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Morality

BY CYNTHIA ENGHAUSER, CAMPUS MINISTER

T*he role of morality within the framework of the Catholic Church has its roots in the very earliest times of the Christian Tradition. Its presence is noted throughout history and is cause for great care and consideration in our own day.*

Throughout the Catholic tradition; from Scripture to the Catechism, from the private sphere of life to communal places, the Catholic moral tradition has been central to our understanding of what it means to be a person of faith.

This resource will examine the foundations of morality in the Christian framework, including the fundamental elements of Christian morality, the reality of sin and God's mercy.

Building off of that framework a history of Moral Theology will follow. Finally, a consideration of The Formation of Conscience and further readings and resources in the area of Catholic Christian Morality will follow.

As a side note, when you see something like "CC no. 123", this refers to a reference in the Catholic Catechism.

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The Foundations of the Christian Moral Life (CCC, Nos. 1691-2052)

Fundamental Elements of Christian Morality

The most basic principle of the Christian moral life is the awareness that every person bears the dignity of being made in the image of God (CCC 1700).

That is to say, God has given us a free will to seek and love what is true, good, and beautiful.

Sadly, because of the Fall, we also suffer the impact of Original Sin. Original Sin is understood as that which darkens our minds, weakens our wills, and inclines us toward sin.

Within us, then, is both the powerful surge toward the good, because we are made in the image of God, and the darker impulses toward evil because of the effects of Original Sin.

Responsible Practice of Freedom

The second basic principle of the moral life (in Christ) is the responsible practice of freedom. Without freedom, we cannot speak meaningfully about morality or moral responsibility.

To break this down a bit; human freedom is more than the capacity to choose between “this” and “that”. It is the God-given power to become who God has created us to be.

Ultimately, human freedom (in the Catholic understanding) lies in our freed decision to say “yes” to God. This contrasts a more common, current understanding that many people hold today of freedom merely as the ability to make a choice, with no objective norm or good as the goal.



The Three Elements of a Moral Act

A final important foundation of Catholic Christian morality is the understanding of moral acts. Every moral act consists of three elements:

The objective act (*what we do*),

The subjective goal or intention (*why we do the act*),

And the concrete situation or circumstances in which we perform the act (*where, when, how, with whom, the consequences, etc.*)

To speak of this in more detail; for an individual act to be morally good, the object, or what we are doing must be objectively good. Some acts, apart from the intention or reason for doing them are always wrong. This is because they go against a basic human good that shouldn't ever be compromised. Direct killing of the innocent, torture, and rape are examples of acts that are always wrong. Such acts are referred to as intrinsically evil, meaning that they are wrong in themselves, apart from the reason they are done or the circumstances surrounding them.

Catholic Morality v. Ends Justifies the Means

The goal, end, or intention is the part of the moral acts that lies within the person. This is why we say the intention is subjective. For any act to be morally good, one's intentions must be good. If we are motivated to do something by a bad intention—even something that is objectively good—our action is morally evil.

This is to say that “the end does not justify the means). For example, an employee couldn't steal money from the office supply account to donate to a charity. While donating to a charity may be a morally good act, stealing to provide money for the charity compromises the subjective intention.

The moral framework of “the end not justifying the means” is distinctively Catholic, and often counter-cultural. Often times the competitive nature of academia, the corporate world, or American culture in general pardon certain actions/behaviors for a desired outcome.

One of the unique and challenging aspects of this teaching is the presence of these objective norms that influence our moral decisions. Our moral norms or decisions aren't simply based on a personal matter of opinion, but are linked to an overarching understanding of good and evil.

The Reality of Sin and Trust in God's Mercy

When we choose to act against the moral imperative of the three elements listed above, this is where the reality of sin enters the picture.

“Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as ‘an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law.’ (CCC, no. 1849).

What does this mean? By definition, sin is understood as an offense to God as well as neighbor/the other and is therefore wrong. However, there isn't a universal “wrongness” to sins. They are evaluated according to their gravity or seriousness.

Mortal and Venial Sin

There are two main ways of talking about or speaking of the gravity of sin.

Mortal Sin: Mortal sin is when we consciously and freely choose to do something grave against divine law and contrary to our final destiny. Mortal sin destroys the loving relationship with God that we need for eternal happiness. If not repented, it results in a loss of love and God's grace and merits eternal punishment in hell, that is, exclusion from the Kingdom of God and thus eternal death. (CCC, 1861).

There are three conditions for a sin to be a mortal sin: grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent (freedom). We commit a mortal sin when we choose to do something grave. You may notice that the three conditions for mortal sin are almost the opposite of the acts that compose a moral act.

Venial Sin: a venial sin is an offense against God in a less serious matter. Though venial sin does not completely destroy the love we need for eternal happiness, it weakens that love and impedes our progress in the practice of virtue and the moral good. Over time, repeated venial sin can have serious consequences. (CCC no. 1863).

Trust In God's Mercy

In considering sin, we must always remember that God is rich in mercy. As the biblical verse Romans 5:20 reminds us, “Where sin is increased, grace overflowed all the more”. God's mercy is greater than sin. At the very heart of the Gospel is the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

Receiving this mercy calls for the recognition and admission of our sinfulness. Sorrow for this may show signs of conversion of heart. This is what may in turn break open our experience of God's mercy.

This gets tricky... it is possible that we can judge a given offense to be the occasion for mortal sin, and thus an act of objective wrongdoing. However, we must always entrust the judgment of the person to the mercy and justice of God. This is because one person cannot ever know the extent of another individual's knowledge and freedom. This factor of knowledge is integral in determining when an occasion for sin becomes an actual sin.

The Formation (Primacy) of Conscience

So given this understanding and context for morality, how do we move forward? How is this practically applied? The Catholic Church's teaching on morality is only as useful as our ability to understand and live it out.

In this way, the formation of a good conscience is another fundamental element of Christian moral teaching.

Conscience is a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act (CCC no. 1796).

A good conscience requires lifelong formation. Scripture is a primary tool in the formation of conscience. Especially when it is incorporated into study, prayer, and practice.

Where can I learn more about Catholic Christian Morality?

-www.catholicmoraltheology.com

(A blog comprised of North American moral theologians writing on fundamental and topical moral issues)

Readings In Moral Theology (vol. 1-11) edited by Charles Curran and Richard McCormick

“The Historical Development of Fundamental Moral Theology in the United States” Curran and McCormick et al.

The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes by James Alison



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