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Fundamental Theological Ethics 'In Exit': A New Moral Theology

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ARTS, HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Dr Carolina Montero Orphanopoulos contends that contemporary Catholic moral theology has become mired in combative debates around personal health choices and sexuality, losing sight of broader ethical challenges. She proposes a radical renewal through three key categories for progress: vulnerability, corporality, and recognition. Drawing on Pope Francis's vision of 'theology in exit' (the Church actively engaging with the world), she argues for a public-facing moral framework that addresses 21st-century crises such as climate change, artificial intelligence, and political fragmentation, while remaining grounded in traditional Catholic values.

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Society in Flux

The golden age of post-Vatican II moral theology was led by scholars such as Bernard Häring and Josef Fuchs. They emphasised a moral framework that was outward facing and flexible, grounded firmly in temporal, worldly affairs. They rejected the previous reliance on dogmatic, rigid frameworks. However, contemporary Catholic moral theology finds itself at a crossroads. After the promising developments following the 1962–65 Second Vatican Council (known as Vatican II), the discipline has become increasingly fragmented, trapped in polarized debates that limit its capacity to address the complex challenges of our time.

Dr Carolina Montero Orphanopoulos presents a compelling case for fundamental reform. Arguing that these laudable initiatives have given way to narrow focus areas that often miss the big picture, she highlights that while medical ethics, sexual morality, and family issues remain important, over focusing on these debates has constrained modern theologians' ability to offer holistic solutions to a rapidly increasing wave of global problems.

The arena of social justice, particularly through papal encyclicals (pastoral letters from the Pope) like *Laudato Si* (emphasising care for the environment) and *Fratelli Tutti* (emphasising cooperation in the wake of the COVID pandemic) represents one of the few areas maintaining consistent development within the theology of the Church.

Meanwhile, the world faces unprecedented challenges: artificial intelligence ethics, climate disruption, political polarization, and technological upheaval. The threat of humanity causing its own self destruction through the proliferation of nuclear weapons is also increasing. These pressing issues demand fresh theological responses that current moral theology frameworks struggle to provide.

A New Moral Framework: Five Key Ideas

Pope Francis's call for an outward-facing Church through *Teologia in uscita* is a paramount guiding principle to the framework Dr Montero Orphanopoulos outlines. This approach moves beyond self-referential academic debates to actively engage the public sphere, contributing to human dignity, ecological wellbeing, and social justice, and attempts to create a unified vision based on a renewal of tried and tested Catholic moral theology.

The framework rests on five essential requirements. The first is *Interdisciplinary Epistemology* – drawing on scholars like Edgar Morin and Wentzel van Huyssteen, the approach embraces complex thinking that acknowledges the fragile nature of human interconnectedness across social, cultural, and climatological phenomena. She argues that collaboration, and not competition, between theologians and scientists enriches understanding of these myriad global challenges.



The second involves the *development of new moral categories* – moving beyond traditional frameworks to integrate concepts like vulnerability, care, emotions, and responsibility. These categories emerge from lived human experience rather than abstract principles.

The third is the use of *significant language*. Theological ethics should not be mired in academic ecumenical debate, but should use simple, straightforward language that is easily understood and internalised by most people.

Fourth is in *having a genuine openness to emerging challenges*. Dr Montero Orphanopoulos argues that moral theology must address topics that the Church may have previously seen as uncomfortable, such as mass migration and LGBTQ+ rights.

The final proposed framework is the idea of *Christianity understanding it is one among many religions*. The Church recognising itself as only one meaningful option among many spiritual or humanist belief systems is integral to reaffirming the place of Catholicism in a postmodern world.

Three Core Categories

Dr Montero Orphanopoulos's most substantial contribution lies in articulating three essential categories for renewed theological ethics. She argues that the first should be **vulnerability**. By acknowledging natural human frailty, the concept of being vulnerable should be taken not as a weakness to be overcome, but a pathway to solidarity and care that enriches both carer and cared for.

The second contribution is the idea of **corporeality or embodiment**. She argues that the human experience cannot be understood through 'mind' alone, but that the physical body and its processes are integral to gain knowledge about the shared human experience. It is where biological, sociocultural, and sexual realities are played out. In contemporary times, the Church cannot ignore the role of the embodied human being in any theological discussion.

The third is **recognition**. This idea builds on philosophical traditions from Hegel through contemporary theorists like Axel Honneth, Miranda Fricker, and Nancy Fraser. Recognition affirms human dignity through simply acknowledging each other's identities, capabilities, and unique contributions. She argues that a failure to recognise individuals

(whether in terms of their identity, knowledge, or participation) leads to social harm and injustice.



Practical Applications

Dr Montero Orphanopoulos emphasizes that these categories should not be seen merely as theoretical constructs. Vulnerability-centred community programs addressing homelessness demonstrate how acknowledging fragility can cultivate networks of care and solidarity. Ecological ethics highlighting human impacts of environmental degradation showcase corporeality's intersection with justice. Finally, restorative justice initiatives illustrate recognition's central role in healing relationships and fostering a sense of shared human community.

Perhaps most significantly, the framework offers a path beyond the ideological entrenchment plaguing contemporary moral theology. Rather than aligning with progressive or conservative agendas, ethics centred on vulnerability, corporeality, and recognition could allow for a greater understanding of the dignity of all persons regardless of ideological stance.

Challenges and Future Directions

The research acknowledges significant challenges, particularly the tensions that may arise when universal ethical principles are applied in context-specific situations. Future research should explore the

dynamic interplay between these categories and their application across diverse sociocultural contexts.

The framework must also engage with critiques and alternative perspectives to ensure adaptability and relevance. Long-term studies on vulnerability-centred programs could provide empirical evidence for the transformative potential of the approach, especially with regards to rehabilitation. An investigation of corporeality's intersection with environmental ethics could illuminate pathways for addressing climate change.

Dr Montero Orphanopoulos' call is for the theological principles of the Catholic Church to reclaim a transformative role in addressing humanity's most pressing challenges. By moving away from academic debate for its own sake, she argues that the Church should engage in the concrete realities of our modern world. Insights from diverse disciplines should be thoroughly examined, and any public outreach attempts should be done in accessible language, easily understood by the average layperson. Any renewed theological approach should also not shy away from engaging with historically marginalised groups.

This vision positions theological ethics as a catalyst for real-world change, promoting human dignity, social justice, and environmental action. In our interconnected yet fragmented world, Dr Montero Orphanopoulos' renewed approach offers a potential path for how the Church could navigate the increasingly complex moral terrain of the 21st century.

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MEET THE RESEARCHER

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Dr Carolina Montero Orphanopoulos obtained her Bachelor in Theology from the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile in 2003. She then completed a Master in Bioethics and STL in Moral Theology from Pontifical University Comillas in Madrid in 2010 and 2011 respectively. She obtained her doctorate in Moral Theology in 2021, also from Pontifical University Comillas. Her doctoral thesis, *Vulnerability: Towards a More Humane Ethics*, was awarded the 2024 Centessimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation prize. By vocation and by training her theological and ethical reasoning and teaching are informed by dialogue with other disciplines (e.g. theology, bioethics, philosophy, and psychology). She is Director of the Interdisciplinary Institute of Philosophical and Theological Studies at the Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez, Santiago, Chile. She is also a member of the Editorial Board of the Revista Iberoamericana de Bioética, of the Centro Teológico Manuel Larraín (PUC – UAH) and of the global network CTEWC (Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church). Her current research interests include vulnerability theory, the ecclesial abuse crisis, ethics and emotions, and global bioethics.



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KEY COLLABORATORS

The University of Birmingham Fellowship Programme of Psychology Cross Training for Theologians (2023–2025)
<https://crosstrainingpsychologyandtheology.com/>



FURTHER READING

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