

CATECHISM PART III

CHRISTIAN MORALITY: THE FAITH LIVED

Introduction: Part One

(C 1691-2051, USC Ch. 23-24)

Part III of the *Catechism* is divided into two sections: (1) Foundations of Christian Morality, and (2) The Ten Commandments.

In Section 1, we will look at the ten foundation stones or building blocks of Christian morality. In this article, we will examine the first six blocks.

What is Christian Morality?

Part Three of the *Catechism* is called "Life in Christ." Christian morality is all about living like Jesus. The focus of Christian morality is our response to a God who created us out of love and keeps us in being every moment of every day and never ceases to love us unconditionally. Christian morality is the faith lived in the daily circumstances of our lives. It is about appropriate and inappropriate responses to a God who loves us.

Before delving into the specifics of morality through the lens of the Ten Commandments, the *Catechism* lays out for us ten foundation stones or building blocks of Christian morality.

BUILDING BLOCK 1: CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD (C 1701-1715, USC p. 310)

To be created in the image and likeness of God means that every human person in our global family, born or unborn, is endowed with infinite dignity and should be treated with reverence and respect. Because we are created in God's image, we are blessed with intellect and will. Because we have an *intellect*, we can distinguish good from evil. Because we have a *will*, we can freely choose to follow God's law of love.

But because we have inherited original sin, we are less than we could be. Due to original sin and personal sin, *our minds suffer from a certain darkness* which can make it difficult for us to distinguish good from evil. We make bad judgments. *Our will is weakened* making it difficult for us to choose what is right and good. But the good news is that through the sacrament of Baptism, we have received divine grace and life into our soul which enable us to resist the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil.

BUILDING BLOCK 2: CREATED FOR THE BEATITUDE OR HAPPINESS (C 1716-1724)

Those of us raised with the *Baltimore Catechism* learned that God created us to know, love and serve him here on earth, and to enjoy him forever in heaven. The *Catechism* calls this "our vocation to beatitude," a word which means happiness. The problem is that because of the influences of the world, our own tendency towards sin and the temptations of the flesh, we may believe that true happiness is *not* found in a life committed to God, but rather in the passing things that the world holds out to us. Frequently, people say: "I'd be happy if I could have...."

The *Catechism* tells us that the beatitude or happiness that God offers us "confronts us with decisive moral choices" (C 1723). It teaches us that the key to happiness is following the law of love as spelled out in the Ten Commandments, the beatitudes and the teachings of the Church.

The beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12) are at the heart of Jesus' teaching. Many scholars tell us that the eight beatitudes are summed up in the first one: "*Blessed are the poor in Spirit*" (Mt 5:3). The "poor in spirit" are those who know their absolute need for God and live their lives in radical trust and dependence on God. Because the poor in spirit have learned to trust God in all things, they are called "blessed" and "truly happy."

In order to embrace the beatitudes as the key to a happy and blessed life, we must undergo a deep conversion of heart. Prior to such a conversion, the beatitudes do not seem to make sense as they are not a recipe for happiness but for sadness.

Pause: What is your understanding of a moral life? Has this understanding changed over the years?

BUILDING BLOCK 3: RESPONSIBLE USE OF FREEDOM (C 1730-1742, USC p. 310)

Freedom of will means the ability to freely choose to live our lives or not to live our lives, as God would

have us live. Christians believe the more we follow God's path, the freer we become.

The flipside of freedom is responsibility. Freedom is not the freedom to do as we *want*, but to do as we *ought* as creatures of God. When we abuse our freedom to do only as we want, we will gradually become slaves to selfishness, sin and evil. The Church recognizes that sometimes our freedom is diminished or nullified due to ignorance, fear or other psychological factors (C 1746).

BUILDING BLOCK 4: THREE ELEMENTS OF A MORAL ACT (C 1749-1761, USC p. 311)

The fourth block or foundation stone of Catholic morality concerns the three elements of a moral act: the *act* (what we do), the *intention* (why we are doing this act), and the *circumstances* in which we perform a particular act (where, when, how, with whom, etc.). Let's look briefly at these three elements of a moral act.

Objective act (what we do). For an individual act to be morally good, the object, or what we are doing, must be objectively good. Some acts, irrespective of the motive or intention for doing it, are always wrong because they go against a fundamental or basic human good that ought never to be compromised, e.g., the direct killing of an innocent person, torture or rape. "Such acts are called *intrinsically evil acts*, meaning that they are wrong in themselves, apart from the *reason* they are done or the *circumstances* surrounding them" (USC p. 311).

Intention or motive (why we are doing this act). This is usually called the subjective element of a moral act because the intention for doing the act lies within us. Two things should be noted here:

- A good intention can never make an intrinsically evil act good. For example, the killing of an unborn child to protect the mother's reputation is always seriously wrong. Hence, the saying: "The end *does not* justify the means."
- A bad intention can turn a good deed into an evil one, e.g., giving money to a charitable organization for the sole purpose of being recognized and praised.

Circumstances surrounding the act. Circumstances can and do contribute to increasing or diminishing goodness or evil of the act, e.g., how much money was stolen. Circumstances can also lessen or increase a person's blameworthiness for a particular act. For

example, there is considerable difference in degree of guilt between a teen who has an abortion, not fully aware that the unborn child is truly a human being, and someone who clearly knows that the fetus is an unborn child but decides anyway to terminate the pregnancy because having a child would be costly and a great inconvenience. There is a difference between missing Mass on Sunday because one is lazy and missing Mass because the nearest church is 60 or 100 miles away.

In summary, for an act to be morally good, all three elements: the *act* (what I do), the *intention* (why I do it), and the *circumstances* surrounding the act, must be good.

Pause: The article offers some examples of how circumstances can diminish one's culpability in an immoral situation. Can you think of other examples?

BUILDING BLOCK 5: FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE (C 1776-1802, USC p. 314)

"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" (C 1778).

The voice of true conscience is like a law written in the core of our being by God calling us to do good and avoid evil. This inner voice helps us to distinguish right from wrong and nudges us to do what we believe to be good.

Eight types of conscience

Over the centuries, moral theologians have distinguished several types of conscience. The following are eight of them.

1. A *true or correct* Catholic conscience is one that has made a sincere effort to discover the truth and one that acts in accordance with the Word of God and the teachings of the Church.

2. An *erroneous conscience* is one that is contrary to God's Word and the teachings of the Church. One may have an erroneous conscience and not know it. For example, a couple may think that their marriage is recognized by the Church when in fact it is not. A couple may think that "living together" prior to marriage is morally correct when in fact it is contrary to the teaching of the Church.

3. A *bad conscience* is one that has not even inquired about what is right or wrong. It is a conscience that has no regard for objective truth.

4. A *weak conscience* is one that may know what is right but has not the courage or spiritual power to do what is right. Or it may know what is wrong and sinful and yet does it. For example, a woman may know abortion is wrong but she may not have the psychological or moral strength needed to carry the baby to full term. A weak conscience is also easily swayed by the opinions of other people.

5. A *scrupulous conscience* is one that frequently thinks that it is sinning when in fact it is not. For example, because of deformative and perfectionistic training in a particular area like sexuality, one may think that he is constantly sinning against the virtue of chastity. It has been said that a scrupulous person thinks that God is a tyrant. His God has an all-seeing eye that watches his every move and is ready to pounce on him for every wrong act. A person with a scrupulous conscience needs to place himself under the guidance of a competent and compassionate confessor who will help to introduce him to the love and mercy of God.

6. A *lax conscience* is one that is insensitive to the good that ought to be done and the evil that ought to be shunned. For example, one may be a racist, or may have little or no social conscience, or be very permissive in sexuality issues.

7. A *rebellious conscience* is one that shows little or no respect for Church teaching, a conscience that says: "I don't care what the Church (or maybe even the bible) says; I will do what I want to do."

8. A *formed conscience* is one that has sought to inform and educate itself about a particular moral issue. For Catholics, forming one's conscience will always involve a prayerful reflection on what scripture and the official teaching of the Church have to say on a particular issue.

Any of us may have several of the above conscience types at the same time. For example, we may have a *scrupulous conscience* concerning sexuality issues and a *lax conscience* about justice issues. We may be well informed about some moral issues and be quite uninformed about other issues. Then again, there may be a moral area where we suffer from a weak conscience. We know what is right but we fail to do it, or we know what is wrong and yet we do it.

Education of conscience. The *Catechism* states that "the education of conscience is a lifelong task" (C 1784). Some helpful aids in the formation of conscience are: scripture and other spiritual reading, knowledge of Church teaching, daily examination of conscience, regular use of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Should one always follow one's conscience? One should always follow a *well formed* conscience, a conscience that we take time to educate about a particular issue. The *Catechism* states: "A human being must always follow the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were to deliberately act against it, he would condemn himself" (C 1790).

Pause: Building Block 5 addresses the issue of conscience. Which of the above-listed eight types of conscience had you not thought about or were you not aware of?

BUILDING BLOCK 6: REALITY OF SIN AND GOD'S MERCY (C 1846-1876, USC p. 312)

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (Jn 1:8-9)

We live in an age when the reality of sin is denied and in which there is much confusion about sin. Facing sin in our lives demands courage. Denying it is as dangerous as denying cancer. It can lead to spiritual death. Karl Menninger, a well-known psychiatrist and author of the book *Whatever Became of Sin*, recognized that when his patients took responsibility for wrongdoing in their lives, their mental health improved and vice versa.

What is sin? (C 1849-1851)

In general, sin is our failure to live the Great Commandment to love God, others and self. The Confiteor, which we sometimes pray at the beginning of Mass, offers us a good description of sin.

"I confess to Almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters [a recognition that sin is not only an offense against God but it also wounds the Body of Christ and our church community], that I have sinned through my own fault [I take responsibility for the wrong I have done], in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done [sins of commission], and in what I have failed to do [sins of omission]." Too

often, we forget sins of omission, the failure to do the good we could have done.

Mortal and venial sins (C 1852-1864)

While all sin is serious and ought to be avoided, some sins are more serious than others, just as some offenses between two people are more hurtful or damaging to the relationship than others. Some offenses are so serious that they can kill a relationship. So it is with us and God.

Mortal sin fatally damages the relationship between us and God. The *Catechism* states that “mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man...it turns us away from God...” (C 1855). Traditionally, the Church has taught that for a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be present.

- *Grave matter*, e.g., murder, adultery, rape, torture.
- *Full knowledge*: we clearly know that our action is gravely sinful.
- *Full consent of the will*: we freely and under no duress choose to do the evil. Factors that diminish full consent are fear, compulsion, and addiction (C 1860).

The first of the above three elements of mortal sin is easy enough to determine since “grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments” (C 1858). But the other two conditions can be very difficult to properly discern, even in oneself, much less in others. Hence, we should never assume that someone is guilty of mortal sin (C 1861).

Venial sin wounds but does not destroy our relationship with God. “All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly” (1 Jn 5:17). All sin should be avoided for it weakens our relationship with God. Ignoring venial sin is like ignoring a minor cancer that can become a serious one. “Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin” (C 1863). We know the truth of this statement as we consider how a gradual neglect of a relationship can eventually lead to divorce.

The seven capital sins. Some sins are called “capital” or “deadly” because they can lead us to other sins (C 1866). They come from the writings of St. John Cassian who lived in the fourth century. The seven capital sins are *pride, avarice (greed), envy, wrath, sloth, lust, gluttony*. An excellent 36-page book on the “Big Seven” is *Liberation from the Seven Deadly*

Sins by Fr. Kevin Joyce (www.SpiritSite.org, tel. 408-247-9237).

Social sin. In addition to personal sin, the *Catechism* also speaks about “structures of sin,” sometimes called institutionalized sin, e.g., unjust political and economic laws that favor one segment of the population over another.

God’s mercy. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:18). We cannot speak about sin without speaking about God’s mercy. His mercy is always greater than our capacity to sin. One of the best ways to deepen our sense of God’s mercy is to meditate on the wonderful mercy stories in the scripture (Lk 7:36-50, 15:1-32, 23:39-43). But to receive God’s mercy, we must first sincerely repent of sin. The above scripture readings are wonderful stories about God’s mercy and about people turning from sin.

Pause: Building Block 6 deals with sin. What are some prevalent behaviors today that are sinful but are washed over as being acceptable, e.g., missing Mass for no good reason, racism?

Suggested action

This week, spend some time with the above six blocks of Christian morality. Be aware of how they may apply to your daily life and daily decisions.

Meditation

Thomas More (1478-1535) was a well- educated man, had a rich family life, was a devout Catholic and the Chancellor to King Henry VIII of England. We might say, “He had everything going for him.” His only problem was that his friend the King wanted him to take his side when he broke with Rome over his divorce. The King also demanded that Thomas acknowledge him as the supreme head of the Church in England. Thomas refused. As a result, he was in prison for fifteen months, lost all his titles and land, and was convicted of treason in a bogus trial and was beheaded. Before he died he said: “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first.” Thomas chose to die rather than violate his conscience.

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