING’S CONFLICTS WITH THE VATICAN commission had begun with his protest against Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical, Humanæ Vitæ, and culminated with the publication of his book Medical Ethics in 1972. Though well known for his gentle and mild manner, he sharply criticized church authorities after his trial. In a letter to Cardinal Franjo Seper, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he stated: “During the Second World War I stood before a military court four times. Twice it was a case of life and death. At that time I felt honored because I was accused by enemies of God. The accusations then were to a very large extent true, because I was not submissive to that regime. Now I am accused by the Doctrinal Congregation in an extremely humiliating manner. The accusations are untrue. In addition, they come from a very high organ of the church leadership, an organ of that church which I in a long life have served with all my power and honesty and hope to serve still further with sacrifice. I would rather stand once again before a court of war of Hitler” (quoted from My Witness of the Church).

The irony, of course, is that Bernard Häring was forced to spend his time analyzing the rightness and wrongness of moral acts, an approach to moral theology that he never accepted or advocated and at which he was not particularly gifted. The Catholic News Service’s July 8 obituary devoted a great deal of space to Häring’s thinking on birth control. Häring, however, saw his work in a much different light. “I find it absolutely laughable and at the same time frustrating,” he wrote in his autobiography, “that at my age I still have to pour out so much energy on questions like flexibility and inflexibility concerning the forbidding of contraception and in the struggle against sexual rigorism. I am most deeply convinced that my main calling is and must be that of an untiring peace apostle for the elimination of war, for a world culture that is free of violence, for a radical love that will not allow us to become enemies, for a ‘transformation of armament’ to a nonviolent defense.”

Despite his trial and illness, Häring published what he viewed as his main theological work, Free and Faithful in Christ (1978-81). He did not consider this a restatement of The Law of Christ but described it as a new work that represented the maturing of his own thought and the changes within the church since Vatican II. During his retirement, Häring also wrote several more books, most of them autobiographical and spiritual works.

When Bernard Häring was found dead on the floor of his hospital room on July 3, an open Bible and some papers were found on his desk. From his vocation as a Redemptorist priest, his training at Tübingen in moral theology and his experiences in World War II, he had developed a deep commitment to changing moral theology from its legalistic approach to a more responsive, biblically based, dynamic understanding of the Christian moral life. Once Vatican II had authorized a view of the Christian life and church that mirrored this theology, he committed himself to teaching, writing and preaching so that the vision might become a reality. His approach to moral theology was a pastoral one, built upon the motto of his Redemptorist community, copiosa apud eum redemptio (“with him plentiful redemption”). The center of the moral life, according to Bernard Häring, is Christ himself, and the Christian life is nothing less than accepting, grasping, loving and living within that plentiful redemptive reality.