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Twofold or Double Effect

Purpose: The purpose of this lesson is to demonstrate the reasoning process involved in deciding whether to perform an act that has both good and bad effects.

Tips for Teachers: Begin by asking if the class can think of a situation when it would be all right to employ evil means to achieve a good end (there are no such situations, of course). Then ask for examples of actions that have both good and bad effects and for suggestions on how to decide whether it is morally right to perform the actions or not. Make sure to distinguish between performing a good act that has both good and bad effects, and an evil act that may have good results. Also, distinguish between what is willed or wanted by the person performing the act and what is only permitted or tolerated.

Having gone through these preliminary steps, the catechist can next spell out the four conditions that are necessary if the principle of the twofold or double effect is to be properly invoked. Write the conditions on the board or have one or more students make a poster listing the conditions.

After the conditions have been explained and discussed, start with an easy illustration of the principle, such as the example of the boy with the cut hand on page 55, and then move on to more complicated situations, such as the pregnant woman with the cancerous uterus.

Ask each student to come up with a case, either one that fits the four conditions or one that fails to do so. Go over each case carefully to show how the principle applies or does not apply.

Some other situations that the teacher or group leader could propose to the class include the following:

(1) A terminally ill patient is suffering from intense pain. The doctor proposes increasing the dose of narcotics to alleviate the pain, knowing that the pain-relief medicine could hasten the patient's death. Is it morally permissible to increase the

dosage? The answer is yes, since the act of giving medication is good, the good effect (pain relief) comes directly from the action and not from the evil effect (shortening the patient's life), the good effect is willed and the evil effect only tolerated, and there is a sufficient reason for permitting the evil effect to occur. The same would not be true, for example, if a doctor gave a life-shortening dose of narcotics to a person suffering from an ordinary headache.

(2) When American military forces were ordered onto the beaches of Normandy near the end of World War II, their leaders knew that many Americans would die in the D-Day landing, despite efforts to limit casualties. Was this military operation morally allowable under the principle of the twofold effect? Yes, because the act of liberating France from the Nazis was a good one, the good effect was not caused by the evil effect, the casualties were not willed but only tolerated, and the good effect far outweighed the evil effect.

(3) In chapter 11 of the Bible's 2nd Book of Samuel, King David wanted to get rid of Uriah the Hittite so that he could have his wife Bathsheba. To accomplish this, David ordered his military commander to put Uriah on the front lines of the battle so that he would certainly be killed. Was David's action morally permissible? No, because the act of putting Uriah in harm's way was evil, the "good" effect of getting Bathsheba was caused by the evil effect of having Uriah killed, the death of Uriah was definitely willed, and the evil effect was nowhere near equivalent to the "good" effect.

Topics for Discussion:

1. Is there ever a situation where it would be okay to use an evil means to achieve a good end?
2. Which of the four conditions of the double effect is the most important and why?
3. Discuss an action that you have performed, seen, or read about that had both a good effect and an evil effect.
4. Why are people today so willing to approve evil means to bring about a purported good?

Some Questions and Answers:

1. Where did the principle of the twofold or double effect originate?

A. The principle has been used in Catholic moral theology at least since the 17th century. You can find more information about the double effect in Germain Grisez's book *Christian Moral Principles* (cf. pp. 239-241, 298-300).

Projects:

1. Make a chart or poster showing the four conditions of the principle of the twofold effect.

2. Make a chart of a case where the principle can be validly applied (see pp. 57, 59 of the text for examples)

3. Make a chart of a situation where the principle cannot be validly applied (see pp. 57, 59 of the text for examples).

4. Look up sections 1753, 1756, 1759, and 1789 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and put together an oral presentation explaining or defending one of those sections.

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