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Spiritual

Catholic Morality: A Way of Living

by Reverend Louis J. Cameli, STD

In one way or another, we are all teachers of morality. If you are a catechist or parent, you have a special role to play. In so many decisive ways, you shape the conscience of those entrusted to you. Of course, there are many factors in the moral formation of children—some positive and some not so helpful. In this mix, catechists and parents have a privileged role and a real possibility of shaping moral sensibilities that will lead to good choices and conformity with God's will for us.

Our own sense of the moral life will inevitably permeate our teaching and our example. So, it is critical that we be in touch with a genuine sense of Catholic morality for ourselves. That will be the source for our teaching and formational work with others.

In our culture, the popular conception of morality is that of a restrictive set of rules that forbids certain behaviors. In this framework, morality is an imposition, something we would rather not have to deal with but are forced to face. There are many in the family of faith who have this sense of morality and moral life—extrinsic rules,

imposed, and grudgingly accepted. An authentic sense of the moral life is exactly the opposite.

St. Paul proposes such an authentic sense in his letter to the Colossians. In so many ways, these words of Paul capture his foundational understanding of Christian morality.

So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above . . . Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry) . . . As God's chosen one, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience . . . And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:1, 5, 12, 17)

Morality is, first of all, a way of deciding and acting. It is a way of living. In Paul's perspective, Christians find their way of living by looking at

The moral life means letting faith suffuse everything, every dimension, every action.

Reflection

their identity in Christ. Precisely because they are “raised with Christ” and have become one with him, Christians will necessarily decide and live in a certain way. Far from being a set of extrinsic or imposed rules, morality flows from the deepest source of our identity as new creatures in Jesus Christ. If we really know who we are, we will know the kind of life to which we are called. It will be a natural and logical consequence of our identity in Christ. And it has no room for whatever is incompatible with that identity, for example, impurity, greed, anger, or idolatry.

Furthermore, morality is not reserved for a sector of life, a particular piece of living. Paul clearly says “. . . whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17). In other words, the moral life means letting faith suffuse everything, every dimension, every action. We are no longer in the realm of rules for this or that. We have a vision that directs the whole of our lives.

Certainly, some of the particulars of Catholic morality need to be studied and properly assimilated. First, however, we must come to terms with the deepest foundation for that morality. It is who we are in Jesus Christ—an identity that summons us to live in a transformed way.

For Reflection

- Who helped you the most to come to your understanding of what it means to live a moral life?
- What Scripture passages help to remind you of your identity and responsibilities as a follower of Christ?

Louis J. Cameli is a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago and pastor of Divine Savior Parish in Norridge, Illinois. He completed his theological studies at the Gregorian University in Rome and obtained a doctorate in theology with a specialization in spirituality. He is the former director of ongoing formation of priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago and director of the Cardinal Stritch Retreat House, Mundelein, Illinois. In February, 2002, he received the Pope John XXIII Award from the National Organization for the Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy (NOCERCC) for his contributions to the continuing education and ongoing formation of priests. He has authored numerous books on spirituality and also served as a writer and theological consultant for RCL Benziger's *Faith First* and *Faith First Legacy Edition* K-8 curriculum.

Faithful to the Light

Lord Jesus,

You **light the way** for us
in our journey through life.

As your followers, clothe us

in a garment woven with **compassion** for others;

with **kindness** toward those who may only know your love through us;

with **humility**, so we will remember that we are only reflections of you,

the one, true, Son of God.

Clothe us with **gentleness**, that we may never do harm to another;

with **patience**, that we may take the time to listen and to forgive.

Let us **shed your light** wherever we go,

as we try to **give witness** to you and

bring God's reign into our world.

We ask for all these gifts

in your holy name.

Amen.

Overview: Catholic Morality Module

The third pillar, or section, of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Life in Christ,” addresses the topic of morality. Morality deals with how we are to live as Christians. We seek this understanding in and through Jesus, who describes himself as “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). The goal of this module is to explore the foundations of Catholic morality and the practice of the moral life.

As you explore the content of this module, you will engage in a process of faith reflection using three components: a DVD, this companion booklet, and a CD-ROM. See page 5 for an explanation of how these components complement one another. You began the process on pages 6 and 7 with a reflection on Jesus, our model in living a moral life. On page 11 you will describe some of your present understandings of morality.

Each of the four segments in this module is divided into two parts. Here is an overview of the topics that each segment of the booklet and DVD will explore:

- 1. Foundations of the Moral Life**
 - Part 1: What Is Morality?
 - Part 2: What Is Virtue?
- 2. Objective and Subjective Morality**
 - Part 1: What Is Objective Morality?
 - Part 2: What Is Subjective Morality?

3. The Morality of Human Actions

- Part 1: What Makes an Action Moral?
- Part 2: What Is Sin?

4. Conscience and God's Law

- Part 1: What Is Conscience?
- Part 2: Why Are There Commandments?

You will find a six-page booklet of process for each segment to help you reflect on the DVD content and apply what you have learned. Here is the structure you will find:

- 1. Introduction:** The goal and objectives for each session, plus an opening reflection question
- 2. Looking Ahead—Presentation:** A video overview for each part and space for writing
- 3. Looking Back—Reflection:** Three reflection questions for each of the two parts
- 4. Looking Beyond—Application:** An opportunity to integrate Catholic teaching with daily life

This module is only a brief introduction to the vast tradition of Catholic morality. As you continue to read, study, reflect, and attend classes and workshops, you will grow in knowledge and insight. Try to participate in the learning process of this module in a group setting. If circumstances require that you work independently, find at least one other person with whom you can share your reflections.

Father Richard Sparks, a Paulist priest, divides his time between giving ethics workshops, serving as an ethical consultant to various hospitals, and ministering as associate pastor. Father Sparks has a Ph.D. in Christian Ethics from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He is the author of two books and numerous articles.

Objective and Subjective Morality

In our highly individualistic society, many see morality mainly as a matter of personal choice. However, morality is based on certain unchanging objective truths that can be arrived at through reason. To ignore this objective aspect would be to plunge humanity into relativism and confusion. We have access to this objective truth through reason, the wisdom of our leaders, and the collective wisdom of the ages. For us Catholics this collective wisdom includes the teaching of the Church. The availability of objective moral truth does not free us, however, from the personal responsibility to apply these truths to the concrete circumstances of our lives. This application introduces a subjective element to our moral choices.

Goal

To explore the relationship between objective moral norms and the subjective elements involved in moral decision making

Learning Objectives

- To define objective morality and subjective morality
- To identify the sources for arriving at objective moral truth and to appreciate the Church's unique role in this process
- To apply objective moral truths to a concrete subjective situation

Exercise

Take a few moments to reflect on the following. Then discuss your response with another person or with your group.

Name some moral truths you have been able to discover simply by the use of your reason.

Prayer

God of infinite wisdom, you sent us your Spirit to guide us in making good choices each day. Help us listen to your voice whispering within us so that all the choices we make will conform us more completely to your holy will. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Looking Ahead

Part 1: What Is Objective Morality?

Part 1 of this segment explores the nature of objective morality. Below you will find an outline of the principal content of the DVD that accompanies Part 1 of this segment. You may wish to refer to this outline as you watch the DVD. Below the outline, there is space for you to jot down questions that occur to you during and after the viewing.

The natural law
is nothing other
than the light of
understanding
placed in us
by God;
through it
we know what
we must do
and what we
must avoid.

St. Thomas Aquinas
*Collationes in decem
praeceptis 1*

Watch Segment 2,
Part 1 of the DVD
or CD-ROM now.

Video Outline

- Individuals describing their understanding of actions that are always wrong
- Theological experts describing the role of reason in determining the difference between good and evil
- A layman describing his efforts to live a moral life
- Experts describing the sources for arriving at objective moral truth

Comments and Questions

Use the space below to list questions, feelings, or ideas that occur to you as you view the video.

A large rectangular area with a vertical line on the left and horizontal lines, intended for writing comments and questions. There are two small grey circles on the left side, one near the top and one near the bottom, possibly serving as markers or bullet points.

Looking Back

Part 1: What Is Objective Morality?

Reflect silently on one or more of the questions below and then jot down your response(s). Then share your thoughts with another person or with a group.

1. Ron Jackson describes how he and his wife drew up a moral code that expressed the values that their family tries to live by. In the space below, describe the moral values that are held most sacred within your family.

Our Family's Values

2. Recall a movie or television show you have seen in the past month. What objective moral truth(s) were affirmed or challenged by this media? In what ways?

3. Jesus told us that "[A]nd you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). How does knowing an objective moral truth free you rather than impede you when you make a personal choice?

Remember . . .

There is
objective truth
and goodness.

•
Natural law
indicates the
basic moral
sense that
allows us to
see the good.

•
The
Magisterium is
the teaching
authority of
the Pope and
bishops of
the Church.

Looking Back

Part 2: What Is Subjective Morality?

Reflect silently on one or more of the questions below and then jot down your response(s). Then share your thoughts with another person or with a group.

1. Father Sparks speaks of the need to love the person even as we may challenge some of his or her actions. Give some examples in our contemporary culture where this understanding could improve the quality of dialogue among persons or groups.
2. The students in the video describe a school environment in which their peers seem to place little value on objective moral rules. What example can you offer them through which you came to understand the value of an objective code of conduct?
3. In light of the ideas expressed in the video, respond to the following statement: "The Church has no right telling me what to do in my private life."

Remember . . .

Objective morality deals with the moral rightness or wrongness of an act.

Subjective morality deals with the sincerity of a person's moral decision.

A subjective moral decision may be sincere yet morally incorrect.

Capacity for right judgment determines one's level of moral responsibility.

God continues to love us despite our wrong choices.

Looking Beyond

In the video you learned that objective moral norms remain unchanging, even though subjective circumstances might affect a person's culpability. The exercise below will help you to analyze a moral choice from this standpoint.

A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. . . .

Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments. . . .
CCC 1790



FOR CATECHISTS
AND PARENTS

With children, especially younger ones, focus on teaching the objective moral norms rather than exploring possible reasons for not following them.

LIVING IN CHRIST

Consider one of the following situations. Name an objective moral truth that could apply to it. Then list some subjective factors which might influence the person's culpability. Discuss your response with another person or group.

1. A parent writes a book report for a child who has not finished reading the book on time.
2. A politician running for office fails to reveal an embarrassing incident from his past to his constituents.

Objective Moral Value

Subjective Factors

What Did I Learn?

In this space summarize the most important insights you gained in this segment.

What Will I Change?

In this space write one thing you will do differently as a catechist because of what you learned in this segment.

Objective and Subjective Morality: A Key Moral Distinction

by Richard C. Sparks, C.S.P.

Every time I hear someone say, "Just follow your conscience," I cringe a little. It's just not that simple! Yes, we are obliged to follow what we personally believe to be the right course of action. Yes, ultimately we must weigh all our moral options and then make a decision "in good conscience." However, being sincere or meaning well is not the total measure of whether we've made an objectively right decision. And that distinction between subjective sincerity and objective rightness or wrongness is central in our Catholic Christian moral tradition.

In the ethnic Catholic ethos of our parents' and grandparents' generations much moral energy was focused on actions, particularly immoral or sinful actions. It seemed as if morality was somewhat outside of us, a list of do's and don'ts decreed by God, the government, our parents, or some other authority. If you broke the laws or rules you were considered wrong and deserving of punishment, with

little wiggle room for exceptions, situational excuses, or good intentions.

In recent decades the pendulum in our society seems to have swung almost to the opposite extreme. Nowadays, if we say that someone did something wrong, many people respond by suggesting that we're "old-fashioned," "out of it," or are being "too judgmental." Their presumption seems to be that if a person acts sincerely and means well, that somehow their action is thereby blameless or even praiseworthy.

Not necessarily so! What about a happy, organized-crime assassin, a contented rapist, or a smiling child abuser? Just because they "feel good," or freely opt to do a given deed, does not automatically mean that they've thought things through wisely or have formed their conscience rightly.

There are all sorts of subjective factors which may color one's culpability (praise or blame). For example, due to mental illness or temporary insanity,

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Teach what is objectively good with clarity and conviction, but tread gently in assigning subjective credit or blame.

some people may choose to do horribly destructive actions to themselves or to others. While we seek professional help for them, we do not

say that their choices (e.g., to kill or to rape) are good, objectively right ones. Subjectively, they may not be fully to blame for actions that we consider objectively wrong.

So too, even those with full mental competency still may be missing some of the facts or ethical insight necessary to make sound moral judgments. While ignorance lessens the level of personal responsibility, it does not thereby make their actions or choices right or good. In addition to ignorance, there may also be questions of long-standing family

or cultural biases that impact to varying degrees one's praise- or blame-worthiness. Still, being blinded by one's past does not completely excuse nor alter the general or objective judgment about certain actions being morally right or wrong.

In a classroom or educational setting, we ought to teach what is objectively good and right with clarity and conviction, while at the same time treading gently and pastorally in assigning credit or blame to a given person. Like Moses standing humbly before God on Mt. Sinai, we too should remove our sandals and enter gently whenever we deal with anyone's interior state of soul. In the realm of moral decision-making and conscience formation we are standing on holy ground.

For Reflection

What steps can we take that will help our moral choices to be both objectively right and subjectively sincere?