

CATHOLIC ETHICS IN TODAY'S WORLD

REVISED EDITION

Jozef D. Zalot & Benedict Guevin, OSB

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Printed in the United States of America

7033

ISBN 978-1-59982-102-3

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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.