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CATHOLIC
ETHICS
IN TODAY'S
WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

What Does the Catholic Church Really Teach?

This question often comes up in theology courses and in parishes across our country. Large numbers of Catholic laity (the non-ordained) are genuinely interested in learning more about their faith and actively seek answers to their questions. They want to know what our Church teaches about the Bible, what it teaches as doctrine, and why our Church follows specific traditional practices. The questions are most often asked in terms of ethics. Today, as individuals, as a nation, and as a world community, we are confronted with many difficult and contentious ethical challenges. We are faced with such social issues as the death penalty, just war, and the forced repayment of foreign debts. We are challenged by ever-present sexual questions and changes in the medical field, including the morality of reproductive technologies and the level of care appropriate for dying patients. 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 are confused about what the Church does and does not teach, particularly in the area of ethics. There are a number of reasons for this confusion. Official magisterial¹ and bishops' conference statements that address important ethical issues are generally written for scholars, not laypeople. When laypeople 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 not do a good job of articulating what it teaches, and an even worse job of explaining why. Ask a random group of students or parishioners what the Church as a whole teaches about justified war, the death penalty, or removing a comatose patient from life support, and you will likely encounter blank stares. Although most people are aware that the Church opposes nonmarital sexual relations, ask them why it holds this teaching and again you will encounter blank stares. The problem here lies not necessarily with the magisterium, but with Church ministers (ordained and lay) acting on the local level. 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 priest, deacon, or lay minister who offered it! For the rest of us, such opportunities occur rarely if ever. Ordained clergy, in collaboration with their pastoral associates, have a duty to help parishioners know and understand what their Church teaches concerning ethical challenges. To the extent that this is not done, these teachings will remain the Church’s “best kept secret.”²

A third reason for confusion concerns the Church’s theologians. The only time that most lay Catholics hear about theologians, particularly moral theologians, is when these individuals publicly dissent from official Church teaching. On the rather rare occasion that occurs, the media jump all over it and often misrepresent the real points of contention at the heart of the disagreement, causing more confusion. And some theologians who write Catholic ethics texts spend a significant amount of time critiquing official Church teaching, sometimes even spending more time on the critique than on the teaching itself. Now 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 in a respectful way, it can become a further source of confusion if lay people misunderstand what the Church actually teaches.

A further issue is that those responsible for educating others—school teachers, pastoral associates, and college professors—are sometimes not well trained in Catholic ethics. As a result of their misinterpretation of Church teachings, students and parishioners receive mixed messages, which can lead to greater confusion.

This book seeks to offer a clear, detailed examination of not only what the Church teaches on a range of challenging ethical topics but also why it teaches what it does. We seek to demonstrate that our Church addresses many contemporary social, sexual, and medical challenges and in doing so offers moral principles to help form our consciences. By explaining what the Church teaches and why, we hope to offer some practical suggestions for how people can respond to moral challenges and live out their call to be Christian disciples in the world today.

Some ethicists and moral theologians may complain that this book presents the teachings of the Church uncritically, or that it is too close to the magisterium to be used effectively in an academic or pastoral setting. We strongly disagree. In this text, we wish to offer a baseline, a clear presentation of what the Catholic Church teaches on a particular topic so 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 disagree — in fact, even the authors do not completely agree on every topic addressed in this text — and that critical dialogue among different parties can be healthy. We encourage readers to seek out other sources to gain further insight and different perspectives from those presented here. Our text is meant to be a starting point for Catholic-based reflection on contemporary ethical challenges, not the final word.

Structure of this Text

Our first three chapters are foundational in that they provide a basic overview of how one “does” moral reflection. Chapter 1 focuses on what moral theology is and why Christian faith is so important for living the moral life. In chapter 2 we speak about moral acts and how we are called to form our consciences in truth. Chapter 3 introduces the reader to Catholic Social Teaching by providing a historical overview and then explaining the moral principles it upholds.

The remaining chapters focus on specific ethical challenges. Chapters 4 and 5 speak to questions of economic justice, the American corporate world, and the ongoing effects of Western-imposed debt repayment and structural adjustment programs on the people of sub-Saharan Africa. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the direct taking of human life, exploring the morality of the death penalty and of the Church’s traditional call to maintain peace

while also detailing specific moral principles to be upheld in war. Chapter 8 focuses on medical ethics and discusses, among other issues, the Church's teachings on embryonic stem cell research and the level of care due to comatose patients. Finally, chapter 9 tackles sexual ethics by discussing the morality of extramarital relations, contraception, and homosexuality.

In contemporary society, the ethical challenges we face in these realms are many and complex. Although a thorough discussion of the issues is impossible in a text such as ours, we hope to lay a solid foundation of understanding on which to build.

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 we face and then formulating authoritative responses to them. We will speak more of the magisterium in chapter 2.
- 2 *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret* is the title of a book, now in its fourth edition, by Edward P. DeBerri, James E. Hug, Peter J. Henriot, and Michael J. Schultheis (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003). The text introduces readers to Catholic Social Teaching and provides an overview of numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century papal and bishops' conference documents.

PART I

FOUNDATIONS

1. 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 wish to 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. This introduction is not exhaustive, but should provide a baseline for understanding Christian morality and how we use it to respond to the many moral decisions we face. We begin by explaining what morality is and why we should study it, then we explain the difference between moral philosophy and moral theology, and finally, we speak to the uniqueness of Christian morality by demonstrating how it is shaped by Scripture and by our 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*, for although they are often used interchangeably, they do mean different things. *Morality* refers to the

standards or norms that an individual or group holds concerning good and evil as well as 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 seeks to apply these standards or norms to life. In this sense, 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 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. Consider this example. Lisa is an eighteen-year-old American Catholic who is pressured by her friends to try illegal drugs. 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. Her community maintains that drug use is illegal; however, its punishment for first-time offenders is relatively light. Her culture teaches that she can take whatever drug she wants as long as she does not hurt herself or anyone else. Given this diversity, which “morality” does Lisa draw upon 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 behavior?

As stated above, one of the purposes of ethics is to help us apply moral principles to the specific decisions we must make. When faced with an important ethical issue we 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 of 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 competing moral principles are at work. Our situation with Lisa illustrates this well. In making her decision about trying illegal drugs, Lisa 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?” Lisa 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, so it is hoped that Lisa will draw more heavily from its moral principles than from those of her community and culture. However, even if Lisa does draw more heavily from the moral standards of her Church, it is important to point out that ethics is not an exact science, it does not always yield black-and-white answers. Ethics often involves a lot of gray area 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 the dilemmas we face. We will deal with a number of these dilemmas throughout this text.

At this point you may be asking yourself, “Why should we study morality?” or, “What can the study of morality add to my life?” Philosopher Louis Pojman says one reason we should study morality is that it helps to keep society from falling apart. Imagine a society where people decide independently what is good and what is evil, where there are no commonly held standards of right and wrong behavior. When good and evil become relative, morality becomes a free-for-all and society cannot survive. Studying morality also helps us to lessen human suffering and promote human flourishing; it allows us to resolve conflicts of interest in just, orderly ways; and it allows us to assign praise, reward, blame, and punishment for our actions. In fact, a general sense of morality that is written and codified in laws is an essential foundation for any functional society.²

Theologian Richard Gula agrees with Pojman but adds that the study of morality helps us to develop what he terms an “ethic of doing” and an “ethic of being.” An ethic of *doing* focuses on one’s actions: “What should I do in this particular situation?” An ethic of *being* focuses on the kind

of person I am, or am seeking to become, through my moral decisions. The question we must all ask ourselves is, what kind of person do I want to be? Do I want to be known as a good person or an evil person? To become a good person I must consistently make good moral choices and, generally speaking, to make consistently good moral choices I must be a good person. However, the opposite is also true. If I am not a good moral person I cannot consistently make good moral choices and, generally speaking, I cannot make consistently good moral choices if I am not a good person. The ethic of being moves well beyond my external actions and deals with my character. It continually asks, “Through my moral decisions, what kind of person am I now and what kind of person am I striving to become?”³

Four important points 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 because the bartender should have refused to serve me any more drinks.” This excuse may sound trite, but we hear variations of it every day. Personal responsibility means that it was not the bartender’s or anyone else’s fault that I did something wrong and must now face the consequences of my actions. Personal responsibility means that I am ultimately accountable for the actions I perform. 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. Human beings have free will — although some philosophers and social scientists try to dispute this. We have the ability to freely choose what we wish to do and 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 responsible for our actions. Thus morality is inextricably related to our ability to make free choices.

Third, our moral decisions and actions have consequences. When we perform an action we set into motion a chain of events. For example, if I were to decide to have sexual relations with someone I have just met at a party, what are the possible consequences? First of all, 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 own sexual gratification. Other consequences may come to light

later such as an unwanted pregnancy, a sexually transmitted disease, a reputation for being promiscuous, or alienation or depression. 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. A general rule of thumb is that the more serious the action, the more serious the consequences.

A final point is that morality has a communal dimension, meaning that in addition to affecting ourselves, our moral decisions can 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 when their airplanes hit the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in western Pennsylvania. However, the consequences of their decisions have been experienced by millions of other people around the world. Over three thousand people died on that day, the families of those killed were forced to deal 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, we must address the question, what difference does faith make in terms of living a moral life? We begin to answer this question by distinguishing between moral philosophy and moral theology.

Moral Philosophy and Moral Theology

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 it seeks to establish principles of right behavior that act as moral guides for both individuals and groups.⁴ From the philosophical perspective, the foundation of morality is human reason. Human reason can be defined in different ways, but generally it 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.

Keep in mind that in its strictest sense, moral philosophy has no reference to God. The reason for this is fairly simple: one cannot prove through reason that God exists so 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 are faith-filled believers. Nevertheless, moral philosophy is primarily concerned with what our ability to reason tells us is right and wrong.

Moral theology is somewhat different. *Theology* is made up of the Greek words “theo,” which refers to God, and “logy,” which means “speaking of” or “the study of.” Theology, therefore, means “speaking of” or studying God and what God has revealed to humanity. Moral theology is a subcategory of theology as a whole, referring 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. It is true that humanity is wounded as a result of its sinfulness, but it is not completely corrupt. The Roman Catholic 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.

Although human reason is an important source of moral knowledge, it is not the only one. For Catholics, and for Christianity as a whole, the primary source of moral knowledge is divine revelation. *Divine revelation* refers to the truth that we believe God has revealed to us, the truth that God wants us to know. From the Catholic perspective, divine revelation comes to us in two forms: Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. This brings up another point of contention between the various Christian churches: although all Christian denominations hold that God reveals divine truth

through Scripture (the Hebrew [Old] and Christian [New] Testaments), some hold that this truth is revealed only by this means. The Catholic Church, along with the Eastern Orthodox and many Protestant churches, teaches that God can and does reveal truth by other means. God's revelation continues to this day, as evidenced by the fact that we hold many truths that are not explicitly stated in Scripture — yet are based on and consistent with Scripture. We call this ongoing revelation *Tradition*.

In regard to moral theology, divine revelation specifically refers to what God teaches about correct human behavior. Through faith we recognize God's revelation in Scripture and Tradition, believe in it, and seek to act in accord with it in our lives. 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 we believe God has revealed to us. The Church often uses the phrase, "Reason informed by faith." This captures the relationship perfectly, as does St. Anselm's dictum, "Faith seeking understanding." Pope John Paul II summarizes 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."⁵ In other words, moral theology takes our ability to reason and forms it in light of what we believe God has revealed to us about correct, or moral, behavior.

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 Son 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 our faith in Jesus Christ influences the way we live. For Jews, moral theology refers to how faith in God as expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Talmud influences the way to live. 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. Thus the study of moral theology is not limited to Christians. The focus of this text, however, is Christian — and in particular, Catholic — moral theology.