

THE IRONIC IMAGINATION
A Source for Christian moral life,
Contribution of William F. Lynch, S.J.

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Our present generation is in a constant conflicting situation of values, and thus the society is divided into groups. The very notion of diversity of values makes it difficult for moral discussion. This is not mere a political and economical problem but also moral and spiritual one. The response and reasoning of the morally conscious person depends on his/her moral outlook, who wants to be related to the world around and the values one holds. For the best moral response the believer's "world view" should be in line with that of Jesus Christ and His teachings found in the Gospels and in the Tradition of the Church.

The Person and the Message of Jesus of Nazareth is at the heart of our Christian faith, and there is an essential relationship between Christian faith and moral life. The moral life of the Christian is the existential expression of one's Christian faith. This claim depends on a rich and dynamic understanding of faith itself. It begins with the acknowledgement that the central focus of our Christian faith is our relationship with God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. The recognition of ourselves as existing in that relationship deeply affects our understanding of our selves. For Christians, personal moral life must become the living expression of the response to the gift of communion offered by God in Christ.

Humans come to know themselves and the world around through their senses and their intellect. Behind these both, there is the *primal*

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source, namely, the imagination. It combines both reason and emotion to maintain a constant relationship and balance in life. Therefore, imagination is an essential pre-requisite for a full appreciation of reality. Actually, it is in imagination that the past is remembered, the future possibilities are being projected and the present moment is lived with vigour and vitality. By virtue of the faculty of imagination, human beings are able to imitate, intuit, empathize and create a novel order in their lives. In fact, there is no activity of the human mind in which imagination does not enter in some degree. Imagination is always at work: from the extravagances of dreaming to the creation of an artist, from the posing of a hypothesis to the solution of a problem. Imagination is seen in every creative activity. It is this creative activity which prevents the human mind from becoming stagnant and the slave of habits.

In this context we need to refer to *God's imagination*, because it is the foundation for all existence. Man, as co-worker, takes part in this imagination of God. Divine imagination is wider than we could ever dream of; and it is closer and more loving than we dare hope. God's imagination is at work in every aspect of creation from the heart of the cosmos to the heart of the tiniest insect, and in the very core of our own being. The imagination is fully at play in the believer's existential longing for the experience of God.

In the Catholic tradition we come across ample evidences of the place given to the gift of Imagination. Theologians like Cardinal J. H. Newman, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan and many other contemporary theologians like, Philip Keane, Garrett Green, Richard Gula, Andrew Greely, etc., brought out a deeper awareness and experience of the mystery of incarnation of Jesus Christ by making use of imagination. So, the *Catholic Imagination* is a precious and unique gift to the humanity. But it is not easy to define the Catholic Imagination. It has to do with a wonderful capacity for seeing into, and beyond the mystery of what happens. It allows us first to experience what is presented to us and then to discover within it much more meaning than the basic phenomena would allow. It takes imagination to craft a new creation between the knowledge of head and intuition of the heart. Thus the imagination becomes the *inner source of human beings to live a Christian moral life*. If the realities of Self, Other and the World are rightly perceived in their depth, through the gift of imagination, living of a Christian life is already begun in the individual. Therefore, Lynch proposes that the realistic/ironic imagination as a source that which empowers the believers to live Christian life.

William F. Lynch (one of 20th C. leading Catholic theologians) is concerned about the existential problem of Christian living here and

now. For him the best way to live our Christian life is to meet the immediate human existence through the realistic imagination. The important thing in human life is that there should be a definite contact between human life and its finite existence. One who is keen about living a meaningful Christian moral life needs to undertake the complex exploration of the *existential facts* of human life through the operations of realistic imagination in one's own life.

The thesis "The Ironic Imagination: A Source for Christian moral life," is developed under five chapters. The first chapter, "The Ironic Nature of a Human Being," speaks of the Catholic tradition which gives utmost importance to the dignity of a human person. Catholic tradition strongly believes that to take the human person seriously is to take seriously the creator God, who became incarnate in the humanity of Jesus. "Being" and "doing" are closely related in Christian moral living.

The second chapter, "Ironic Imagination," explains the different components of Imagination under two sections: one, *the different nuances* of the term "imagination" that play an important role in its formation and functioning in the human person, and the particular significance of Catholic Imagination, Moral Imagination, Ironic Imagination, and Christic Imagination. Having reached the core meaning of imagination, focus is turned to William Lynch's development of Analogical imagination for Christian moral living. Second section illustrates how the *Christic imagination* functions in the Catholic tradition, and it discusses Lynch's development of Christology based on the Christic imagination. After having found the rich aspects of a profound source of ironic imagination, the view of the believer gets merged with *Christic view*. Thus, with the ironic imagination the believer can perceive (analogically) his/her self and other world realities from a Christic point of view: "*seeing everything through the eyes of Jesus.*"

The next three chapters focus on the *theological virtues* of love, faith and hope in a Christian's life. The third chapter focuses on the role of *Images of God* and the *Images of love* in Christian moral life. This chapter is divided into two main sections: *Images* in general, and *Images of love*. Christian life is a constant struggle to find the meaning of life amidst the different tensions and contraries. The fourth chapter, "Images of Faith," examines the faith of a believer, which is the foundation for Christian moral life. The Moral and the Christic Imagination form the right *Images of faith* to wrestle with the struggles of life. Here effort is made to understand what the Christian *faith and imagination*, and the irony of faith is. On the journey of understanding Christian faith, Lynch leads us to the point where *faith is being educated by Christ*. He ultimately identified Christian religious faith with Christ. Lynch's central argument is that first one must imagine (re-imagine) faith (Christ), and then, allow

faith (Christ) to imagine reality. Lynch calls this *imagining of reality by religious faith* the '*irony of Christ*' or '*the ironic Christic imagination*.' The fifth chapter "Images of Hope," is developed under two sections. In the first section the relationship between hope and imagination in general, and the power and functions of the realistic imagination are explored. The second section focuses on the *ironic character of hope*. In this chapter we explain hope's *interior movement* towards the exterior relationships with others and God.

The goal of this dissertation is to find out a *primal source to live Christian moral life*. For a Christian believer, God is not only the end point (something to be arrived at) but also the source and life here and now. In other words, our Christian vocation is to know God through His beloved Son Jesus Christ, and to take part in His death and resurrection, and to be led by the Holy Spirit. For this, the believer has to depend on the immanent source Faith/Ironic imagination. And this Faith/Ironic Imagination must be empowered by the spirit of the Risen Christ. Thus '*the Christic imagination*' becomes *a source* for the Christian moral living.