

The background is a vibrant stained glass window. It features several vertical panels. From left to right, the panels contain: a winged angel, a pope in a red and white mitre, a man in a blue robe, a man with a raised hand, and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ with the inscription 'INRI' above his head. The colors are rich, including blues, reds, yellows, and greens.

THE ROLE OF VIRTUOUS EXEMPLARS IN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY, EDUCATION, AND EVANGELIZATION

BY JOHN ROSELLE, S.J.



When have you experienced a virtuous person, either close-up or from afar? What specifically did you value about this individual? How were you able to learn about virtue from his or her example? One way of speaking about such a person, who actualizes the highest ideals of human behavior, embodying ethical existence, is as an “exemplar.” We can find exemplars across history, culture, and religion. They are perennially fascinating and influential in the way they have enacted what is best in humanity. Conceptions of exemplars have undoubtedly informed humanity’s understanding of the virtues. Exemplars are also prominent in Catholicism, though the tradition rarely refers to them explicitly by that name. Rather, the Church’s language tends to speak of exemplarity in terms of holiness and sanctity. I will argue that recent analysis of virtuous exemplars complements Catholic thought on theology, education, and evangelization.

Harry Clarke, east window of St. George’s Cathedral (Southwark)

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The following is not an exhaustive study of exemplars in Catholicism. Instead, it seeks to provide the reader with the latest developments in the study of them. I hope to indicate the potential of a renewed reflection upon the nature, scope, and dynamics of exemplars within Catholic inquiry. I begin by presenting a synopsis of a new theory within moral philosophy, called exemplarism. I then situate exemplarity in the context of Christology. Finally, I discuss the value of exemplars for purposes of character education and proclaiming the Gospel.

I. Introduction to Exemplarism

Exemplars are highlighted as part of the project of Linda Zagzebski, a current Catholic philosopher in the areas of ethics, epistemology, and religion. Zagzebski has developed what she terms “an exemplarist virtue theory” or simply “exemplarism.”¹ Exemplarism will serve as the subject of her latest book, as well as the Gifford Lectures she will give in the fall of 2015 at the University of St. Andrews. The fact that exemplarism is a work in progress makes it both exciting and partially provisional at this point. Although we will note some of the major points of exemplarism thus far, we must recognize that the theory is still somewhat embryonic.

Initially, Zagzebski’s *Divine Motivation Theory* (2004) presents two versions of exemplarism. The first version is inclusive of exemplars more generally, pointing to virtuous persons from any background. The second version specifically points to virtues found in the exemplar of Jesus Christ. In this way, “Christ shows us an ideal self in relation to which we learn how to identify moral properties.”² For our purposes, I will concentrate on the latter Christian exemplarism.

Exemplarism promises the renewal of an ancient manner of envisioning the virtues. In the West, exemplars have a philosophical pedigree reaching back

at least to Plato and Aristotle. In her *Plato and the Hero*, Angela Hobbs explains how Plato is inclined “to give role models the central place in his ethics”³ and that he in fact “sets up Socrates as a new exemplar, albeit a complex one.”⁴ Nancy Sherman, in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, characterizes Aristotle as conceiving that “virtue . . . is embodied, made concrete in the flesh.”⁵ From an Eastern perspective, Confucius seems to have also been an exponent of exemplars, as evidenced by Amy Olberding’s insightful *Moral Exemplars in the Analects: The Good Person is That*.⁶ Perhaps surprising given exemplars’ history, Hobbs admits that an “emphasis on role models is both extremely important and strangely overlooked in contemporary ethical philosophy, even by supporters of modern virtue ethics.”⁷ I understand exemplars as closely related to, if not synonymous with, role models.⁸ Exemplarism therefore not only addresses this lacuna, but also furnishes us with further explanation of how and why exemplars effect our moral thought.

According to exemplarism, an exemplar constitutes “a paradigmatically good person . . . who is most admirable.”⁹ The theory takes exemplars as being “identified directly through the emotion of admiration.”¹⁰ In other words, exemplarism depends upon actual exemplars. Yet it does not require that we interact with these exemplars. Exemplars can come from people amidst daily life, such as relatives, friends, professionals, priests and religious, etc. At the same time, we may not have contact with other exemplars, like those from history, current events, or movies. A case in point of the latter phenomenon is the way that many regard Pope Francis as an exemplar without having met him.

In order to better appreciate the underpinnings of exemplarism, I encourage the reader to apply it to specific people, as suggested in the first paragraph of this article. Recall how that exemplary person has

affected you. Account for what he or she has stirred within you. Ask whether admiration is a primary feeling that leads you to ascribe exemplarity to him or her. If so, then you have seen part of how exemplarism characterizes the process of recognizing exemplars.

Exemplarism argues that we first know virtues by finding those qualities in exemplars that we look up to and follow. The theory proposes that virtues already present in exemplars in fact *precede* abstract formulations of the nature of each virtue, so that “we do not have criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness.”¹¹ Exemplars thereby exist as virtuous people *before* we ever extrapolate about what makes them exemplary. That is to say, virtues are first manifested in exemplars. Only then are people able to reason about those virtues.

Exemplarism offers a helpful analogy here for grasping its epistemology. It relates knowledge of things like water to knowledge of ethical notions like virtues. Just as we can recognize water through an exemplary form of it like an ocean, we can recognize virtues through exemplars. People know what genuine water is by people pointing to it and by personal experience. By the same token, people know what genuine virtue is by pointing to exemplars and by personal experience of them.¹² Exemplarism emphasizes the experiential to the extent that it contends: “We cannot understand ethics without reference to particular persons.”¹³

II. Christ as the Divine Exemplar

Theologically speaking, we are on solid ground in referring to Christ as an exemplar. For instance, St. Thomas Aquinas proposed “in his passion Christ offers himself to us as the perfect model of all the virtues.”¹⁴ *Divine Motivation Theory* rightly recalls: “to the Christian, God is most perfectly revealed, not in a set of commandments or in any written or spoken words, but in a person,”¹⁵ such that “Jesus Christ is the central paradigmatic good person.”¹⁶ A full exposition is not possible here, but I will offer a few cases to corroborate what might seem *prima facie* evident: that Christ is accounted the Divine Exemplar in Christian thought. Joseph Ratzinger’s *Introduction to Christianity* states, “Christian faith believes in Jesus of Nazareth as the exemplary man.”¹⁷ As the first of his “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics,” Hans Urs von Balthasar claimed, “Christian ethics must be modeled on Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ Exemplars typically fulfill the function of fashioning such moral conceptions.

To be sure, Christ is much more than an exemplar of virtue. For Christians, the person of Christ is not just a teacher or a model. In his aforementioned “Propositions,” von Balthasar is instructive when he includes the following warning: “Where Christ’s divinity is not recognized, he necessarily appears as a human exemplar.”¹⁹ Seeing Christ merely as a model is a possible *de facto* position for those who repudiate him as the Son of God. In no way do I mean to construe Christian exemplarism in such a reductionist fashion.

Instead, I would endorse Benedict XVI’s approach to Philippians 2:5, wherein Paul writes, “Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus.”²⁰ Benedict XVI succinctly clarifies that “it is not only or not merely a matter of following Jesus’ example, as something moral, but of involving one’s whole life in his way of thinking and acting.”²¹ Benedict XVI

thereby encapsulates an authentic Christian approach to participating in the exemplarity of Christ. We must avoid any Pelagian conception of becoming Christ-like based on our own abilities. Instead, grace proves indispensable in having a relationship with Christ that leads to having his exemplary likeness reflected in ours.

Let us momentarily consider Christ as an exemplar apart from the tenets of Christian faith. Even when Christ is exemplary in the eyes of non-Christians, one could raise the larger theoretical problem of why they ought to prefer Christ as an exemplar over and above other exemplars.²² Though open to argument, it seems to me that Jesus has uniquely credible claims to divinity and perfection. Some political and religious figures have surely styled themselves divine. However, those claims have not proven realistic or believable in hindsight. No other person, except Christ, has convinced so many people across history and culture that he is divine. That does not necessarily make it true that he is God Incarnate, but it does make him stand out among available exemplars.

Another possible objection to giving primacy to the exemplarity of Christ is that his divinity puts him out of reach as a worthy exemplar. His perfection could pose too great a gap between him and us. Zagzebski recognizes that “nobody can be equal to Christ, but emulation does not need to result in equality. It only needs to be a motivator for moral improvement.”²³ In other cases, we do not need to be on par with our exemplars in order for them to spur us toward greater ethical living. In order to imagine how this might work, let us return to the figure of Pope Francis as an exemplar. Francis inspires people from countless walks of life by his compassion and simplicity. Others need not have the equivalent stature, training, authority, or skills of the Pope in order to desire to act more like him. By the same token, one can still aspire to imitating Christ in the face of his immense greatness. Such

becomes possible all the more on account of God’s grace bringing a person into congruence with Christ.

Kierkegaard offers trenchant warnings about our relation with Christ under the aspect of him being an admirable exemplar. His views on the topic are worthy of particular consideration.²⁴ Kierkegaard believes that by his Incarnation, Christ intended not only to redeem humanity but also to become “*the prototype*, of leaving footprints for the person who wanted to join him, who then might become an *imitator*.”²⁵ Notice that without calling Christ an exemplar, Kierkegaard’s language of imitating a prototype resonates with exemplarism.

Still, exemplarism and Kierkegaard could appear to diverge over the role of admiration, which is the emotion that exemplarism situates in between an encounter with an exemplar and the imitation of him or her. In the case of Christ, Kierkegaard laments a “fundamental change” in his milieu, whereby “ordinarily Christ at most acquired admirers and not imitators.”²⁶ Instead of imitation being an inextricable dynamic of admiration, Kierkegaard observes an unfortunate split between admiration and imitation among his confrères. This happens because “an admirer keeps himself personally detached” so that he “consciously or unconsciously does not discover that what is admired involves a claim upon him, to be or at least to strive to be what is admired.”²⁷ To only admire Christ contravenes who Christ is for Kierkegaard, since Christ’s entire existence in the flesh “was designed solely to be able to have imitators and designed to make admirers impossible.”²⁸

While one can sympathize with Kierkegaard’s caveat on these points, one ought not use them as a foil for exemplarism. Exemplarism and Kierkegaard are reconcilable on the issue of admiration and imitation. It seems a false dichotomy to say that we must *either* admire *or* imitate Christ. Rather, exemplarism offers an

account of how admiration and imitation go together. Kierkegaard acknowledges that these twin dynamics could be related when he comments, “An imitator *is* or strives *to be* what he admires.”²⁹

III. Possibilities for Education and Evangelization

In our last section, I will describe how exemplars may cast light on the mission of the Church. Before delving into Christian applications of exemplarity, we might remember that exemplars can contribute much to schooling in virtue from the secular perspective as well. Hobbs paraphrases Plato as believing that “the emulation of appropriate role models can give a life shape and structure.”³⁰ This suggests that personal examples of those whom one respects can almost impress themselves upon one’s own ethical existence. It is interesting that Hobbs notes, “Several of the Homeric heroes have heroes of their own: even Achilles looks up to Herakles.”³¹ A similar dynamic holds as true today as it did for Homer or Plato. It would be difficult—and perhaps impossible—to find people who achieved their full potential without the presence of various exemplars pointing them to what is humanly possible.

Exemplarity is key for the task of moral learning. In *An Education for Choosing Life*, a recent translation of addresses to teachers in Argentina, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio (the future Pope Francis) urged, “Let us rouse ourselves to *propose models of life* to our pupils.”³² Bergoglio placed his call in the context of how “The postmodern culture, which dilutes everything, has declared every proposal of concrete ethics to be out of date.”³³ Instead, “to present valuable examples of service, of struggle for justice, of compromise for the sake of the community, of sanctity and heroism”³⁴ was important for this Church leader who would become just such an exemplar for the world.

Exemplary Christians have played a preeminent role in evangelization. One need only recall how the martyrs, saints, and other heroic Christians have shared the Gospel throughout history. George Weigel explains in *Evangelical Catholicism*, “Hard as it may be for theologians and other Christian intellectuals to admit it, argument was not the crucial factor. Example was.”³⁵ Building upon the work of sociologist Rodney Stark, Weigel recounts how “the Christian ‘Way’ triumphed because it modeled a more humane mode of life in a brutal world,” so that “supernatural charity and sacramental fellowship, extended to women, slaves, foreigners, and the sick, proved an attractive incentive” in becoming Christian.³⁶

In his landmark Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis highlights the power and purposes of exemplars in the labors of the Church. He reminds us: “In fidelity to the example of the Master, it is vitally important for the Church today to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §23). It is especially striking how the Holy Father describes the effect of others’ exemplarity upon himself. He writes poignantly and with his characteristic candor, “I am grateful for the beautiful example given to me by so many Christians who joyfully sacrifice their lives and their time. This witness comforts and sustains me in my own effort to overcome selfishness and to give more fully of myself” (*EG* §76). Later, Francis expresses concern for “those women who endure situations of exclusion, mistreatment and violence,” yet he commends how “even so, we constantly witness among them *impressive examples of daily heroism* in defending and protecting their vulnerable families” (*EG* §212, emphasis added).

There remains an exigency for exemplary persons in order to evangelize today. In the course of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis cites the homily given by Pope

Benedict XVI for the commencement of the Year of Faith, in which Benedict in turn quoted Blessed John Henry Newman as saying, “The Christian world is becoming sterile, and it is depleting itself like an overexploited ground, which transforms itself into a desert” (EG §86).³⁷ Francis cites his predecessor further, who went on to affirm that “in the desert people of faith are needed who, *by the example of their own lives*, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive” (EG §86, emphasis added).³⁸

Conclusion

The growing study of exemplars can teach us much about the life of Christian virtue. Exemplarism offers a rich treatment of the subject from which Catholic thinkers can draw. Exemplars provide an important venue for the harmony between faith and reason, offering powerful resources for Catholic theology, education, and evangelization. Grace can build upon nature as God increases what is possible for exemplars through the presence of Christ in their lives. Moreover, Scripture and the history of the Church recount how God is able to elevate even the most fallible people to the point of exemplarity if they will cooperate. Let us recall the wisdom of Blessed Pope Paul VI, whom Francis excerpted in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “This is the source of the Church’s heroic and impatient struggle for renewal: the struggle to correct those flaws introduced by her members which her own self-examination, *mirroring her exemplar*, Christ, points out to her and condemns” (EG §26, emphasis added).³⁹ As a Catholic educator, it is staggering to see how well students respond to relatable exemplars. Stories like those of St. Augustine, St. Ignatius of Loyola, or St. Thérèse of Lisieux enable them to experience exemplarity and inspire them along the same path of regular people toward profound virtue.



NOTES

1 Linda Zagzebski, “Exemplarist Virtue Theory” in *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 41 (Jan 2010), 41–57.

2 Linda Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 256.

3 Angela Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero: Courage, Manliness, and the Impersonal Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 60.

4 *Ibid.*, 65.

5 Nancy Sherman, “Character Development and Aristotelian Virtue” in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education (Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education)*, ed. David Carr and Jan Steutel (London: Routledge, 1999), 36.

6 Amy Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects: The Good Person is That (Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory)* (New York: Routledge, 2012). Zagzebski also refers to Olberding’s work in “Exemplarist Virtue Theory,” 53–54.

7 Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero*, 59.

8 Zagzebski does not mention Hobbs or speak of “role models”

9 Zagzebski, “Exemplarist Virtue Theory,” 54.

10 *Ibid.*, 41.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, 47. We should note that Zagzebski’s theory and analogy owes a debt to twentieth-century analytic philosophers Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam, who formed an epistemology concerning exemplary instances of what are known as “natural kinds” such as gold or water. Zagzebski took the leap to extend this epistemology to the realm of moral exemplars.

13 Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, 253.

14 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II q. 46, a. 3. Cited in Patrick M. Clark, “The Case for an Exemplarist Approach to Virtue in Catholic Moral Theology” in *Journal of Moral Theology*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2014): 54–82.

15 Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, 237.

16 Ibid., 232.

17 Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004) 234. Ratzinger suggests this statement as the closest meaning that follows from that “last Adam” in Paul. On the same page, Ratzinger goes on to argue, “But precisely because he is the exemplary, the authoritative man, he oversteps the bounds of humanity; only thus and only thereby is he the truly exemplary man.”

18 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics” in *Principles of Christian Morality*, with Heinz Schürmann and Joseph Ratzinger, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 79. Emphasis original.

19 Balthasar, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics,” 80.

20 See Benedict XVI, *Prayer* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2013), 236. The Philippians citation is taken from the Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV).

21 Ibid., 236. A compilation of Pope Benedict XVI’s addresses on the topic of prayer over the course of about a year, this particular citation comes from his General Audience on June 27, 2012.

22 David Bukenhofer alerted me to the exigency of this question via personal communication (Spring 2014).

23 Personal communication (1 March 2014).

24 I thank Professor Paul K. Moser of Loyola University Chicago for highlighting the importance of Kierkegaard for my discussion of exemplarism.

25 Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 238. Emphasis on “the prototype” original; emphasis on “imitator” added.

26 Ibid., 237.

27 Ibid., 241.

28 Ibid., 238.

29 Ibid., 241.

30 Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero*, 61.

31 Ibid., footnote on p.60.

32 Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis), *An Education for Choosing Life: Proposals for Difficult Times* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 35. Emphasis original.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 George Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 194.

36 Ibid.

37 The excerpt from Newman comes from his letter on 26 January 1833; see *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. III, ed. Ian Kerr and Thomas Gornall, S.J. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 204.

38 The homily by Benedict XVI is from 11 October 2012.

39 See Bl. Paul VI’s Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam Suam* (6 August 1964).



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