

# Studia Moralia

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## Vincenzo VIVA

Formatori di coscienze, maestri di speranza  
Il discorso di papa Francesco ai partecipanti  
al Convegno “Sant’Alfonso pastore degli ultimi  
e Dottore della Chiesa” (23 marzo 2023)

## Vimal TIRIMANNA

Listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit  
The current synodal process and  
a few implications for Moral Theology

## Mario BOIES

*Amoris laetitia*  
Un appel à cheminer graduellement  
vers un jugement moral postconventionnel

## Martín CARBAJO-NÚÑEZ

Fraternità e madre terra  
Tutti fratelli e sorelle nella casa comune

## Mathias NEBEL

Polisemia y coherencia interpretativa de la noción de bien común  
en la Doctrina Social de la Iglesia (parte II)

## James F. KEENAN

Pathways to Holiness: Early Christianity and Ethics

## Matteo MARTINO

Come pensare la legge naturale? La proposta di Giuseppe Angelini

## Maurizio CHIODI

Risposta a Martin McKeever: *lex naturae*

Laudato si' partecipazione  
casa comune comunione  
discernimento fraternità  
gradualità missioni pastoralità  
miser cordia  
COSCIENZA  
Evangelii gaudium  
Amoris laetitia  
Fratelli tutti sinodalità  
Laudate Deum

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## **In Memoriam**



**Brian V. Johnstone, C.Ss.R.  
1938-2023  
Professor of the Alphonsian Academy**

Although I had already heard about the name Brian Johnstone as a leading and competent professor of moral theology at the Alphonsian Academy in Rome, it was only when I actually arrived in Rome in 1990 for my higher studies in moral theology that I met him face to face at our Redemptorist community of Sant'Alfonso at Via Merulana. At that time, in that community there still lived such world-renowned moral theologians as Louis Vereecke, Jan Visser, Domenico Capone, Sean O'Riordan, Roberto Koch, Augustine Reagan, Giulio De La Torre, ... etc. but though he belonged to the next generation of professors of the *Alphonsianum*, Brian was the one who stood out as erudite while at the same time being very reserved if not shy and unassuming if not simple. Those days it was a pleasure to go to the community common room for Recreation during the weekends because after being in the company of such a galaxy of really great scholars one came out of the common room more educated not only in theology but in many aspects of ecclesial life. Brian Johnstone cer-

tainly was one of those from whom many of us youngsters learnt a lot not only with regard to moral theology but also with regard to the contemporary ecclesiastical affairs.

During my licentiate studies, I chose all the courses he offered at the *Alphonsianum*, in the fields of fundamental morals, bio-ethics and ethics of war and peace. Till this day, I consider him to be one of the two best professors I have met in my life who evoked in me a vivid interest in theological studies, the other being the late Clement Campos, C.Ss.R. of the Bangalore Province of the Redemptorists (who taught most of my moral theology subjects in the Major Seminary in Bangalore, India). Brian's style of teaching was such that it not only led the serious students to delve more into the subject matter in an inter-disciplinary way but it also evinced how profound and well-read he himself was. Needless to say that when it was time for me to choose a Moderator (Supervisor) for my licentiate thesis, invariably the choice fell on Prof. Brian Johnstone. Two years later, when I began my doctoral studies, again I chose him as my Moderator. At that time, Brian was so popular among the students of the *Alphonsianum* that he was the most sought-after professor to guide the licentiate and doctoral dissertations. I still recall how at times he was so overwhelmed if not over-burdened with supervising such dissertations that he even gave the impression of living in another world whenever we happened to bounce on to him on the corridors. Yet he was meticulous and demanding from his students. His corrections were gentle but academically scrupulous and challenging. At times, I myself was made to rewrite the same Chapter three or four times but not without reason. Ultimately, it was we, his students, who benefitted from such scholarly corrections.

Brian V. Johnstone hailed from Brighton, Australia. As a young Redemptorist seminarian he excelled in his studies at the Redemptorist Seminary at Ballarat, Australia from 1958 to 1965. Later, he had his higher studies at the Pontifical Atheneo di Sant'Anselmo in Rome where he obtained his licentiate in theology in 1968. He then proceeded for his studies in moral theology at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Bonn and at the University of Tubingen during the period from 1968 to 1970. He obtained his doctorate in moral theology from the Catholic University of Leuven in 1976. In his

illustrious academic life, he held the following prestigious posts among others: Lecturer in moral theology at Yarra Theological Union, Box Hill, Australia (1973-1981); Visiting Lecturer at the Catholic Theological College, Clayton, Australia (1975-1981); Assistant Professor at the Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo di Manila, Philippines (1975-1976); Professor of moral theology at the Catholic University of America (CUA), Washington DC in the USA (1981-1987); Professor of moral theology at the Alphonsian Academy Rome, Italy (1987-2005). In 2005, he left Rome to return to the CUA for a brief spell there till 2012 before retiring and returning to his dear homeland Australia.

Today, on the one hand, we often hear in the academic circles the fact that one needs to be inter-disciplinary which is certainly true with regard to moral theology. Ironically, on the other hand, we also see how in higher echelons of academic life those who teach various subjects try to be “specialists” only in a given area almost pushing oneself to an academic ghetto, a fact seen even in contemporary moral theology. On his part, Brian would have proved both of these contemporary slogans in isolation to be wrong not only with his commanding and profound knowledge of various branches of moral theology but also with his indisputable competence in scripture, ecclesiology, church history, philosophy, and last but not least the Catholic tradition and official magisterial teachings. He surely was a “specialist” not only in one area of moral theology but in the whole gamut of moral theology. Among the many courses he taught during his long years of teaching were: Fundamental Moral Theology, Catholic Moral Tradition, Biomedical Ethics, Ethics of Violence, War and Peace, Human Rights, Probabilism and Conscience and on various other issues in Social Ethics. This wide repertoire of subjects themselves is an indication to his competence in almost all the diverse branches of moral theology. During these years of teaching, he had directed many licentiate and doctoral dissertations in moral theology thus touching deeply the lives of so many students across the continents. Prof. Johnstone also had written many articles on relevant moral theological themes and published them in leading international theological periodicals. In his retirement, he was interested in delving into the role of the resurrection in moral theology, and it is said

that in his last years, he was writing a book on “Rising to New Life: A Moral Theology of Resurrection”.

His students from all over the world nostalgically remember him with gratitude for the person he had been to them; to them, he was not just a ‘professor’ but a wonderful ‘human being’, a gentleman. It was in this sense that two of his former students, Robert Koerpel (from the USA) and I (from Rome) joined in editing a *Festschrift* entitled “Contemplating the Future of Moral Theology: Essays in Honor of Brian V. Johnstone, C.Ss.R.” published by Wipf & Stock Publishers in 2017, in his honour on the occasion of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. Writing the Foreword to this *Festschrift*, the world-renowned American moral theologian Charles Curran gave a fine, accurate summary of Brian Johnstone: “I personally was very happy to have Brian as a colleague in our discipline of moral theology. He did not always agree with all my positions, and likewise I did not always agree with his, but we both appreciated the ability to share and dialogue. He was willing to express his own position but always in a very quiet and non-provocative way. This aspect of his personality made him a most valued colleague for all of us. Biran was deeply appreciated and even loved by his colleagues. He was a quiet introvert who did not have boastful bone in his body. Wherever he taught, Brian has always engaged in some pastoral work. In Washington he worked quite extensively with the Teams of Our Lady which were originally founded in France by Father Henri Caffarel but came to the United States in 1958. Brian’s commitment to his scholarship and the Church was recognized by all”. Although the publication of this work happened a couple of years after this important milestone in his life, it contained articles by some of his colleagues and students. A complete bibliography of his works (till 2017) compiled by his Australian confrere, Michael Kelly, C.Ss.R. was published in that *Festschrift*.

Brian’s contribution at the *Alphonsianum* is unforgettable. As a loyal son of St. Alphonsus, the Official Patron of Catholic Moral Theology, he always sought the pastoral benevolence from the point of view of the people but without losing the profound professional and academic depth for the pastoral stands he took. His style of situating himself firmly in the Catholic moral tradition before venturing into con-

temporary ethical issues made him a very balanced and solid moral theologian not only in his teaching but also in his erudite theological articles. Some of us, his students, have benefited immensely in trying to emulate him in this regard. Very few would have known that in addition to his academic tasks Brian also somehow found time to reach out to the forgotten people wherever he was, thus, being a true Redemptorist whose main charism is to reach out to the most abandoned. While in Rome, I recall how he as a prison chaplain used to visit regularly the prisons and try to be in solidarity with the inmates therein.

With his death, his students have lost a real 'guru' and friend, the Redemptorists a wonderful confrere, the world of Catholic moral theology a real scholar with a pastoral slant, the *Alphonsianum* one of her greatest professors, and last but not least, all of us a gentle, unassuming human being. May he rest in peace and rise in glory!

Vimal TIRIMANNA, C.Ss.R.