

Our Moral Life in Christ

SEMESTER EDITION



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OUR MORAL LIFE IN CHRIST

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The Marriage of the Virgin (detail) by Besozzo.

Our Moral Life in Christ

CHAPTER 1



The Basis for Morality and Moral Theology

OUR MORAL LIFE IN CHRIST

CHAPTER 1

The Basis for Morality and Moral Theology

Imagine an athlete who participates regularly in sporting events—a football player, for example. He and his teammates want to win every game, and their ultimate goal is to win a championship. To reach that goal requires that he and every other player on his team perform to the very best of their ability.

In order to perform at the highest level, each player must prepare himself well and do what is expected of him. He studies the team's playbook in great detail, so that he knows every formation and what he is supposed to do on every single play. He goes out with his team and practices these plays many times until executing them becomes almost second nature. He works out regularly to build his strength and improve his endurance, so he will not tire as easily. He knows the rules of the game and strives to remain disciplined enough to avoid being penalized for breaking those rules. He and his teammates work at how to use time well, so that the clock does not run out at the end of the game while they are still behind in the score. He keeps his eyes always focused on the prize.

The life of a Christian is a lot like that—at least it ought to be. To live in this world the way Christ taught us takes preparation. We need to study our “playbooks”—the Bible and the teachings of the Church—to learn what Jesus expects of us. If we want to become stronger, with the indispensable help of God's grace, we must “work out” our faith regularly through prayer, the sacraments, growth in virtue, and service to others. To avoid being penalized, we need to learn the rules Christ asks us to live by, and we must discipline ourselves accordingly with self-control. God's laws are the means required by human nature to fulfill our innate desire for happiness. We must use our time well and keep our eyes focused always on the ultimate prize—eternal life and happiness in Heaven.

Christ became man, suffered, died, and rose again from the dead so that we might enjoy eternal life with God. His sacrifice on our behalf saves us from the power of sin and death that is reflected in the perils that arise from using our God-given free will in making wrong moral choices and thereby acting sinfully. Rather than abandon us to our sinful tendencies, Christ invites us—every one of us—to share in his life, both in this world and the next.

To accept his invitation requires not only that we have faith, but also that we live according to that faith by using our free will to make good moral decisions. We must, in other words, live our moral life in Christ.

The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace...

Indeed we also work, but we are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us. It has gone before us so that we may be healed, and follows us so that once healed, we may be given life; it goes before us so that we may be called, and follows us so that we may be glorified; it goes before us so that we may live devoutly, and follows us so that we may always live with God: for without him we can do nothing.¹ (CCC 2001)



The Bible of Ripoll opened to Genesis. We need to study our “playbooks,” the Bible and the teachings of the Church, to learn what Jesus expects of us.

THE BASIS FOR MORALITY AND MORAL THEOLOGY



Moses Receives the Tablets of Law on Mount Sinai. Although the *Catechism* links all of its moral teachings to the Ten Commandments—including those very “thou shalt nots”—the Commandments themselves are rooted in an even more fundamental principle, as the Gospels tell us.

FOR DISCUSSION

- ✦ What would happen if you played a game in which everyone could make up his or her own rules?
- ✦ What does it mean to “share in the life of Christ”?
- ✦ Did Jesus indicate how his followers should live?
- ✦ Who is harmed if we do not always do our best and “follow the rules”? Ourselves? Others?
- ✦ What is the connection between freedom and living a moral life in Christ?
- ✦ The creation story² teaches us about human dignity and the sacredness of life. What other lessons does it give us about moral theology?
- ✦ What does it mean when we say that God created us in his image and likeness?

OUR MORAL LIFE IN CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

Morality refers to the standards by which we judge actions to be good or evil. *Moral law* refers to the standards of human behavior that were established by God and are taught by the Catholic Church.

In recent decades, there has been heated controversy over how to define certain standards of behavior for society as they relate to a number of disputed issues. Those who support a “woman’s right to abortion,” for example, have clashed frequently with those who believe the unborn child has a “right to life.” The strong tensions and lively discussions that result are indications that while most people agree in the existence of some kind of moral standards, there is broad disagreement as to what exactly those moral standards should be.

Those who form their consciences according to the teachings of Christ believe in an *objective morality*, one that is rooted in the fundamental dignity of the human person and the sacredness of human life. Those who have not received the same moral education and formation might hold to a *subjective morality*, one that can vary from situation to situation and from one personal opinion to another. This line of thinking is called *moral relativism*.



The Samaritan Woman at the Well by Caravaggio.
Love of God and neighbor—Jesus himself fulfills the precepts of the Law: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Moral theology is the study of the principles and actions revealed to us by Jesus Christ and taught by the Catholic Church that will guide us to a life of holiness and eternal salvation. It also includes the study of principles and actions that can be known by reason through the natural law, with the help of grace.

Besides exploring Catholic moral teaching, this textbook aims to show not only how human reason leads us to affirm an objective moral law, but also how respecting this law can help bring us true happiness and make us better human beings—how we become, as St. Paul tells us, a new creation in Christ.³

This first chapter presents an overview of the basic principles of Christian morality and clarifies some common misconceptions. Understanding these principles is vitally important if we are to appreciate more completely the richness and depth of Catholic moral teaching.

WHAT THE MORAL LAW IS NOT

Moral law is not just about human sexuality. Mention the word “morality,” particularly in the context of Catholic moral teaching, and many people are likely to think first of issues pertaining to sexuality and marriage. More to the point, they are reminded of the “thou shalt nots” of human relationships, as though moral law represents a severe restriction on human freedom.

The fact of the matter is that although moral law does govern issues such as premarital sex, adultery, abortion, contraception, and homosexual behavior, in its totality, it is far broader than that. Catholic moral teaching also has much to say about topics such as war, health care, economics, poverty, discrimination, calumny, and criminal justice.

The third section of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the official presentation of Catholic beliefs and teachings, explains the Church’s position on a wide variety of modern moral concerns. It is important to bear in mind that Divine Revelation of the moral law and the teachings of the Church reflect the natural law, which is innate to human nature and established by reason.

THE BASIS FOR MORALITY AND MORAL THEOLOGY



Temptation on the Mount by Duccio. Jesus' morality is not a morality of rules, but rather a morality that includes laws and precepts. Moral laws help us differentiate between good and evil.

Natural Law is the participation of man in the plan of God. It is the objective order established by God that determines the requirements for people to thrive and reach fulfillment, enabling man "to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie."⁴

Moral law is not just about rules, but about happiness. When morality is seen only as a series of cold and rigid "thou shalt nots," it is easy to think of it in negative terms as a list of somewhat arbitrary restrictions on human freedom. That view misses the point entirely. The moral law essentially puts the human person in a position to achieve happiness.

Man is made to live in communion with God in whom he finds happiness: "When I am completely united to you, there will be no more sorrow or trials; entirely full of you, my life will be complete."⁵ (CCC 45)

Although the third section of the *Catechism* links all of its moral teachings to the Ten Commandments—including those very "thou shalt nots"—the commandments themselves are rooted in an even more fundamental principle, as the Gospels tell us.

When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest, he replied: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."⁶ It is precisely in living these commandments that a person becomes fulfilled and truly happy, for the commandments ultimately lead us to God.

Endowed with a spiritual soul, with intellect and with free will, the human person is from his very conception ordered to God and destined for eternal beatitude. He pursues his perfection in "seeking and loving what is true and good."⁷ (CCC 1711)

OUR MORAL LIFE IN CHRIST

Love of God and neighbor, then, is the basic principle on which moral law is based. Catholic moral teaching provides the answer to this critical question: How can we best reflect our love for God and other people in our thoughts, words, and deeds?



Baptism of Christ by Cima.

Jesus himself fulfills the precepts of the law: "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." (Mt 3: 15)

Moral law is not just about precepts. Christianity is more a message of salvation and holiness than a set of moral teachings. Nevertheless, to reach perfection or holiness, commandments and counsels are vital. In Jesus' preaching, there are concrete prohibitions, such as adultery, avarice, rash judgments, divorce, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and scandal to the innocent.⁸

Jesus himself fulfills the precepts of the Law. He observes the Sabbath, he fasts, he obeys the purification laws, and he goes to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish feasts.⁹

Jesus' morality is not a morality of rules, but rather a morality that includes laws and precepts. These laws and precepts exist in order to guide people to a good life. Moral laws help us differentiate between good and evil; they show us the path that we need to follow if we want to please God, achieve true perfection, and obtain salvation.¹⁰

Morality does not mean being "moralistic." Unfortunately, people who embrace Christian morality sometimes make poor ambassadors for the Christian Faith. They, too, sometimes tend to reduce the moral law to a mere set of rules, a checklist of behavior that they see as the primary indicator of a moral life in Christ. Mix that with a degree of *triumphalism*—an excess of pride that leads them to think themselves superior to others, sometimes called a "holier than thou" attitude—and they can quickly be seen not as witnesses to the Faith, but as cold and judgmental moralizers.

It is important to live according to Church teaching, but it is even more important that we do so with the love described in the Great Commandment.

It is as easy for us today to slip into a moralistic mentality as it was for the Pharisees in Jesus' time. In fact, the Old Testament, which includes an extensive set of moral guidelines given by God to the Jewish people, often was reduced to a narrow, legalistic, and sometimes hypocritical model of morality. This explains Jesus' critical attitude toward many of the ideas preached by the religious leaders of his time.¹¹

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MORAL LAW

Moral law comprises the objective standards authored by God and taught by Church authority.

Moral law is a demand of our Faith. Although Christianity involves much more than the observance of moral law, to live according to the moral law is a requirement of the Christian life.

When the rich young man asked Jesus how he could attain eternal life, Jesus made it abundantly clear that adherence to the commandments was a vital first step.¹² The Great Commandment of love does not at all weaken the force of the Ten Commandments; rather, it brings context to the commandments and describes the interior spirit with which we are to embrace the moral law. A full commitment to the moral law is essential if we are to live out our vocation to holiness and abide by Christ's new commandment of love.

Moral law is guided by the cardinal virtues. At Baptism, we receive from the grace of God the four *cardinal virtues* of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, along with the *theological virtues* of faith, hope, and love. These virtues assist the Christian in living the commandments because they are the