INTRODUCTION

In 1976 Walbert Bühlmann, Capuchin missionary to Tanzania and for many years professor of missiology in Freiburg, published a book, *The Coming of the Third Church*, in which he declared that we were in the middle of a process of change, “as a result of which the Church, at home in the Western world for almost 2000 years, will, in a short time, have shifted its center of gravity into the Third World, where its adherents will be much more numerous.” By whatever indices one chooses to gauge it, the third church is here. Consider this: Latin America alone is home to nearly half of the world’s Catholic population. And the Catholic Church in Africa is growing at an annual rate of over 3 percent. With church growth has come a flowering in vocations to the religious life and the priesthood. Today, the largest seminaries in the Christian world are in Africa. Many African churches have become missionary churches as well, with missionaries all over the world. From Europe to the United States, from Oceania to various parts of Africa, African Protestant church workers are crisscrossing the globe, founding new churches. The same applies to the African Catholic Church, whose members—religious and priests from various communities and dioceses in Africa—have fanned out into the entire world on mission.

Andrew F. Walls, the great Scottish missiologist, once noted that “the theological sector has not yet come to terms with the fundamental
shift in the center of gravity of the Christian world whereby the Southern continents have become the heartlands of the Christian faith.” Walls further contends that even where this shift is recognized as a fact, the implication that this requires something like “a Copernican revolution in theological discourse, is not recognized, and would certainly not be welcome.” The reality, however, is that “conditions in the various parts of the Third Church (or third world) are taking Christian theology into new areas of life where Western theology has no answers, because it has no questions.” Theologians from the first and second churches often seem to consider issues that are raised in and by the third church as quaint. Usually these issues are considered an “African thing” or an “Asian thing” or a “Latin American thing.” This situation needs to change as the world becomes more and more “a single place” and as the church is faced with more evidence of its catholicity.

The good news is that some change has started to take place on this front. The recent global biennial conferences (2008, 2010, 2012) of Catholic moral theologians and ethicists (under the banner of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church), initiated by James Keenan, S.J., and organized and sustained by an international planning committee, attest already to substantive theological contributions both to specific regional questions and to the church at large. This global movement is a laudable effort to bring Catholic moral theologians and ethicists to a shared conversation and a deeper awareness of one another’s questions.

AIM

As the title of this book suggests, we are engaged in this project with the linking of several conversations: African tradition in its various aspects, both religious and secular; African Christian theology; fundamental moral theology; and religious ethics (that is, an ethics broadly religious and cultural). Each of those conversations has a history, and so to link them means to give an account of how those histories have intersected in the past, why they are intersecting now in a special way, what the nature of their present intersections is, and why we should care about it and advance it. The book does this by posing and an-
swering two compelling questions: (1) Given the largely Eurocentric nature of Catholic moral theology thus far in the history of the church, what will it take to invest the rest of the church, especially the theological community, through sustained intellectual attention and solidarity, in the history and moral challenges of the church in other parts of the world, in this case Africa? (2) What is to be gained, for the whole church, were this to happen in a deep and lasting way?

To put it another way, Morality Truly Christian, Truly African: Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations seriously and, in the main, critically seeks to interrogate key foundational issues in elaborating a moral theology that adequately meets neuralgic issues in the African context in all its complexity and diversity. These issues include: (1) the meaning and function of tradition and culture, with emphasis on the ongoing encounters and contacts between Africans and Europeans from the fifteenth through the twenty-first centuries; (2) the encounter of African Traditional Religion and Christianity, with its missionary impulse; (3) the post–Vatican II permission, better, encouragement to inculturate the faith; (4) the relation (read: accountability) of “new” theologies to theology’s history as Catholic theology (vis-à-vis Thomas Aquinas or Augustine or Ambrose or the Clements); (5) the impact of political divisiveness in a shifting global political situation; and so on. Authentic ethical living is complex and compound, complex given all that human living entails, from the smallest decisions about food purchases (whether made in an outdoor market or in an air-conditioned supermarket) or voting (stuffing and stealing ballot boxes or counting and allotting ambiguous ballots to one candidate or another) or whom to marry and whether to marry. And as Richard McCormick remarked a long time ago, no one theologian or any other scholar has the competence, wisdom, or time to attempt to offer or even dare to attempt to provide answers to all the challenges that life is throwing at us these days. This is to say that the days of the moral manuals are definitely over, and for good. My hope is that theologizing in such an open way, as I try to do here in this book, will help to bring the church and the entire theological community into conversation about Christian ethics (moral theology) in the African context so that what goes on in that part of the Christian community will be of interest to all as a “Christian theological thing,” and not just as an “African thing.” I believe that what goes on in the
current African church and theology should be of great interest to the theological community elsewhere, given the potential of this emerging church and its current and growing impact on the rest of the church.

Here at the University of Notre Dame I have for a number of years led a doctoral seminar on African Christian theologies. During this period I have been struck by the need for a theologically comprehensive treatment of the section of Catholic moral theology which is often referred to as fundamental moral theology. African and the other parts of the “third church” have long been beneficiaries of theological insights from the older churches of the West. Today, people look to Africa for what it can offer the Christian world, for it does indeed have plenty to offer. However, Africa’s “goods” must also meet the test to which other “goods” from everywhere else have been subjected in order to make sure that they meet the demands of the gospel. The purpose of this book then is to show how we can do moral theology today, taking into account both the received Christian theological tradition and the African tradition(s) of morality, and by so doing contribute to the necessary engagement with African Christianity from the point of view of theological ethical discourse.

PLAN OF WORK

This book is concerned with the nature and bases of a Christian ethical discourse that is at once Christian and African. In its three parts, it is concerned strictly with the foundational aspects of moral theology/Christian theological ethics. The first part consists of chapter 1, in which I try to establish the subject matter of the book, provide a brief history of the development of African theology, and identify some of the important interlocutors and issues that will be addressed in the rest of the book. In part two, the second, third, and fourth chapters deal with the question of tradition, the response of African theologians to African tradition, and the Christian responses to the reality of non-Christian religions, all in that order. African theology is being done in a context where there is a living and thriving primal religion. This, as Kwame Bediako would point out, is a different situation from the reality of current Western Christian theology. Also, African tradition is closely bound to African religion in such a way that anyone who opens
his or her mouth to speak about one finds himself or herself in the territory of the other. It is thus necessary to address both aspects of this reality as we try to understand the matrix of African theology and the preoccupation of African theologians. The presence of Christianity in Africa in a context where African Traditional Religion is pervasive and the interest of Christianity in seeking converts from this context raises questions both about the African primal religions and about Christianity itself and its claims. This issue is addressed in chapter 4 of the book.

In part three, chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 build on the previous four chapters as they try to provide the foundational bases for engaging in an ethical discourse that is both Christian and African. In chapter 5 we digest the contributions of Bénézet Bujo to the search for foundations for African moral theology; while in chapter 6 we discuss the role God, or the idea of God, plays as the basis for moral discourse both in general and with particular reference to Africa. Chapter 7 is a discussion of the human person both as subject and moral actor in Christian ethics in Africa. In chapter 8 we take up the subject of moral reasoning in an African Christian theological ethics. The ninth and final chapter is a case study showing how the African church has tried to inculturate moral discourse on the continent. Here we take up the question implied in all our discussions so far of how individuals and the church can engage in ethical discourse and action in the African context. This chapter discusses how, through the Second African Synod and the postsynodal exhortation from this synod, the church has tried to identify some of the more significant moral concerns on the African continent and what its suggestions are concerning what moral actions are to be taken. Thus, although this book is primarily a project in fundamental ethics, its interest and scope go beyond the narrow confines of normative ethics in that its claims and assertions are based on extensive research into and discussions of some carefully chosen practical questions from the African world.