

Catholic Moral Decision Making

- Some Catholics of the past had one word to describe the Church, and that word was —institution. When the Church set out to define itself at the Second Vatican Council, that all changed. The Church Fathers determined that —institution is an extremely narrow vision of Church. The Church in its fullness is so much more than an institution.
- The Church Fathers provided images and metaphors to describe the essence of Church and to keep us from being boxed in to one narrow way of thinking.
- Such images and metaphors required the use of our imagination. Yet in spite of the effectiveness of such metaphors and images, they are not without limits. While a metaphor comes close to the reality, it never quite is the reality.
- Metaphors simply help us unlock the layers of mystery contained within that which the metaphor attempts to describe.
- Theologians have created certain metaphors that help us explain the many dimensions of morality and our response to it. Many people think that morality is nothing more than a set of rules, regulations, and the necessary requirement to obey them. Morality is so much more than that.
- Theologians have explored various models to help us understand the way in which our understanding of morality has developed and how we have developed in relation to morality.

Models of Morality

The Rational / Philosophical Model

A Moral Principle is a fundamental or comprehensive assumption of the law. It is:

- Universally valid
- Unchanging in content
- Holds absolute claim on our submission
- Is self-evident and does not require justification. Examples: “do good / avoid evil” “Always treat others as ends, never as means”

A Moral Norm

- Ensures that our external actions are in harmony with our internal lives
- Provides a rational and public moral foundation in a pluralistic and fragmented world
- Are more specific than principles by stating the content of our individual actions.

What is Natural Law?

Thomas Aquinas on law

- External Law – God’s plan
- Divine Law – norms we would not know without divine revelation
- Natural Law – our participation in the eternal law
 - Often misunderstood as an attempt to understand the laws of nature.
 - It is concerned with discovering the natural and supernatural ends for which we were created, which we define as happiness
- Human Law – precepts based on natural law, but which are human creation
- Natural Law
 - Provides norms which evolve from reflection on the natural law.
 - Involves the totality of human experience
 - Contemporary approach to Natural Law
 - Real – moral good determined by the community’s experience
 - Experiential – result of our collective experience

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- Consequential – the consequences of actions contribute to the formulation of moral norms
- Historical – the human person changes and develops in life stages and history
- Proportional – the morally right choice will achieve the greatest measure of good over evil
- Limits to Natural Law
 - No room for courage, spirituality
 - Ignores our life's goal, desirability of happiness and the role of suffering
 - Leaves questions of justice unanswered
 - Life becomes a series of tasks, directed by what I "should" do.

Legal model.

- The first metaphor or model is the legal model. This is the oldest model and flows from society's need to organize itself. Rules help maintain peace and harmony within the society. Rules are to be followed. If they are not followed, there are consequences and punishment.
- This legal model was and is so ingrained in people's consciousness that morality became synonymous with the law. Everything was, and for the most part is today, understood by many within the context of the legal system. Within that legal context, therefore, God is the lawgiver and human beings are obliged to obey.
 - Within this legal system there exist divine law and natural law.
 - There are rewards and punishments in the here and the hereafter.
 - The believer must obey.
 - Extreme disobedience results in expulsion from the Church.

Some limitations to the legal model

- Scrupulosity and circumvention. When an institution creates a large body of laws, there is always the presence of two extremes in response to those laws.
- One extreme is scrupulosity and flows from a fear of not perfectly following the law.
- The other extreme seeks to circumvent the law. Such persons ask how much they can get away with before they commit a sin.
- The legal system, while nevertheless necessary, also gives rise to other extreme responses. When an institution imposes rigid observance of the law (much like the Pharisees of the New Testament, who required that faithful Jews follow over 600 specific laws, many of them extremely burdensome to poor peasants) the response is often a rebellious questioning of the authority behind the law. The law then is perceived as oppressive and burdensome.
- Relativism. However, today we are faced with a different extreme response. Some people have relativized the legal nature of the law. For them the law is not the heart of morality; they do not believe that morality should be legislated. The sentiment for them becomes: —No one should tell me what I should or should not do. If I am an adult and it feels right to me, then I am the one who determines if it is right for me or not. Some see this posture as liberating in that it provides the adult with the freedom to act responsibly and with personal conviction.
- A truly mature adult, however, comes to understand that while law is not the central component in morality, it is a necessary component of it, a necessary balance to freedom.
- In spite of some obvious limitations to the legal model of morality, it is important to note that society will always need agreed-upon norms and values that uphold the common good and those norms must and do drive our values.

Other models of morality

The Love Model

- Another model of morality is rooted in love. The gospel mandate to love one another, the two great commandments, is the heart of the Beatitudes, the new law Jesus handed down at his Sermon on the Mount.
- Such love is directed toward others.
- Love-based morality insists that the love Jesus taught us by word and example should drive our moral responses to all life situations.
- However, this model has its limitations. It is not always easy to determine what the most loving action is in a given situation. WWJD (What would Jesus do?) does not always work. Or worse, we use our own criteria of morality and put it squarely on Jesus' shoulders in order to give divine acceptance to our own narrow (often anti-gospel) way of thinking.
- For example, a televangelist once used WWJD to defend his support of the death penalty. He failed to consider the reality that Jesus promoted a gospel of non-violence and that he himself was an innocent victim of the death penalty!
- When confronted with the love model's limitations, we always revert back to the legal model that we know and that works so well.
- It is not that the love model is not full of the best intentions; it simply fails us when it comes to determining the right thing to do in many life circumstances.

The Discipleship Model

- The discipleship model of morality is based on an intimate, reciprocal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Commissioned followers of Christ follow the example of the New Testament and join with other Christians in community to establish the reign of God in their midst.
- Such a model is a welcomed change from the rigidity of the legal model.
- Much discernment happens within the context of community as it seeks to live out the gospel in day-to-day life situations.
- However, just as the love model falls short, there are no clear directives given to address the complex situations that Christians face.
- What is lacking are concrete answers to what is morally right or wrong.
- While love and discipleship are good foundations for living the moral life, more is needed.

The Inner Conviction Model or Moral Conscience Model

- In this model we joyfully accept personal responsibility for living according to accepted moral norms.
- When Moses gave the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel, we often think that they were given this difficult code by which to order their lives, when in truth the people of Israel understood the Ten Commandments to be their joyful reciprocal response to the love, care, and nurturing shown to them by God, a God with whom they shared a covenant relationship.
- In this inner conviction or moral conscience model, directives of the law guide us, but we choose to make a personal mature commitment to live by the Law's imperative.
- The law is not imposed; it is embraced. The law is embraced in response to our love relationship with the God who is in covenant relationship with us.
- In this model the law drives our values and becomes the basis of our moral decision making, our moral conscience.

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- In this model we do not follow the law out of fear or blind obedience.
- We follow the law out of a mature commitment to live an authentic life of integrity, a life informed by moral norms that are freely embraced and lived.
- In this model people act in complete freedom of choice—the freedom to say, —“Yes” to God.
- Conscience is not simply the tool within us to determine if we should do the right thing and avoid the immoral or wrong thing. Conscience drives our entire approach to life. It helps us discover God’s divine design for our lives; it helps us discover who we are, how we are to live, and God’s ultimate will for our lives.
- Conscience is developed (or not) from childhood as we learn to obey the rules and norms of society. It grows and develops as we learn that such norms are for the good of all people and that a well-ordered society is in the best interest of everyone. I follow all the traffic laws not just because it is the law, but because I care about the welfare of other citizens.
- Conscience achieves its highest level when we act not because of some obligation to follow the law, but because it is the right and moral thing to do.
- We develop a good conscience over time by creating the habit of good behavior.
- When we habitually tell the truth, we become known not just as a truthful person, but we learn to discern truthfulness and the lack of it in specific life situations.
- The same can be said of all the virtues—justice, prudence, temperance, and courage. We learn those virtues by living them. When we live them and they become a part of our moral fiber, we, in the process, become better persons, not just generally but in relation to each of the virtues. We become prudent, just, temperate, courageous people.
- Aristotle insisted that morality is judged by the judgment of a morally virtuous person, not simply by a code of law or ethics.

Forming a good conscience

- The definition of conscience is that it is a “judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete action” (CCC, #1796).
- God has placed a moral law in every human heart. That moral law is the human conscience. Conscience is our ability to know what is right and what is wrong.
- Conscience helps us discern what we should do in particular circumstances.
- Conscience helps persons assume responsibility for their own actions (CCC, #1781).
- When a person chooses to engage in an evil act, the conscience stands in constant judgment and witness of that act.
- The human conscience holds out the hope of mercy and forgiveness in admitting to the evil and challenges the person to turn away from evil and turn toward virtue.
- We make moral choices guided by our conscience. We either follow or we reject God’s law. A good conscience adheres to reason and to what is willed by God’s wisdom.
- It takes a lifetime to form one’s conscience. Every Catholic is required to form his or her conscience according to the Church’s moral norms.

What tools are used to form a moral conscience?

- Scriptures assist us in forming our conscience (CCC, #1785).
- Do our actions conform to the Word of God?
- When we pray, study, and live according to biblical principles, we are strengthened to live the moral life; we follow the teaching of Christ in the Scriptures.
- While a little cliché, overused, and abused (see above), WWJD is nevertheless a wise axiom: What would Jesus do? Such a principle guides our actions.
- Study is required, however, in accord with biblical interpretation. We can be in error when it comes to Scripture if we read it in a literal, fundamentalist way.

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- For example, there is a scene in the movie —Roots in which the landowner is reading the Bible about slaves being obedient to their masters. As he is reading the Bible inside the house, outside his runaway slave Toby is having his foot cut off as punishment for running away. The landowner is using the Bible as the authority to justify his punitive action. Scripture must be read with the authoritative lens of the Church and biblical interpretation if we are to authentically use it as a tool for discerning our moral actions.
- Moral counsel of others helps us form our moral conscience.
- Moral advice and the example of other faithful Christians help us to form our conscience.
- The authoritative teaching of the Church helps us form a moral conscience.
- We honestly and with open mind and heart try to embrace the guidance and teaching of the Church, and in so doing we form a moral conscience.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit strengthen us to form a moral conscience.

- We believe those gifts are given to us in the sacrament of confirmation, in which we are given a special outpouring of strength by the Holy Spirit. That strength takes the form of the following gifts:
 - Wisdom: the gift that allows us to grow in faith and embrace divine truth; it allows us to have good judgment about the truth and to meditate on the things of God.
 - Understanding: the gift that helps us understand, grasp, and be certain of our faith—the teachings of our Catholic faith.
 - Counsel: the gift that helps us intuitively know what is right and to have the confidence to courageously defend the truth.
 - Fortitude: the gift that provides the strength to act in accord with the truth, the courage to stand up for what is right even when to do so is difficult.
 - Knowledge: the gift that gifts us with the certitude of the truth of God. Whereas wisdom is the desire to know the truth and things of God, knowledge is actually knowing the truth and the things of God.
 - Piety: the gift whereby the Holy Spirit prompts us to lovingly serve and give honor, praise, and worship to God.
 - Fear of the Lord: the gift that provides us with both a healthy fear that we will turn our backs on God whom we love and do not want to disappoint, and the hope that God's grace will provide the necessary strength to keep us from doing so.
- Such gifts help us to form our conscience; to know good when we see it; to do good when we are compelled to do good, even when that causes us harm or difficulty; to seek what is right in all things.
- Examination of conscience helps us to form our moral conscience:
- This is the frequent and honest examination of our lives, our actions, the motives for our actions, the value of our actions (are they good and upright, or are they unjust, evil, or wrong?), the choices we intend to make, and the choices we have made. Such an evaluation helps us form a moral conscience.

What constitutes a moral action?

Moral Acts

- In order to form a moral conscience, we must understand what constitutes a moral action. Every moral action has three parts:
 1. what we do (the act)
 2. the intention, why we do the act
 3. the actual situation of the act, such as where and when it takes place, how the act is carried out, with whom it is carried out, and the consequences of the act
- An act is moral if the act is by itself a good thing to do, a good action. (Some things are by nature intrinsically bad, and thus the act itself is not a moral act, such as murder, rape, or torture. The reason for doing such acts makes no difference. The act, in and of itself, is immoral.)
- An action is morally good if the action itself is a good action and if the person doing the act has a good intention.
- If the person carries out a good action, but has an evil intention or does it for an evil purpose, it is not a moral action because the person's intention for doing it was evil in the first place. An example: o Coworkers ostracize another coworker and make working conditions unbearable for this person. Under the guise of offering a hand of forgiveness and friendship, the coworkers delegate one of their members to reach out to the ostracized worker so as to investigate whether or not this person reported them to management.
- The Church also insists that we can never do something wrong or evil in order to bring about a good (United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, p. 312). The end does not justify the means. A person may not rob a bank to give money to the poor. The act itself was an evil act, even if the intention was good.