

CATHOLIC ETHICS IN TODAY'S WORLD

REVISED EDITION



Jozef D. Zalot and Benedict Guevin, OSB

ANSELM ACADEMIC

“This book engages college students on many levels. It explores philosophical and theological principles in Christian ethics and applies them to topics such as the economy, the death penalty, war and military activity, medical issues, and sexual ethics. The principles of Catholic Social Teaching provide a solid foundation for each topic. This well-researched and well-written book challenges students to grapple with the Catholic Church’s perspective and their own stances.”

—Dr. Elizabeth Willems, SSND, instructor of religious studies
Loyola University New Orleans

“Honest, accessible, and thorough: Catholic Ethics in Today’s World accomplishes a welcome but rare feat among current textbooks. Zalot and Guevin provide clear, accurate, and enthusiastic explorations of Catholic moral theology and social justice. Their examples involve realistic scenarios, and their willingness to incorporate the research and insight of their own undergraduate students only enhances the book’s accessibility. Those charged with teaching undergraduate ethics courses will appreciate Zalot and Guevin’s patient explanation of the theology behind the well-known moral perspectives. I have used the book since its publication in 2007 and remain impressed by the authors’ convictions and my students’ positive reactions.”

—Jeffrey Marlett, professor of religious studies
College of Saint Rose

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To Sue and Maria

—*Jozef D. Zalot*



To the Reverend Xavier Thévenot, SDB,
my thesis advisor in Paris and a great man.

—*Rev. Benedict Guevin, OSB*



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Introduction

WHAT DOES THE CATHOLIC CHURCH REALLY TEACH?

THIS QUESTION OFTEN COMES UP in college theology courses and Catholic faith formation programs. Many Catholic laity (the non-ordained) are genuinely interested in learning more about their faith and actively seek answers to their questions. Many in the general public also want to know what the Catholic Church teaches about the Bible, what it teaches as doctrine, and why it follows specific traditional practices. Most often, however, people ask questions related to ethics. As individuals, as a nation, and as a world community, we face many difficult and contentious ethical challenges. We contend with social issues such as the death penalty, just war, and corporate fraud. We deal with sexual issues such as premarital relations and birth control. We are challenged by advancements in the medical field including reproductive technology and care for the dying. Ethical dilemmas are often the most challenging matters of faith for Catholics and non-Catholics alike. That's why they are the focus of this text.

Many Catholics and non-Catholics are confused about what the Church teaches and believes, particularly in the area of ethics. There are a number of reasons for this confusion. One is that official magisterial¹ and bishops' conference statements that address ethical issues are generally written for scholars, not lay people. Thus, when lay people try to read these documents, they often walk away more confused than when they began.

A second reason for confusion is that the institutional Church generally does a poor job of articulating *what* it teaches, and an even worse job of explaining *why* it teaches what it does. Ask a random

group of students or parishioners what the Church teaches about justified war, the death penalty, or removal of the feeding tube from a comatose patient and you will likely encounter blank stares. Most Catholics and many others are aware that the Church opposes non-marital sexual relations and the use of artificial methods of birth control, but ask them why it holds these teachings and you will encounter even more blank stares. The problem here lies not necessarily with the Catholic pope and bishops who make up the Church's teaching authority, but with the Church's ministers (ordained and not) on the local level. If you are Catholic, when was the last time you heard a homily—the Church's primary teaching tool—or attended a parish educational program concerning an ethical issue? If you have, good for you and congratulations to the individual who offered it! For most, however, such opportunities are few and far between. Ordained clergy, in collaboration with their pastoral associates, have a duty to help parishioners understand what their Church teaches concerning important ethical challenges, as well as why it teaches what it does. To the extent that this is not done, Catholic ethical teachings will remain the Church's "best kept secret."²

A third reason for confusion concerns the Church's theologians. Most people hear about Catholic theologians, particularly moral theologians, only when these individuals publicly dissent from official Church teaching. When this occurs, the media jump all over it and, not being theologians themselves, often misrepresent the real points of contention, thus causing more confusion. And some theologians who do address ethics spend more time critiquing Church teachings than explaining them. Now critique is not a bad thing; in fact, it is good that people question official Church teaching. Respectful, critical dialogue is essential to the ongoing tradition of the Church. The problem is that even when this critical questioning is done respectfully, it can become a source of confusion if the rationale behind the official teaching is not clearly explained and distinguished from the author's critique.

A final issue concerns those responsible for educating others in faith: elementary and secondary school teachers, pastoral associates, and even college professors. Sometimes educators are not well trained in Catholic ethics. As a result they misinterpret Church teachings, and students and parishioners receive mixed messages, leading to even more confusion.

This book is aimed at dispelling such confusion. In the chapters that follow, we attempt to offer a clear, detailed examination of not only what the Church teaches on a range of challenging ethical issues, but also why it teaches what it does. We seek to demonstrate that the Catholic Church actively addresses many of the social, sexual, and medical challenges that we face today, and in doing so offers specific principles to help form our consciences. By explaining what the Church teaches and why, we hope to offer some practical suggestions for how all people, Catholic and not, can live a moral life in the world today.

Some may feel that this book's approach to Church teachings is uncritical, too close to the magisterium to be used effectively in an academic or even pastoral setting. But that misses the point. By offering in this text a baseline, a clear presentation of what the Catholic Church teaches on particular issues, we hope that people will be able to evaluate the teaching on its own merits and in light of the critique of others. We recognize that faithful Catholics can disagree; in fact, even the authors do not completely agree on every topic addressed! Critical dialogue contributes to the health of the Church and society. To that end, we encourage readers to read our book and then seek out other sources to gain further insight and different perspectives from those presented here. Our text is intended to be a starting point for reflection on contemporary ethical challenges from a Catholic perspective, and not the final word.

STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

This second edition of *Catholic Ethics in Today's World* is similar to the first edition in terms of format, but we have rewritten a number of the chapters for clarity and have added material to reflect recent developments. The first three chapters are foundational. Chapter 1 focuses on what moral theology is and why Christian faith provides a strong foundation for living a moral life. New to this chapter are discussions of natural law and virtue as sources for Catholic theological reflection. In chapter 2 we speak about the moral act and how we need to form our consciences in truth. Chapter 3 provides a historical overview of Catholic Social Teaching and explains the moral principles it upholds.

The remaining chapters focus on specific topics. Chapter 4 focuses on economic ethics by applying the principles of Catholic Social Teaching to the American corporate world. New to this chapter is discussion of some of the factors that conspired to cause our nation's recent recession. Chapter 5 also addresses economic ethics by focusing on the effects that Western-imposed debt repayment and structural adjustment programs have had on the people of sub-Saharan Africa. The next two chapters discuss the direct taking of human life. Chapter 6 offers an overview of the death penalty in the United States and then explores the morality of capital punishment from both philosophical and theological perspectives. Chapter 7 deals with the issue of justified war by first examining the Church's traditional teachings on peace, and then detailing the specific moral principles that must be upheld in any decision to go to war, with a particular focus on Iraq and Afghanistan. Chapters 8 and 9 explore issues in medical ethics. In chapter 8 we identify the moral principles at the heart of the patient-professional relationship, and then explore three issues concerning the beginning of human life: the status of the embryo, reproductive technology, and embryonic stem cell research. In chapter 9 we focus on end-of-life issues, including the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means of care, euthanasia/physician-assisted suicide, and the removal of feeding tubes from patients in a persistent vegetative state. Finally, in chapter 10 we tackle sexual ethics by discussing the virtue of chastity, and then examining the morality of extramarital relations, contraception, and homosexuality.

ENDNOTES

1. The magisterium, which consists of the pope working in collaboration with the bishops of the world, is the official teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church. In terms of morality, the magisterium is charged with interpreting God's revelation in light of the many ethical challenges people face and then formulating authoritative responses to them. We will speak more of the magisterium in chapter 2.
2. Edward P. DeBerri, James E. Hug, Peter J. Henriot, and Michael J. Schultheis, *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, 4th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003). The book introduces readers to Catholic Social Teaching and provides an overview of nineteenth- and twentieth-century papal and bishops' conference documents.

1

PART

Foundations

The Foundations of Christian Morality

You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.

— MICAH 6:8

TO SPEAK INTELLIGENTLY about the many ethical issues we face today, it is important to have a basic familiarity with the foundations of Christian morality. In this chapter we introduce the reader to some of the basic terminology that we will use in this text, and demonstrate some of the main sources of moral reflection. While not exhaustive, this introduction should provide a baseline for understanding what Christian morality is and how one may use it to respond to the many moral challenges one faces in life. We begin by explaining what morality is and why one should study it. We then explain the difference between moral philosophy and moral theology. Finally, we speak to the uniqueness of Christian morality by demonstrating how it is shaped by Scripture, the natural law, virtues, and a Christian understanding of the good.

WHAT IS MORALITY?

The first step in any study of Christian morality is to understand what is meant by the terms *morality* and *ethics*. Most people use these terms interchangeably, but they mean different things. *Morality* refers to the standards or norms that an individual or group holds concerning good and evil, what constitutes right and wrong behavior.

It concerns the basic moral principles that are considered beneficial for society. *Ethics* is the inquiry into, or the investigation of, the subject matter of morality, or the study of how we are to act in morally good ways. Ethics is the discipline that critically examines the moral standards or norms held by a particular society, and then applies these standards or norms (assuming they are reasonable) to life. The goal of ethics is to develop a body of moral standards on which we can draw to help us respond to the many moral challenges we face.¹

While morality refers to the standards or norms held by a particular group of people, it is not static. Different cultures have different standards or norms of acceptable behavior as do different religious traditions, social classes, and age groups. It should come as no surprise that the morality of the generation that lived through World War II is very different from that of “Generation X.”

It is important to note that individuals regularly belong to more than one group and thus they are influenced by more than one set of moral standards. For example, Rachel is an 18 year old American Catholic who is pressured by her friends to try illegal drugs. Her culture teaches that she can take whatever drug she wants as long as she does not hurt herself or anyone else. Her community maintains that drug use is illegal; however, its punishment for first-time offenders is relatively light. Her Church teaches that drug use is immoral because it is harmful to her body, a body that has been given and entrusted to her by God. Given this diversity, on which “morality” does Rachel draw when making her decision about trying illegal drugs? Which does she choose when the various groups to which she belongs have different standards concerning right and wrong, moral and immoral behavior?

As previously stated, ethics is the discipline that applies moral principles to specific decisions we must make. When faced with an important ethical decision, we may draw from the generally accepted moral principles of our church, family, community, culture, and more to help us decide how to act. These principles inform us regarding what is expected of us and offer us guidelines for action. Ethics responds to the question, what should I do? by identifying the relevant moral principles at stake and then helping us apply them to the specific decision we must make.

In theory, ethical reflection is a fairly straightforward endeavor, but in practice it often is not. Sometimes generally accepted moral principles do not clearly apply to the situation in question, or there may be competing moral principles at work. Our situation with Rachel illustrates this well. In making her decision about whether to try illegal drugs, Rachel first draws upon the moral standards held by her different groups. Following this, she asks, “How do the various moral principles apply, or not apply, to the specific decision I must make?” Here Rachel must critically evaluate the various principles before her and use them to help her come to a decision about how she will act. Now from the Catholic perspective her Church holds a privileged position and so hopes that Rachel will draw more heavily from its moral principles than from those of her community and culture. However, even if Rachel does draw more heavily from the moral standards of her Church, ethics is not an exact science and does not always yield black and white answers. Ethics often involves gray areas and, in fact, well-intentioned people can disagree as to what constitutes an appropriate ethical response to a particular moral dilemma. While in this particular case the Church’s position is unambiguous—don’t take the drugs—sometimes the Church’s moral teachings do not provide clear responses to a particular moral dilemma. We will deal with a number of such dilemmas throughout this text.

Before we conclude this section, we want to briefly mention four important points that must be kept in mind within any discussion of morality. The first concerns personal responsibility. Too often today we hear people saying, “It’s not my fault that this happened!” “Yes officer, I crashed my car into that tree but it wasn’t my fault. The bartender should have stopped serving me drinks.” Such excuses may sound trite, but we hear variations of them every day. Personal responsibility means that it was not the bartender’s or anyone else’s fault that I did something wrong. Personal responsibility means that I am ultimately accountable for my actions. As long as I perform the act with full knowledge and freedom (an act of the will), responsibility for it lies with me.

The second point is that morality is “housed” in the human will. Morality implies choices, the choices we make each day to do good or evil. Humans have free will—although some philosophers and social scientists try to dispute this. We have the ability to freely

choose what we do and do not do. We are not forced to act in specific ways; in fact if we did not have free will we could never be held morally responsible for our actions. Thus, morality is inextricably related to our ability to make free choices.

Third, our moral actions or decisions have consequences. When we perform an action we set into motion a chain of events that would not have happened had we not chosen to act. For example, if I decide to have sexual relations with someone I just met at a party, what are the possible consequences? As a Christian, the next morning I will probably feel guilty for having violated the Sixth Commandment as well as for having used the other person as an object of my sexual gratification. Other consequences may come to light later, such as an unwanted pregnancy, a sexually transmitted disease, a reputation for being promiscuous, or feelings of alienation or depression. The point is that things happen as a result of the moral decisions we make. The consequences of our actions can be profound or minute, they can be foreseen or not. Typically the more serious the action, the more serious the consequences.

Finally, morality has a communal dimension. This means that in addition to affecting ourselves, our moral decisions often have profound effects on others. An extreme example of this is the 9/11 hijackers. For the hijackers themselves the personal consequences of their actions came to an abrupt end on September 11, 2001, when their airplanes hit the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in western Pennsylvania. However, millions of people around the world continue to experience the consequences of the hijackers' decisions. For example, more than three thousand people died that day, the families of those killed were forced to live with the loss of loved ones, the governments of Afghanistan and Iraq were toppled, and the war on terrorism continues in various locations around the world. The point is that our moral decisions have consequences that affect not only our own lives, but the lives of many others as well.

Thus far we have been speaking about morality in general. However, because this is a Christian ethics text, the question we must now address is what difference, if any, does faith make in living a moral life? We will begin to answer this question by distinguishing between moral philosophy and moral theology.

MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND MORAL THEOLOGY

Philosopher Louis Pojman defines moral philosophy as a systematic endeavor to understand moral concepts and to justify moral principles and theories. It analyzes concepts such as “right,” “wrong,” “permissible,” “ought,” “good,” and “evil,” each within its moral context. Moral philosophy investigates which values and virtues are central for the overall good of society, and seeks to establish principles of right behavior that act as moral guides for both individuals and groups.² From the philosophical perspective, the foundation of morality is human reason. Human reason refers to our capacity to acquire intellectual knowledge, to contemplate or critically evaluate decisions, to foresee possible consequences of our actions, and to formulate particular judgments and conclusions. Most people possess the capacity to reason and thus have the ability to engage in moral reflection and discern varying levels of moral truth.

One must keep in mind that, in its strictest sense, moral philosophy has no reference to God. The reason is fairly simple: moral philosophy is primarily concerned with what our capacity to reason tells us is right and wrong. Because one cannot prove through reason that God exists, one cannot appeal to God as a source of moral knowledge. In making this point, however, we should clarify that not every moral philosopher rejects the existence of God. Many do not.

Moral theology is somewhat different. *Theology* is made up of the Greek roots “theo,” which refers to God, and “logy,” which means “speaking of” or “the study of” a particular subject. Theology, therefore, means “speaking of” or “the study of” God and what God has revealed to humanity. Moral theology is a sub-category of theology and refers to the study of what God reveals to humanity about how to live a moral life. A common misconception about moral theology is that it has no place for moral philosophy. Some Christian denominations hold that because of Adam’s sin (the Fall), humanity is so completely corrupt that we cannot know any moral truth through our capacity to reason. Catholic moral theology rejects this claim. While it affirms that humanity is wounded as a result of its sinfulness, it does not view humanity as completely corrupt. In light of this, the Church holds that some moral truth can be known through

reason apart from religious faith. In fact, as we will see in chapter 2, Catholic moral theology incorporates human reason as an essential element in the formation of conscience.

The primary source of moral knowledge for Christianity as a whole, however, is divine revelation. *Divine revelation* refers to the truth that Christians believe God has revealed to human beings and wants them to know. From the Catholic perspective, divine revelation comes in two forms: Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. This brings up a distinction between the various Christian churches: while all Christian denominations hold that God reveals divine truth through Scripture, some hold that God reveals truth only by this means. The Catholic Church, along with the Eastern Orthodox and many Protestant churches, does not hold this position. The Catholic Church teaches that God did not stop revealing truth with the “closing” of the Scriptures in the year 380. Rather, God’s revelation continues to this day, as evidenced by the fact that many truths, although finding their basis in and always consistent with Scripture, are not specifically found in Scripture. The Church calls this ongoing revelation *Tradition*.

In regard to moral theology, divine revelation specifically refers to what God teaches about ethical human behavior. Through faith, one recognizes God’s revelation in Scripture and Tradition, believes in it, and seeks to act in accord with that revelation in one’s life. Here we see the relationship between faith and reason: Catholic moral theology holds that faith always informs reason. We use our capacity to reason in making moral decisions, but our reason is always informed by the truth that God has revealed. The Church’s often-used phrase, “Reason informed by faith” captures this relationship perfectly, as does Saint Anselm’s dictum, “Faith seeking understanding.” Pope John Paul II summarized this relationship by describing moral theology as “a science which accepts and examines Divine Revelation while at the same time responding to the demands of human reason.”³

Some clarification is in order here. Moral theology is a generic term that does not refer to any specific tradition or form of religious expression. A Christian is one who confesses that Jesus Christ is the Word of God who became a human being, lived among us, taught us, redeemed us through his suffering and death, rose from the

dead, and will ultimately return to judge us. Moral theology from the Christian perspective, therefore, refers to how one's faith in Jesus Christ influences the way one lives. However, not all people are Christians. There are Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and the list goes on and on. For Jews, moral theology derives from the study of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Talmud, by which one learns the way to live as God intended. For Muslims, moral theology refers to how one's faith in Allah (God) as expressed through Allah's revelation to Muhammad in the Koran influences how to live. The point here is that the study of moral theology is not limited to Christians; people from other faith traditions also study it within their own contexts. Nevertheless, Christian—and in particular, Catholic—moral theology is the primary focus of this text.

DISTINCTIVENESS OF CHRISTIAN MORAL THEOLOGY

What makes Christian moral theology different from that of other faith traditions? In this section we identify four sources that distinguish Christian moral theology. These sources are Scripture, the natural law, the Christian understanding of virtues, and the Christian notion of the good.

Scripture

Unique to Christian moral theology is its founding in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Christianity teaches that Christ came into the world, in part, to teach people how to live a moral life. Jesus was Jewish, and was influenced by the moral teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures. So we will begin by briefly looking at some of what the Hebrew Scriptures teach about ethical human behavior.

The most important and best-known moral teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Ten Commandments. In the book of Exodus, God delivers the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt and enters into a covenant with them, promising that they will be his “special possession” as long as they remain faithful to him (Exod. 19:3–8). As the sign of what is expected of them in this covenantal

relationship, God gives them the Ten Commandments (20:1–17). The first three focus on the peoples' relationship with God:

1. I am the Lord your God. . . . You shall not have other gods besides me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain.
3. Keep holy the Sabbath day.

These first three commandments remind the Israelites—and Christians—that God is God. At the time the commandments were given, the Israelites were living among peoples who worshipped pagan idols and they needed to be reminded to offer unwavering faith and obedience to God. This remains the Christian message today, that contrary to popular culture's insistence on the importance of wealth, power, good looks, or material possessions, God must always remain the primary focus of our lives.

The remaining Commandments deal with the Israelites' relationships with one another:

4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's possessions.

These Commandments, as well as the subsequent "Covenant Code" laid out in Exodus, reflect God's great concern for the overall well-being of the Israelite people. These Commandments deal with how the people are to live together as members of the Covenant Community. They place a high value on human life and are applicable to all members of society, no matter what one's position in it.⁴ These commandments, given to the Israelite people more than three thousand years ago, are just as relevant for the world today. Simply turn on the television and you will see murder, sexual transgression, theft, lying, covetousness, and a general lack of respect for parents and those in

positions of authority. The Ten Commandments in themselves do not respond to every moral dilemma one might face; however, they do provide a starting point for moral reflection and a foundation for living a moral life. It is no coincidence that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Part Three: Life in Christ,” uses the Ten Commandments as the outline for its extended discussion of morality.⁵

The book of Deuteronomy describes in detail the Israelite people’s moral duties toward both God and one another. After recalling the Covenant and restating the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:1–21), Deuteronomy proceeds to extended discussions of specific moral (and other) issues. For example, it warns against giving in to the lure of riches (8:17–20). It explains how people should tithe their possessions in gratefulness to God and forgive the monetary debts owed by others (14:22–29 and 15:1–11). It further demands that one not defraud or exact onerous pledges, but treat all people fairly in business dealings (24:10–15 and 25:13–16).

Although the basic teachings of Exodus and Deuteronomy are similar, the tone of Deuteronomy is somewhat different in that it focuses much more on love. The Israelite people are called to act morally not simply out of obedience to God, but as a positive response to God’s love for them. This theme is exemplified in Deuteronomy 6:4–5: “Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, *you shall love the Lord your God* with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (emphasis added). The understanding within Deuteronomy is that God does not give moral laws simply for the sake of giving moral laws. God gives these laws because, as the people’s God, he knows what is in their best interests. In other words, it is for both their individual and communal good that the people abide by the rules of conduct that God has proclaimed. Thus for Deuteronomy, following moral rules is not a form of legalism, it is the people’s proper response to the love that God continually offers to them.⁶

This theme of love so evident in the book of Deuteronomy also serves as the foundation for Jesus’ moral teachings in the Christian Scriptures. When asked which is the greatest of the commandments, Jesus responds: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–39).⁷ By quoting the first

part of this teaching from the book of Deuteronomy, Jesus upholds the moral teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus reminds the crowds that he did not come to abolish the Law of Moses but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17–18). By restating the Hebrew Scripture obligation to love God and commit oneself completely to him, Jesus reemphasizes the importance of both covenant membership and living lives worthy of what the covenant entails.

The second part of Jesus' teaching, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," also has roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. These same words are found within the Holiness Code of the book of Leviticus (19:18) where the Israelite people are again being instructed about living in relationship with one another. Jesus uses this exhortation from Leviticus to help explain the "Great Commandment" and then throughout the rest of the Gospels offers examples of how one can embody it in one's life. For example, when people press him as to exactly who is the neighbor they ought to love, Jesus teaches them the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). In the Sermon on the Mount, he teaches his followers to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44; see also Luke 6:26–36). At the Last Supper, he demonstrates his love through his extended prayer for his disciples (John 14:15–21 and 17:1–26) as well as the washing of their feet (John 13:1–17). The question is, what does Jesus mean when he says we are to love one another? In the Christian sense, love means consistently willing the good of the other. If we truly love our neighbor we will their good in every circumstance—just as we will the good of ourselves—and do whatever we can to help them achieve it. This understanding of love is so important to Jesus' overall message that Saint Paul reiterates it:

Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law [of Moses]. The Commandments . . . are summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law. (Rom. 13:8–10)⁸

A second great theme of Jesus' moral teaching is his compassion for the poor and powerless. Throughout the Gospels we see Jesus

ministering to, and even socializing with, those whom the community rejects. He focuses his greatest attention on lepers, tax collectors, people possessed by demons, and even prostitutes, all to the consternation of the religious authorities. Here Jesus is teaching that the Kingdom of God is open to all people, and that we have a moral duty to love *all* our brothers and sisters by doing what we can to help them in their need. Perhaps the most striking example of this teaching is found in Matthew 25:31–46. In this account of the Last Judgment, Jesus informs the “sheep” that they will enter the Kingdom of Heaven because they fed Jesus when he was hungry, gave him drink when he was thirsty, clothed him when he was naked, welcomed him when he was a stranger, cared for him when he was ill, and visited him when he was in prison. When these people ask when they did these things, Jesus replies, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” Conversely, the “goats” are sent off to eternal punishment because they did not feed, offer drink to, clothe, welcome, care for, or visit Jesus in his time of need. When these people ask him when they failed to do these things, Jesus responds, “What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.”

In addition to these general themes of love and compassion, Jesus offers specific ways that one can strive to live a better moral life. In the Beatitudes of Matthew’s Gospel (5:3–12), he teaches, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Contrary to popular belief, this Beatitude does not praise those who have little faith. Jesus here is speaking about those who recognize their complete dependence on God, those who realize that everything they have comes from God. These people are grateful to God for what they have been given and in turn are willing to share their gifts with others in need.⁹ Further beatitudes are also important for living a Christian moral life. Followers of Christ are “blessed” when they are meek (humble), when they hunger and thirst for justice, when they show mercy to others, when they are clean of heart, and when they act as peacemakers in the world. As with the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes do not offer practical, concrete suggestions for how one is to act in specific situations, but they do represent virtues that all Christians are called to emulate in their lives.¹⁰

Natural Law

In addition to Sacred Scripture, Christian—and in particular Catholic—moral theology draws from a second source in its moral reasoning, the natural law. The natural law is defined as the rational person's participation in the eternal law. What exactly does this mean? Briefly, the eternal law is the law of God. It is the law by which creation is ordered and by which all things are directed toward their ultimate end. As such, the eternal law is understood as the first law and source of all other laws. Now humans cannot know the eternal law for the simple reason that humans are not God. Yet, in order that we can “know” some measure of good, God wills that people understand certain aspects of this law and apply it in their lives. God reveals these aspects through the human capacity to reason. This is the natural law. Natural law is human participation in God's eternal law through reason, or the law written on the human heart by God (Rom. 2:14–15). According to Catholic moral theology, the purpose of the natural law is to enable people to recognize the good they must do in their lives, as well as the evil they must avoid. It is important to note that the natural law is “knowable” to all people. Because God reveals this law through the human capacity to reason, one need not have religious faith to understand it. All people, atheists included, are bound by the natural law.¹¹

When speaking of the natural law, it is important to clarify that it pertains only to human beings. The reason for this is fairly simple: humans are the only creatures who possess the capacity to reason, the only creatures that are rational. Sub-rational creatures do participate in the natural law, but only to the extent that they follow the laws of their own natures. Simply put, dogs do what they do because they are dogs; plants do what they do because they are plants. They cannot reflect on what it means to be a dog or a plant, nor can they consciously follow norms that have to do with being a dog or a plant. They are guided either by instinct or by the natural processes that are part of their nature.

Humans are different. As rational creatures we are able to reflect on what it means to be human, as well as on those actions that either enhance our humanity or diminish it. This ability to reflect, and to reflect critically, has important implications for living a moral life.

All humans know through reason that certain goods must be pursued if one is to be fully human. In fact, classical natural law theory specifies four basic goods that are self-evident to rational creatures. The first is life itself. Our capacity to reason informs us that life is a good—for without it we could speak of no other goods—and we must always protect and promote it. Actions that threaten life, such as alcohol and drug abuse, or actions that take human life (particularly innocent life), are contrary to this good and thus constitute evils that one must avoid. A second good is the procreation and rearing of children. Reason informs us that bringing forth new life and nurturing it within the context of family is beneficial not only for children themselves, but also for society as a whole. Abusing or neglecting those entrusted to our care is contrary to this good and is an evil that must be avoided. The third good is living in society, which entails respecting the dignity of others and striving for equity in one's relations with them. Engaging in unjust, illegal, or corrosive social activities is contrary to this good and again is an evil that one must avoid. The fourth good is truth. Reason informs us that we should be open to truth in all its forms and we should seek it with honesty and integrity. Striving to amass power or wealth at the expense of truth is contrary to this good and likewise constitutes an evil that one must always avoid.

The overall point is that through reason a person recognizes the need to uphold these basic goods regardless of time, place, or culture. When people pursue them they act in accord with the natural law; when they neglect or act contrary to them they diminish what it means to be human. The Church historically has employed the natural law as the basis for many of its ethical teachings, and understanding it is vital for any study of Catholic moral theology.

Virtues

A third distinctive element in Christian moral theology is its understanding of the virtues. Often discussions about ethics focus on actions: “What should I *do* in this particular situation?” Focusing on actions—the “ethic of doing”—is an important aspect of moral reflection, but it is only half the equation. The other, and perhaps more important, half concerns character, the “ethic of being,” which

focuses on the *kind of person* one is.¹² Just about everyone would say that Mother Teresa was a good person. We say this because we know about the good she did for the poor of Calcutta as well as others around the world. Adolph Hitler, on the other hand, was not such a good person. We say this because we know that he was responsible (directly or indirectly) for the deaths of millions of people during the 1930s and 1940s. The question one must ask oneself is, what kind of person do I want to be? Do I want to be known as a person of good moral character, or something else? One's moral decisions play an important role in answering these questions and, as we will see in a moment, there is an essential relationship between the choices one makes and the kind of person one is.

So how does one go about making good moral choices that, in turn, makes for a person of good moral character? The answer lies in the virtues. A virtue is a disposition of the will by which an individual willingly and consistently chooses to act in a morally good way. Virtues are ongoing patterns of moral behavior that develop (people are not born with them) through our free and intentional choices. For example, one develops the virtue of honesty by freely choosing to always tell the truth. One develops the virtue of justice by consistently rendering to others their due. By willingly and consistently making good moral choices, one develops the virtues that help one become a person of good moral character.

It is precisely here that we recognize the importance of virtues for the moral life. Virtues are important because there is an essential relationship between the choices one makes (ethic of doing) and the kind of person one is or is seeking to become (ethic of being). In order to be a person of good moral character one must make consistently good moral choices and, generally speaking, in order to make consistently good moral choices one must be a person of good moral character. Again, the example of Mother Teresa illustrates this point well. Mother Teresa developed good moral character through the many good moral choices that she made throughout her life. Therefore, when faced with an important ethical decision—and she faced many—she possessed the type of character that more readily allowed her to make the correct moral decision. Each correct moral decision, in turn, then aided her in further developing her good moral character.¹³ Now Mother Teresa

is not unique here; think of any person in your life who is of good moral character and you will recognize the same relationship at work. In short, the virtues serve as the foundation for consistent responses to the many moral decisions people face in their lives, and define who they are as persons.

So what are the virtues and how does one apply them to moral decision-making? Virtues can be understood both philosophically and theologically. The moral (or human) virtues are those that can be known philosophically through reason; thus they can be developed and practiced by all people no matter what their faith tradition—if any at all. Prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance are the primary or cardinal virtues, the ones on which all others “hinge” (this is what the word *cardinal* means). Thus any moral virtue that one cultivates falls under one of these four main categories. Prudence is the virtue that disposes one to discern the good, to choose the correct means of achieving this good, and then to act in accord with this discernment. This virtue is often defined as practical wisdom or “right reason in action.” Justice is the virtue that disposes one to render to each person what is due to them. This virtue helps one to consistently act in ways that nourish right relations with others, for example by respecting others’ rights and establishing peace and harmony in relationships with them. Fortitude connotes strength, so it is the virtue that enables one to face difficulties well. This virtue ensures consistency in the pursuit of the good and it enables one to overcome obstacles to living a moral life. Finally, temperance is the virtue of self-control. It is the virtue that inclines one to enjoy pleasures in reasonable and moderate ways, and it provides balance in the use of created goods.¹⁴

OK, so if all people can understand prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance through reason, what is different about Christian moral theology? Christianity responds by stating that in order to live a moral life one needs to cultivate not only the moral (human, philosophical) virtues, but the theological virtues as well. The theological virtues relate directly to God, are infused into the souls of believers by God, and are revealed through faith. In fact, the first theological virtue is faith. Faith is the virtue by which one believes in God and believes all that God has revealed. It is the virtue by which the Christian professes belief, bears witness to it, and shares it with others. In terms

of the moral life, faith is important because through it one believes what God has revealed about correct or ethical behavior. As stated earlier, Catholicism maintains that moral truth is revealed through both Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. Faith is the virtue by which one understands this truth and confidently acts in accord with it throughout one's life.¹⁵

The second theological virtue is hope. Hope is the virtue by which one desires to live in full communion with God in heaven, and places one's full trust in the promises of Christ. It is the virtue that "inclines us to yearn for union with God,"¹⁶ because God is one's true destiny and source of ultimate fulfillment. In terms of the moral life, it inspires and purifies one's activities and orders them toward God's kingdom. It also protects one from discouragement or disillusionment during times of difficulty, and it sustains one when one feels abandoned. Although the *Catechism* does not specifically state it, hope can also be understood as the belief that one's good works can positively influence the temporal order, that one can make the world a better place. Now one may not always recognize the immediate benefit of these good works, but through hope one can be confident that these works are part of God's overall plan and will come to fruition in God's own time.¹⁷

The final theological virtue is charity (love). Charity is the virtue by which one loves God above all things and loves one's neighbor as oneself. It is the virtue that animates and inspires the other virtues, binds them together "in perfect harmony," and is the "source and goal" of Christian practice.¹⁸ What it means to love both God and neighbor has already been discussed, and will not be repeated here. But the virtue of love is crucial to living a Christian moral life because it calls one to act differently from the world. Those who truly love God and neighbor recognize that all people are created in God's image and seek to uphold the common good of society as a whole.

Overall, Christianity maintains that the theological virtues constitute the foundation of morality. One cannot be a Christian or live as God wishes without knowledge and practice of them. They are essential for one's ongoing efforts to do good and avoid evil. In the final part of this section we consider the Christian understanding of the good and what this understanding means for living a moral life.

The Good

The primary goal of any moral system, whether philosophical or theological, is discerning the good. For Christians, the good is God, understood as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Anything in the created order that is deemed good is good only in relation to God, or as a reflection or mediation of God's own goodness. Stated differently, goodness is not an attribute or characteristic of God, God *is* goodness. God is good in God's own self and all goodness existing in creation has its origin and ultimate fulfillment in God. In practical terms, this means that the good one does in one's life is really not of oneself, but is a reflection of the goodness that is God.¹⁹

At this point you may be wondering what we are talking about and why it is important. From the Christian perspective, God offers each person the unconditional gift of God's goodness (we can also call this *love* or *grace*). One of the great truths—and challenges!—Christianity holds is that, whether one is Christian or not, God loves all people equally and unconditionally. God wants nothing more from each person than to accept him and ultimately exist in full communion with him for all eternity. Thus, God continually offers his gifts of goodness, love, and grace to all people no matter what they believe or what they may have done in their lives. However, God also gives humanity the gift of free will. God does not force people to accept this goodness; they can accept or reject it. When one accepts this goodness and acts accordingly, it is reflected through that person's actions for all to see. Take the example of Mother Teresa once again. Mother Teresa dedicated her life to providing material and spiritual comfort to the destitute of Calcutta and was known around the world for her charity. However, Christianity teaches that Mother Teresa was not good in and of herself. The work she did with the poor, as well as the affect this work had on others, was really a reflection of the goodness that God had offered to her. She experienced God's goodness, committed herself to acting upon it, and through her many charitable acts provided a model of true Christian living for millions of people around the world.

However, there is always the other side of the story. Just because God offers the gift of his own goodness, it does not mean that people will always act in morally good ways. The reason for this is, once

again, free will. One always has the opportunity to reject God's goodness and act in ways that are contrary to what God intends. Take, once again, the example of Adolph Hitler. Christianity teaches that God offered Hitler the gift of God's own goodness. God wanted nothing more of Hitler than for him to accept God. However, Hitler used his free will to reject God and God's goodness. He recognized some other "good" in his life and he chose to pursue that instead. This rejection of God and God's goodness is what Christianity terms "evil." Evil, in the theological sense, is the absence of good. It is the rejection of what God has revealed to be good; it is the rejection of God.

Mother Teresa and Adolph Hitler would seem to demonstrate extreme examples of accepting or rejecting God's goodness, but Christianity recognizes that all people both accept and reject God's goodness in their lives. Most of us can think of examples of good that we have done: volunteering for a community service project, comforting a neighbor in need, helping an old lady across the street. However, just like Mother Teresa, Christianity asserts that the good we do in these situations is not really of us but of God. God is working through us to achieve a good end. We simply choose to participate with God and in doing so reflect God's goodness through our action.

Conversely, we can also think of times when we have done evil in our lives: ignoring others in need, deceiving others for our own gain, or abusing alcohol, drugs, or our own sexuality. Christianity teaches that when we commit evil acts or sin, we are rejecting God's goodness, as Hitler did. In fact, sin is what results when *we*—not God—determine the good in a particular situation. All humans sin. We all reject God at various points in our lives. Therefore, before condemning Hitler or anyone else for their evil actions, we need to look at ourselves. From the Christian perspective, the evil we commit continually reminds us of our own rejection of God and of God's goodness in our lives.

With this understanding, we can now speak to the importance of God's goodness for a moral life. Belief in God as good and as the source of all goodness offers the Christian a reason to be moral. That is, one ought to be moral because God's goodness both enables and requires one to be responsible for the goodness of the world. This concept may seem difficult, but in reality it is not. The key to

understanding what it means to live a Christian moral life lies precisely in this question: “What is God enabling and requiring me to both be and do?” If God enables me with the gifts, talents, or abilities to become a specific kind of person, then I have a moral duty to become that person (ethic of being). If God enables me with the gifts, talents, or abilities to do a specific thing, then I am morally required to do this thing (ethic of doing). In other words, enabling and requiring are intimately connected; you cannot have one without the other. Christianity teaches that because God authorizes and requires morality in this way, we can say that our moral responsibilities are not only to ourselves, to other people, or to the demands of rationality; they are, first and foremost, responsibilities to God. Actions are judged to be moral not simply because they bring “good” to ourselves and others, but because they are properly responsive to what God enables and requires of us. Likewise, actions are judged immoral not simply because they cause harm to ourselves and others, but because they are not properly responsive to what God enables and requires of us in our lives.²⁰

Let’s clarify Christian belief here: God does not require the impossible. God enables each of us with specific gifts, talents, and abilities and then requires us to use them to reflect his goodness in the world. However, we are not morally required to do things for which we have not been enabled. For example, if you have not been enabled with the gifts, talents, or abilities to become a social worker, then God does not require you to become a social worker. Again, enabling and requiring are intimately connected. God requires of us that for which we have been enabled, but does not require that for which we have not.

With this perspective in mind, the Christian moral life can be properly understood as our response to God’s offer of love. Through faith, the Christian recognizes God’s offer of love through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as an open invitation to live a life of good, to live a life of God. The Christian’s free response to this invitation *is* the moral life. The purpose of Christian moral theology, then, is to demonstrate how belief in Jesus Christ makes a difference in the way one lives. It seeks to demonstrate the implications of Christian faith both for the actions one ought to perform and for the kind of person one is striving to become.²¹

Morality, or living a moral life, thus poses profound challenges to the Christian believer. Morality does not mean simply following biblical commandments or Church rules. Morality involves a deep commitment on the part of the believer to discern what God is calling one to both be and do. Moral reflection is not easy; it involves great personal effort. When faced with an important ethical decision, one must critically examine oneself and try to discern how God is calling one to use the gifts, talents, and abilities that one has been given. If this were not difficult enough, one must also recognize that throughout their lives people mature and develop as human persons. What one may have thought was a moral response to a specific dilemma at age eighteen may look very different at age forty (and vice versa). We also must remember that all human beings are different. Individual people have been graced by God with different gifts, talents, and abilities, so valid responses to similar moral dilemmas may vary from person to person. Christian morality, therefore, is not as cut and dried as many people think. It involves a deep commitment on the part of individuals to understand not only God's call in their lives, but also themselves as human persons. Morality truly entails a lived response to God's invitation of love.

In sum, Christian morality is unique because it is intimately related to one's beliefs and experiences of God understood as Father Son, and Holy Spirit. God is recognized as the source and end of all that is good and therefore the individual must always view the self, others, and all of creation in reference to God. In the next chapter, we further develop these foundational understandings by discussing the nature of the moral act and the importance of a rightly formed conscience.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is morality? What is ethics? What is the goal of ethics?
2. Why is morality not static?
3. What four important points do we need to keep in mind within any discussion of morality?
4. What is moral philosophy? On what is it based?

5. What is moral theology? On what is it based?
6. From the Catholic perspective, what are the two forms of divine revelation, and how are they related?
7. What is the relationship between faith and reason?
8. Why is the theme of love so important for the Book of Deuteronomy?
9. In the Christian Scriptures, what does Jesus mean when he says we are to love one another?
10. How does Jesus demonstrate his compassion for the poor and powerless?
11. What models for living a moral life do we find in the Beatitudes?
12. What is the natural law? How does it act as a source for Christian moral reflection?
13. What is a virtue and why are virtues important for the development of good moral character?
14. What are the philosophical virtues? What are the theological virtues?
15. For Christians, what is the good? What does it mean to say that the good that one does in one's life is a reflection of the goodness that is God?
16. What does it mean to say that God's goodness both enables and requires us to be responsible for the goodness of the world?
17. How is the Christian moral life our response to God's offer of love? What are the challenges to living a moral life?

ENDNOTES

1. Manuel Velasquez, *Business Ethics: Concepts and Cases*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2002), 7–12; and John Boatright, *The Ethical Conduct of Business*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2007), 22–23. In a more specific way, ethics can also be defined as the “rules” or “code of conduct” governing the actions of a particular group of people. For example, if we are speaking about a code of conduct for people working within the health care field, we are speaking of health care ethics or medical ethics. If we are speaking about a code of conduct for those working in the business world, we are speaking of business ethics.

2. Louis Pojman, *Life and Death: Grappling with the Moral Dilemmas of Our Time*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 2.
3. John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth* (Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1993), no. 29.
4. Roger H. Crook, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007), 68.
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 498–611.
6. *Catholic Bible: Personal Study Edition*, ed. Jean Marie Hiesberger et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 87. See also Crooke, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 69.
7. See also Mark 12:29–31, Luke 10:27–28, and John 14:34–35.
8. In 1 Cor. 13:4–8a, 13, Paul further expands upon this understanding of love: “Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. . . . So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”
9. Closely related to this, Jesus also teaches that discipleship entails a full commitment to him (Matt. 10:37–39 and Luke 14:25–33), and that the gaining of wealth, power, or prestige means nothing if you lose your soul in the process (Matt. 16:25–26 and Luke 18:24–30).
10. Although in this section we have focused on Jesus’ positive moral teachings, we would be remiss if we failed to mention that his moral teachings also decry those who do evil. He states that it would be better for one to have a millstone placed around his neck than to lead another into sin (Mark 9:42 and Luke 17:1–2). He castigates the Pharisees for their hypocrisy (Matt. 23:1–36, Mark 7:1–15, Luke 11:37–12:1, and John 9:1–41) as well as his own disciples for their desire to be the greatest (Mark 10:35–45 and Luke 9:46–48). He speaks against those who exhibit great pride (Luke 14:7–11) and those who seek ever-greater wealth (Luke 6:24–26 and 12:13–15). Finally, he demonstrates his anger against those who turn the Temple, his Father’s house, into a marketplace of fraud and greed (Matt. 21:12–17, Mark 11:15–17, Luke 19:45–48, and John 2:13–17).
11. For more information, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 91, art. 2; and Alberto Piedra, *Natural Law: The Foundation of an Orderly Economic System* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004), 9–10.

12. Richard Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 7–8.
13. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. A person who is not of good moral character cannot consistently make good moral choices and, generally speaking, one cannot make consistently good moral choices if one is not a person of good moral character.
14. For further discussion of the cardinal virtues, see William Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 76–79, 98–99, 136–40, and 181–82. See also *CCC*, nos. 1804–11.
15. This discussion of the theological virtues is adapted from *CCC*, nos. 1812–29.
16. Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology*, 258.
17. Mattison speaks to this point directly: “Hope’s foretaste of the true fulfillment that ultimately satisfies us most effectively illuminates the ways in this life that such fulfillment is not yet present. Furthermore, hope’s steadfast clinging in trust that the realization of this destiny is a real possibility actually generates movement toward that goal, even though full realization is not possible here.” See Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology*, 259.
18. *CCC*, no. 1827.
19. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 43–44.
20. *Ibid.*, 44–45.
21. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

The Moral Act and Conscience

Caitlin is a senior majoring in sociology at a midsize Catholic college. After graduation she plans to go to graduate school to pursue a master's degree in special education. In fact, she has already been accepted to graduate school. On a whim, she decided to take a financial accounting course during her last semester. This has been the hardest course she has ever taken and she is in real danger of flunking if she does not pass the final exam. She is desperate and is even considering cheating if it will help her pass the final. For all of her academic struggles, Caitlin has never cheated before. But if she flunks this course, she will not graduate and her plans to pursue a master's degree will be put on hold. By cheating, she will pass the course, graduate, go on to graduate school, and someday do the good work of a special education teacher. No one will know, no one will get hurt, and she promises herself that she will never do it again. . . . But it's so unlike her. What should she do?

CAITLIN IS FACING A CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE not unfamiliar to many college students. She knows that cheating is wrong, yet she sees her future and all the good she could do going up in smoke because of one course that is not even a requirement for her major. Her story and the dilemma she faces may conjure up images from our childhood. We see a little devil perched on one shoulder whispering in Caitlin's ear that cheating is not so bad because it's really for a good cause. The devil tells her that everyone cheats, no one will know she has cheated, and no one will be hurt by it. On the other shoulder is perched a little angel informing her that cheating

is wrong regardless of whether or not everyone else is doing it. The angel informs her that one can never do evil to achieve a good end, God will know that she's cheated, and in fact the entire class will be affected by her cheating.

This childhood image is of course naïve, but many people evoke it when asked what conscience is and what role it plays in guiding our moral decisions. Even if we do not picture an angel or devil, many still describe conscience as “that little voice inside us” telling us what is right or wrong. Now while there is certainly some truth in this description, we must be careful not to misinterpret what it means. In Catholic moral theology, conscience is not a thing but an activity. Conscience refers to (1) the basic principles of practical reason (reason that is concerned with action), (2) the application of these principles to a specific set of circumstances, and (3) our self-evaluation of (a) how we have carried out this application, and (b) whether we have lived up to what we judged we ought to do. We will examine each of these elements as we move through the chapter, but as conscience guides our specific moral actions, let us first clarify exactly what we mean by a moral act.

THE MORAL ACT

All human beings act, and our actions can be categorized in two ways. A general act is one we perform without thinking about or willing it. When we blink our eyes or breathe we normally do not think about or will these actions, we just do them. A moral act is different. A moral act is an action that is freely chosen and comes into existence through our exercise of reason and will. For example, the person sitting next to you drops her book on the floor so you reach down, pick it up, and hand it to her. In this case you fully know what you are doing (picking up the book) and you make the free choice to do it. This is a moral act. Because the act comes into existence through your free exercise of reason and will, it can be morally evaluated. The question is, how do we evaluate a moral act?

Traditionally, moral acts are evaluated using the three-font principle: the object, the intention, and the circumstances. The *object* is an action that is rationally and freely chosen by the will. It is an intentional kind of behavior or thought. Stated more clearly, it is an action

that we knowingly and willingly perform. This understanding of object is vitally important because, as Pope John Paul II explained, the morality of any human act “depends primarily and fundamentally” on the object.¹ This means that the object is what gives an action its particular moral character. John Paul II further stated, “The object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person.”² What did he mean by “a deliberate decision”? The answer to this can be found in the intention.

The *intention* is not, as many suppose, the reason why we act or our motive for acting. Rather, the intention is the choice of the will to do something. For example, my choice to drink a glass of water is my intention. I will (or choose) to drink the water and I do it. Now, one cannot see my willing to perform this action, one only sees the result of my willing to perform it. The choice of my will to drink the water is my intention. The actual drinking of the water is the object. The intention and the object are so closely connected that they are often combined under the expression “the intentional act.” It is this intentional act that is subject to moral evaluation.

Now moral acts do not occur in a vacuum; they always occur within a set of *circumstances*. Circumstances involve matters such as who, what, where, when, why, how, and how much. Circumstances are very important because in order to evaluate a particular moral act we must know who is acting and what is involved. For example, did the acting person fully know what he or she was doing? Was the action performed by a two-year-old, or a thirty-year-old? Was the amount in question ten cents or ten million dollars?

Certainly each of the circumstances is important for determining the morality of an action, but the most important involves the matter of *why*. The reason for this is the “why?” question always involves motive. Why did I choose to drink the glass of water? Perhaps I was thirsty. Perhaps I had to take a pill. Perhaps I wanted to suppress my appetite so I would eat less at my next meal. Motive is my reason for choosing to act in a certain way and it is essential for determining the morality of my act. For example, Mr. Smith has chosen to give fifty million dollars to Caitlin’s college. Why did he choose to do this? Maybe he did it out of generosity, or maybe he was just trying to get his name in the paper. If Mr. Smith chose to

give the money out of generosity, then we can say that the object was one of generosity. But if he donated the money simply out of a desire for publicity, then the object is no longer generosity but vainglory. On the surface both actions look the same, but upon further evaluation they are quite different. True, the college benefits regardless of Mr. Smith's motive, but Mr. Smith will not benefit morally if the gift is given out of a desire for publicity. He has already received his reward.

Another important lesson to be learned from these examples is that one cannot really know the morality of an act except from the perspective of the acting person.³ Only the individual (Christians would add "and God") can know the object of the act that gives it its moral specificity. When Jesus commanded his followers not to judge lest they be judged (Matthew 7:1–2, Luke 6:37–38), he was specifically referring to this type of judgment. As rational human beings, we can, and should, judge people's actions to be objectively right or wrong. For example, if we learn that a friend has stolen a cell phone, we *should* judge that action to be morally wrong and, in love, inform her of this fact. However, we need to make a distinction between the objective and subjective nature of the act in question. Objectively the act was morally wrong; however, to our friend it may have seemed, subjectively, to be the best course of action at the time. Thus our friend's culpability might be greatly lessened due to the circumstances involved,⁴ although this doesn't change the fact that the act was objectively wrong. The overall point is that because we can never fully know our friend's motive(s) or the circumstances surrounding her decision, we cannot judge her heart or condemn her as a *person*. We cannot say to her, "You are an evil human being."

To summarize, the morality of a human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the object, understood as the intentional act. One may choose a course of action for the best of motives—cheating in order to pass a test—but a fundamental principle of morality is that one may never do evil with the intention that good will come of it. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that some acts are intrinsically evil (that is, evil in and of themselves) and thus choosing them is always morally wrong.⁵ In order for an act to be morally good, all parts of it must be good: the object, the intention, the motive, and the circumstances. Only these kinds of actions are in

conformity with the good of the human person. Conscience is the faculty that guides us to choose what is truly good, so let us now explore what conscience is and how it helps us to live a moral life.

CONSCIENCE

People are often confused when they hear the word *conscience*. One reason for this is that they often understand conscience as a thing, as something we possess. In fact, conscience is more of an activity, something we do. In his encyclical *Splendor of Truth*, Pope John Paul II stated that “the relationship between man’s freedom and God’s law is most deeply lived out in the ‘heart’ of the person, in his moral conscience.”⁶ What did the pope mean? Think of a spectrum where at one end is complete free will (or license) and at the other is God’s revealed law. Throughout one’s life, the Church asserts, humans continually move back and forth along this spectrum. Sometimes we find ourselves closer to God’s law while at other times we find ourselves moving toward complete free will. This moving back and forth along the spectrum is illustrative of the relationship between our free will and God’s law, and conscience is where this relationship is played out. Stated differently, conscience is the place deep within the human heart where we meet God and freely respond to his law.

Now, what exactly is God’s law and how can one follow it? As we discussed in chapter 1, the Catholic Church teaches that God’s law, or the eternal law, is knowable to God alone. However, in order that we can “know” the good and live fulfilling lives, God wills that we know some aspects of this eternal law and apply it in our lives. Thus, God reveals certain elements of the eternal law to us through our capacity to reason. This is the natural law. Natural law is defined as human participation in God’s eternal law through our capacity to reason, or the law “written on the human heart” by God.⁷

With this understanding of the natural law in mind, we can now speak more directly about conscience. Conscience bears witness to the authority of the natural law and to the first principle of practical reason: do good and avoid evil. From the Church’s perspective, conscience involves us utilizing our capacity to reason in order to respond to God and to what God reveals about correct moral behavior. Thus, there is an important relationship at work here: the

natural law makes known the objective and universal demands of the moral good, while conscience is the application of this law to a particular case.⁸ What exactly does this mean? It means simply that the conscience and the natural law need each other. Conscience needs the natural law (reason) in order to “know” the moral good, while natural law needs conscience in order to apply this good to specific situations. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further explains this relationship by stating that conscience “is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed.”⁹

With this basic understanding of what conscience is, we can now explore how we form our conscience to choose the good. The Roman Catholic tradition ascribes three dimensions to conscience: (1) *synderesis*, the basic capacity within the human person to understand value; (2) *moral science*, the process of discovering the particular good to be done or the evil to be avoided; and (3) *judgment*, the specific determination of the good that one must do in a particular situation, has done in a past situation, or will do in the future. Let us examine these three dimensions in greater detail.

Synderesis is the term that describes our innate knowledge of universal moral principles, or the disposition of our practical intellect to understand moral truth.¹⁰ *Synderesis* is the necessary foundation for the exercise of conscience because it is the capacity by which we understand value. Through *synderesis* we always and everywhere choose what we perceive to be beneficial or “good” for us, and avoid what we perceive to be detrimental or “evil.” The key to understanding this concept is the word *perceive*. At the level of *synderesis*, we perceive that which seems to be beneficial for us in the here-and-now even though this choice may not be “good” in the moral sense. Let’s use an example to illustrate this. Mindy has a distorted body image; she sees herself as overweight even though she is not. So what can Mindy do? She can starve herself (anorexia) or binge and purge herself (bulimia). Both options are destructive to her body and she should avoid them, but for Mindy they are both beneficial—or “good”—in her misguided pursuit of an unrealistic body shape. Or take the case of Joshua, who would like to play varsity football but knows he is too small. One option for Joshua is to take steroids

in order to gain size and strength. In spite of their effects on both his body and mind, Joshua recognizes the steroids as beneficial—a “good” to be pursued—toward his overall goal of playing football. Or consider an extreme example: suicide. A person seeking to end his or her life does not view death as something to be avoided. Instead, suicide is perceived as beneficial—and thus “good”—because it provides a means to end unbearable physical or psychic suffering.

In each of these cases, options that most of us would consider objectively evil are perceived by the person to be “good.” They are perceived as good because they help the person achieve a particular goal, regardless of the negative consequences they may bring. Because the person always seeks the “good,” we can say that *synderesis* is infallible, it never errs. We never choose what we perceive to be detrimental to us; we only choose what we perceive to be beneficial. Clearly this basic capacity to understand value needs to be formed if we are to act in morally good ways. This process of formation is called *moral science*.

Moral science is the process that shapes, educates, examines, and transforms *synderesis*. It is the means by which we learn whether a particular option is, in fact, good or evil. Now *moral science*, also termed “the formation of conscience,” does not take place in a vacuum. We humans have our feet in a number of different worlds and our culture—be it Western or some other culture—can either form our conscience or deform it. As an example of this, take our attitudes toward money. We Americans are very generous. We donate billions of dollars to charities both at home and abroad in order to help alleviate the plight of others. Yet at the same time our Western, capitalist economic structures may, without our even realizing it, impel us toward pursuing wealth and material gratification as ends in themselves. They might even desensitize us to systemic poverty both in our own country and around the world. The point is that our conscience can be both formed and deformed by our culture’s view of money.

Cultures are not only national in nature. Within every culture there exists any number of subcultures: country clubs, universities, trade unions, political organizations, Goths, and so on. Each of these subcultures is also able to form our view of what is good and evil, and thus our conscience. Likewise, parents, extended families, and friends

can play a significant role in the formation of our conscience, as can the media and the academic disciplines, insofar as these disciplines strive to discover truth and what it means to be truly human.

So how do these various sources help form (or deform) our conscience? Essentially we draw from them moral principles or norms concerning right and wrong behavior. For example, what do these sources inform us about starving or purging ourselves, taking steroids, ending our lives, or—returning to our friend Caitlin—cheating on a financial accounting test? By drawing upon these sources, we begin to recognize the good we ought to do and the evil we ought to avoid. As a result, we come to learn the morally correct thing to do. Now it is true that these sources can give us conflicting messages. Most people, we hope, would inform Joshua that taking steroids is wrong, but he might get a different message from his teammates or even his coaches. Similarly, most people would probably say, at least publically, that cheating on a test is wrong, but Caitlin’s roommate may influence her differently. The point here is that, at the level of *moral science*, we must draw upon various sources of moral knowledge in order to help us determine the right thing to do.

OK, if we have to draw from various sources of moral knowledge, how do we know which one is correct? How do we know which one to follow, particularly when we are receiving conflicting messages? As we saw in chapter 1, Catholics have two very important sources for the formation of conscience, (1) the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as revealed through Scripture, and (2) the ongoing Tradition of the Church. When faced with a difficult ethical decision, Catholics are called to examine both Scripture and Tradition to learn the principles and values that God has revealed. These revealed principles and values should guide one’s decision-making process more than any other. Now how exactly does one do this? Where specifically within Scripture and Tradition does one find information on steroid use or cheating on tests? What happens if Scripture and Tradition do not specifically address an ethical dilemma that arises in one’s life? Here we like to introduce a third “source” for the formation of conscience, the Church’s magisterium.

The magisterium—derived from the Latin term *magistra*, meaning “teacher”—is the official teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The magisterium consists of the pope and the

bishops of the Church who are in communion with him. Its task is to provide the faithful with an authentic interpretation of both Scripture and Tradition.¹¹ The Second Vatican Council spoke to the importance of the magisterium when it stated:

In forming their conscience the Christian faithful must give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. Her charge is to announce and teach authentically that truth which is Christ and at the same time with her authority to declare and confirm the principles of the moral order which derive from human nature itself.¹²

From this short quote it is clear that for Catholics, the teachings of the magisterium are an essential source in the formation of conscience.

Exactly how are Catholics called to follow magisterial teachings? While the answer to this question is rather complex, the Church basically holds that if one wishes to be guided by God's truth, he or she must give *religious assent* to the teachings of the ordinary magisterium, even when the specific teaching has not been infallibly defined.¹³ What this means is that Catholics are to give the benefit of the doubt to the truthfulness of the Church's teaching regarding the moral law, particularly when the teaching holds a particular action to be intrinsically evil.¹⁴ The reason for this is that one's choice to commit an evil act would not only set one's freedom in opposition to God's law, but it would also separate one's freedom from God's Truth.¹⁵ In short, one becomes an authentically free human being—always choosing to do good while avoiding evil—to the extent that one allows oneself to be guided by truth.

It may seem from what we have just stated that authoritative, magisterial teachings can limit a Catholic's freedom of conscience. However, this is not the case. Cardinal Newman wrote that "conscience has rights because it has duties."¹⁶ This means that if Catholics have an obligation to follow their conscience (which the Church teaches they do), then they also have the equally important obligation of assuring that it is formed correctly. The formation of conscience certainly involves gaining information, but it also means gaining *truthful* information. John Paul II spoke to this by stating that the "maturity and responsibility" of conscience is measured not

by personal autonomy or by a “liberation” of the conscience from God’s objective truth. Instead, the true maturity and responsibility of conscience is measured by “an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one’s actions.” He continued by affirming that the freedom of conscience “is never freedom ‘from’ the truth but always and only freedom ‘in’ the truth.” In other words, the magisterium does not formulate moral truth and then impose it on the individual’s conscience; instead it “brings to light” those truths that conscience should already know. In this sense, the Church and her magisterium are always at the service of conscience.¹⁷

Clearly, the formation of conscience is a complicated affair. It is complicated not only because of the many competing voices that can inform one’s conscience, but also because these same voices can pull it in one direction or the other. Given these competing voices, how is one to exercise *judgment of conscience*? How is one to do good and avoid evil?

The third dimension of conscience concerns *judgment*. After one has been informed of what is truly “right” through the process of moral science, one must then make a concrete decision about how to act. Making this judgment of conscience seems easy enough—I should choose what I know to be morally good—however, this is not always easy. What if the “correct” course of action is difficult or unpopular? What if I will be ostracized by my friends or ridiculed by society for my choice? Knowing *what* to do can be easy, actually making the judgment to do it often is not.

Judgment concerns the specific determination of the good that I must do in a present situation, but it concerns more than this. As we grow older—and hopefully wiser!—we can look back on our lives and critically evaluate the moral decisions we made in the past. Sometimes when we reflect back on these decisions we realize that, while at the time we thought we were making a correct moral decision, in reality we were not. Judgment also deals with future decisions. In light of past experience and with what we know today, we can anticipate what a correct moral judgment will be if we are faced with a similar situation in the future. Thus, the judgment of conscience can be defined as the specific determination of the good that I must do in a present situation, have done in a past situation, or will do in the future.

Another way to understand judgment of conscience is to look at Saint Paul's *Letter to the Romans*:

For when Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them. (Rom. 2:14–15)

According to Saint Paul, conscience confronts the Christian with the law, understood as Jesus' dual command to love both God and neighbor (Matt. 22:34–40), and it becomes a witness for them as to whether they are faithful to this law or not. Because its judgments issue from the depth of the human heart, conscience is in fact the only witness to what takes place in the heart. It remains unknown to everyone except the individual and, from the Christian perspective, God. In this sense, the judgment of conscience is dialogical in nature. In one sense it is a dialogue within the individual person, but in another, much deeper sense it is also a dialogue between the person and God, the author of the moral law.¹⁸ The Second Vatican Council spoke to this dialogical understanding of conscience in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*:

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.¹⁹

Therefore, when one arrives at a judgment of conscience, one does not do so alone, but with God's voice calling one to obedience. As such, conscience does not command from its own authority, but rather from the authority of God. This is why the judgment of conscience is morally binding.

It is easy to say, "Let conscience be your guide," but how do we know if our conscience is moving us in the right direction? What if

we make a mistake, even a mistake in good faith? Are we still morally bound to follow our judgments of conscience? Let us explore these questions in more detail.

THE MISTAKEN CONSCIENCE

In the previous section, we stated that *synderesis*, our capacity to understand value, is infallible because it never errs. Not so with conscience. Because of the many competing voices that we hear—and, Christians would add, because of our own sinfulness—we can err in our judgments of conscience. How can this be? Remember that the role of conscience is *not* to decide what is good or evil, but to bear witness to the authority of the natural law and to the first principle of practical reason: do good and avoid evil. Just because one's conscience judges a past, present, or future action to be good, it does not make it so. Conscience can be mistaken. But if this is the case, is one morally bound to act in accord with conscience? A Christian would also want to ask, does a mistaken judgment of conscience necessarily lead to sin? Let us examine these questions more closely.

According to Thomas Aquinas, a correct judgment of a rightly formed conscience binds absolutely, without qualification, and in all circumstances.²⁰ Thus, if your conscience judges that you should not commit adultery, then you must follow this judgment and not commit adultery. To change your judgment would be, in Aquinas's words, seriously sinful because of the very error of changing such a judgment. As such, a correct judgment of conscience that tells you not to commit adultery binds absolutely, without qualification, and in all circumstances.

Difficulties arise, however, when it comes to the binding nature of a mistaken judgment of conscience. Aquinas argued that a mistaken judgment of conscience is still binding, but only conditionally and in a qualified sense. For example, if your judgment of conscience leads you to believe that it is permissible to fornicate, you are obliged to follow this dictate as long as such a judgment remains. To act otherwise, i.e., to act against your judgment, would entail sin. But for Aquinas, a mistaken judgment of conscience does not obligate in every event and circumstance. The reason for this is that with further information (moral science), you may change your understanding of

the good to be pursued. When this occurs, you are now no longer bound to follow your originally mistaken judgment of conscience. To clarify, consider the following scenario. Suppose you lived on an island where you were raised to believe that hospitality is expressed, among other ways, by fornicating with guests. In the eyes of the Church, fornication is objectively wrong, but if you believe and judge the action to be morally right, then you are obliged to follow this judgment. Not to do so would entail sin. But suppose some missionaries visited the island and you accepted their teaching, including their instruction regarding the proper use of sexuality. Now you have changed your judgment concerning fornication as an expression of hospitality. In this case, (1) you are no longer obliged to follow your previously mistaken judgment of conscience, and (2) you can no longer appeal to conscience to do what you had previously thought to be right. You are now obliged, in all events and circumstances, to follow your new, correct judgment of conscience.

Does the Church teach that a mistaken judgment of conscience excuses us from sin? That depends. Moral culpability is determined in large measure by ignorance, of which there can be different sorts.²¹

First there is *antecedent ignorance*, or ignorance that precedes an act of the will and is, therefore, unwilling. As long as such ignorance remains, one is not responsible for the consequences of an action. For example, let us suppose that Maria is target shooting. Unbeknown to her, Olivia is standing near the target. Maria shoots at the target, misses, and the bullet strikes Olivia, injuring her. Because Maria was ignorant of Olivia's presence near the target, she is not morally responsible for the consequences of her action.

Second, there is *consequent ignorance*. Consequent ignorance arises when an individual (1) deliberately chooses to remain ignorant, (2) operates out of inattention, or (3) exhibits crass ignorance about obtaining information on matters of fact or law. Generally speaking, a person is not excused from moral culpability as a result of consequent ignorance. Thus, a person is guilty of moral wrongdoing if he or she deliberately chooses to remain ignorant about a moral teaching. For example, a Catholic who rejects the Church's teaching against the use of contraceptives without first learning why the Catholic Church objects to their use could not plead ignorance in his or her defense, but would be guilty of moral wrongdoing.

Individuals are also culpable of moral wrongdoing if they are inattentive to a matter that they should have known, for example driving 60 mph through a 35 mph zone because they did not see the speed limit sign. Finally, individuals are morally responsible for their actions when they demonstrate crass ignorance, or ignorance that is “so crude and unrefined as to be lacking in discrimination and sensibility.”²² An example of crass ignorance is drinking alcohol simply to get drunk, and individuals who engage in this behavior are morally responsible for any actions performed while intoxicated. Once again, a mistaken judgment of conscience that proceeds from consequent ignorance is, generally speaking, morally culpable. However, as we saw above, individuals can reverse their error since their ignorance is voluntary and can be overcome.

To conclude the chapter, let us return to Caitlin and the question of whether she should cheat on her test. Like all of us, Caitlin has the capacity to choose good and avoid evil. She already has a well-formed conscience in that she understands that cheating is wrong and her “inner voice” reminds her of this. However, as well-formed as her conscience is, it is temporarily asleep. She is seriously contemplating cheating in order to graduate and pursue a worthwhile career. Will Caitlin remain true to herself in spite of the danger of failing the course and thus delaying her career plans, or will she cheat? What do you think she will do? What would you do?

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How does a moral act differ from a general act?
2. What is considered in the three-font principle? Based on this principle, what can we judge about human actions and what can we not judge?
3. How is conscience related to the natural law? How did the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* define conscience?
4. What is synderesis and how does it relate to the formation of conscience? Why is synderesis infallible?
5. What is moral science and how does it relate to the formation of conscience?

6. What is the magisterium? What is religious assent to magisterial teachings?
7. What is a judgment of conscience? What does it mean to say that a judgment of conscience is dialogical in nature?
8. What is the binding nature of a correct judgment of conscience? Of a mistaken judgment of conscience?
9. What is antecedent ignorance? What is consequent ignorance? Which excuses one from sin?

ENDNOTES

1. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1993), no. 78.
2. *Ibid.*, no. 78.
3. *Ibid.*
4. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1995), no. 18.
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 1761.
6. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 54.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 91, art. 2. See also Romans 2:14–15.
8. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 59.
9. *CCC*, no. 1778. See also *Splendor of Truth*, no. 59.
10. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14384a.htm>.
11. *CCC*, no. 85.
12. Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Liberty* (1965), in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992), no. 14.
13. *CCC*, no. 892, and Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (1964), in *Vatican II*, no. 25.
14. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (1964), no. 27, and John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 81.
15. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 56.

16. John Henry Newman, *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk: Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in the Catholic Teaching*, uniform ed. (Longman, Green and Company: London, 1868–1881), 2:250, cited in John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 34.
17. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, nos. 61 and 64.
18. Cf. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, nos. 57–58.
19. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965), in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), no. 16.
20. Thomas Aquinas, *On Truth*, q. 17, art. 4, reply.
21. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II, q. 6, art. 8. These distinctions are taken from *Summa Theologica*, volume 17, appendix 15: “Conscience,” 182–83.
22. <http://www.dictionary.com>.

Catholic Social Teaching

An Introduction

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.

INTERNATIONAL SYNOD OF BISHOPS,
JUSTICE IN THE WORLD (1971)

THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES THE SOCIAL TEACHINGS of the Catholic Church. In their 1998 statement, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*, the U.S. bishops deplored the fact that most American Catholics are ignorant that their Church has developed an extensive body of teachings concerning important social issues. In light of this, the bishops called upon Catholic educators to explicitly incorporate these teachings into all educational programs, including college courses and adult faith-enrichment programs.¹ Our text is a contribution to this effort. In this chapter we introduce readers to Catholic Social Teaching (CST) by explaining what it is and where it came from, identifying its main principles, and demonstrating why we use it as a foundation to respond to contemporary moral challenges. We must understand what Catholic Social Teaching is before we can apply it to the specific ethical issues that we will discuss throughout the remainder of the book.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

What Is It and Where Does It Come From?

Catholic Social Teaching refers to the body of writings that the Catholic Church maintains concerning important social, economic, and political issues. These writings come from various popes and bishops' conferences, both on the national and international levels. Examples of these writings include Pope Leo XIII's *On the Condition of Labor* (*Rerum Novarum*) (1891), Pope Pius XI's *After Forty Years* (1931), Pope John XXIII's *Christianity and Social Progress* (1961) and *Peace on Earth* (1963), the Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965), Pope Paul VI's *On the Development of Peoples* (1967) and *A Call to Action* (1971), the International Synod of Bishops' *Justice in the World* (1971), Pope John Paul II's *On Human Work* (1981), *On Social Concern* (1987), and *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (1991), and Pope Benedict XVI's *Charity in Truth* (2009). The U.S. bishops have also written a number of documents addressing social concerns pertinent to our nation. These include their *Statement on Capital Punishment* (1980), *The Challenge of Peace* (1983), *Economic Justice for All* (1986), *The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace* (1993), and the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (2001). The overall point of these writings is to demonstrate the communal dimension of Christian faith. Faith does not concern solely one's individual or "personal" relationship with God, it also concerns one's relationships with others and how one is called to work for the common good of all. As such, CST demonstrates how Christians can live their faith in the world. As we move through the following chapters, we will make reference to the documents listed above as well as to other, lesser-known writings from around the world.

Unfortunately, as the U.S. bishops lament in *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*, most American Catholics are unaware that these writings even exist; in fact, they are often called the Church's best kept secret. Those who are aware of them often mistakenly believe that CST began with Leo XIII's *On the Condition of Labor* (1891). Actually, CST traces its roots back to the Bible—both the Old and New Testament Scriptures—and to the writings of the early Church

fathers. Owing to space constraints, we cannot offer a detailed analysis of how the Church's social teachings evolved from these sources. We must limit ourselves to just a few examples.

Scripture

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Law of Moses clearly indicates how the Israelite community should treat its poor and defenseless.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you glean the stray ears of grain. Likewise, you shall not pick your vineyard bare, nor gather up the grapes that have fallen. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. (Lev. 19:9–10; cf. Deut. 24:19–22)

If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner toward him by demanding interest from him. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body. What else has he to sleep in? (Exod. 22:24–26; cf. Deut. 24:10–15)

Either explicitly or implicitly, the operating terms in these and other related passages are *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*, generally translated “justice” and “righteousness.” Together, *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* connote a sense of communal peace and harmony, virtues that were supposed to characterize the Israelite people's relationship with God and with one another. In modern language, justice and righteousness mean avoiding violence, fraud, or any other actions that undermine communal life, while at the same time “pursuing that which sustains the life of the community.”²

The Hebrew Scriptures not only describe how people should live in relation with one another, they also demonstrate what happens when justice and righteousness are lacking. Numerous prophets, including Amos and Micah, unequivocally convey God's displeasure toward the wealthy and ruling elite who shamelessly exploit the “lower classes” of Israelite society.

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land! “When will the new moon be over,” you ask, “that we may sell our grain, and the sabbath, that we may display the wheat? We will diminish the ephah, add to the shekel, and fix our scales for cheating! We will buy the lowly man for silver, and the poor man for a pair of sandals; even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!” The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Never will I forget a thing they have done! (Amos 8:4–7)

Woe to those who plan iniquity, and work out evil on their couches; In the morning light they accomplish it when it lies within their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and they take them; They cheat an owner of his house, a man of his inheritance. Therefore thus says the Lord: Behold, I am planning against this race an evil from which you shall not withdraw your necks. (Micah 2:1–3)

Through these and numerous other prophetic passages, the Hebrew Scriptures clearly teach that God expects the people to act justly in their relations with one another. For the Israelite community as well as for us today, practicing justice is an essential characteristic of anyone who claims membership in the “People of God.”

In the New Testament, Jesus also offers many teachings that deal directly with how people are to live in right relationship with both God and one another. From Luke’s Gospel, he begins his public ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord (Luke 4:18–19; cf. Isa. 61:1–2).

Right from the beginning of his public ministry Jesus identifies himself with the outcasts of society, a theme that recurs throughout each of the Gospels. He ministers to and heals the poor, the blind, the lame, and sinners, and calls on his followers to do the same (Luke 14:12–14, 21). He teaches his disciples to model their lives on the

Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–12 and Luke 6:20–26), to give alms to the poor (Matt. 6:2), and to always act toward others as they would have others act toward them (Matt. 7:12). Jesus further demonstrates how his followers should be willing to help a neighbor in need through the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). He teaches forgiveness through the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) and the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). And finally, he shows the importance of service to others through the washing of his disciples' feet (John 13:1–20).

On a more negative note, Jesus warns against the trappings of wealth and power in his interaction with the rich young man (Matt. 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–22) and his denunciation of the Pharisees and scribes (Matt. 23:1–11). Similar stark warnings against both the lure and effect of riches are seen in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21), the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), and in his teaching that “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:24–25, Mark 10:23–25). Through the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), Jesus admonishes his followers to be careful stewards of the gifts that God has entrusted to them, and through the story of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31–46) he warns his followers that their eternal fate will be determined, in part, on whether they aid their brothers and sisters in need.

These are but a few of the many passages from the Scriptures that deal with social relations, but in them we recognize two great values that have particular relevance for Christians today. The first, as we have already noted, is that faith is not simply a private affair between the Christian and God. Through the Law of Moses, the Israelite people's faith in God was translated into the various customs and regulations that both guided communal life and protected the dignity of society's most vulnerable members. The message of the New Testament is essentially the same. Jesus did not teach, heal, and forgive the many people he did simply because he was a nice guy; he did so to demonstrate his solidarity with the poor, powerless, and outcasts of society. This is the type of solidarity that his followers are called to exemplify in the world today.

The second value revealed through these scriptural passages is a vision of what we might term a *contrast* society. This contrast society

is not one characterized by pride, greed, and the unrestrained pursuit of power; instead, it is one where people recognize that their individual goods are intertwined with the good of the community and that the needs of the poor and powerless become the “touchstone of right relationship with God.”³ This vision is part and parcel of the Hebrew people’s notion of communal living, and it is also implicit in Jesus’ call, particularly through the Beatitudes, to live a counter-cultural life. Today, as in biblical times, we tend to measure worth by how much wealth one possesses or how much power one wields in society. The scriptural message demonstrates the exact opposite. True human worth rests with the fact that people are created in the image and likeness of God, and true human power is exercised through the practice of love, justice, and service.

Early Church Fathers

In addition to Scripture, contributions from the third- and fourth-century Church fathers also serve as an important foundation for modern day CST. The early fathers were particularly concerned about people’s attachment to their material possessions as well as what they did with them. Clement of Alexandria urged Christians to recognize that their possessions were gifts from God, given for their benefit and the benefit of others. Thus, material wealth had a social dimension. Clement further asserted that possessions were to be employed for “divine and noble” purposes and that people’s ability to “suffer loss cheerfully” showed whether they were the masters or the slaves of their possessions.⁴

Origen and Cyprian took an even more critical approach. Origen called upon the wealthy of his time to examine themselves in light of how they viewed and employed their possessions.

Let each one of us now examine himself and silently and in his own heart decide which is the flame of love that chiefly and above all else is afire within him, which is the passion that he finds he cherishes more keenly than all others. You must yourselves pass judgment on the point and weigh these things in the scales of your conscience; *whatever it is that weighs the heaviest in the balance of your affection, that*

for you is God. But I fear that with very many the love of gold will turn the scale, that down will come the weight of covetousness lying heavy in the balance.⁵

Cyprian, the third-century bishop of Carthage, took Origen's condemnation one step further by forcefully speaking against the "unbounded self-interest" within his own community:

[The rich and powerful] add forests to forests and, excluding the poor from their neighborhood, stretch out their fields far and wide into the space without limits. . . . Their possession amounts to this only, that they can keep others from possessing it.⁶

The deep and profound darkness of avarice has blinded your carnal heart. You are the captive and slave of your money; you are tied by the chains and bonds of avarice, and you whom Christ has freed are bound anew!⁷

Both Origen and Cyprian offered clear, unambiguous challenges to the elites of their communities. The unbridled pursuit of wealth was these people's "god" and their use of wealth exacerbated already existing inequalities within society. One also recognizes, particularly within Cyprian, the warnings of Amos and Micah, who condemned the wealthy for their exploitation of the poor, and Jesus' message that a disordered attachment to possessions led to condemnation and death.

It might seem from these examples that the early Church fathers opposed wealth per se, but this was not necessarily the case. Gregory of Nyssa, among others, held that individuals maintained the right to own property, although this right was not absolute. People could lawfully possess property (land, money, and other material wealth) and use it to fulfill the goods they recognized in their lives; however one could not do with this property whatever one wanted. Gregory explained this point by stating that the right to ownership must "yield" to the needs of one's brothers and sisters, which meant that in times of great need the wealthy had a moral obligation to use their wealth to support the entire community, particularly the poor.⁸ Ambrose of Milan similarly distinguished