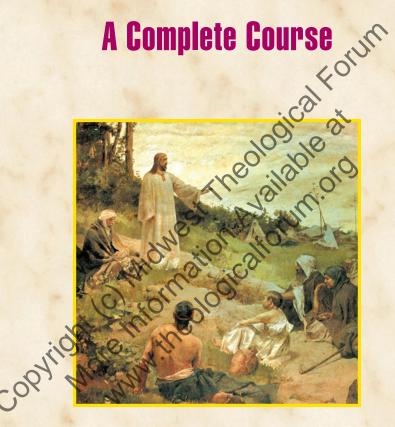
# **Our Moral** Life in Christ



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- viii Abbreviations used for the **Books of the Bible**
- **General Abbreviations** viii
- ix Foreword

### **Chapter 1: The Basis For Morality** 1

- Introduction 4
- What the Moral Law is Not 4
- Characteristics of the Moral Law 6
- 9 Moral Law and Free Will
- 10 Moral Law and Grace
- 12 Moral Law and the Christian Vocation
- 13 Vocation and Discipleship
- 14 Christian Morality in Action
- 16 Effects of the Moral Life in Christ
- 18 Personal Fruits of the Moral Life in Christ
- 21 Conclusion
- Supplementary Reading 22
- 25 Vocabulary
- 27 Study Questions
- 29 Practical Exercises
- From the Catechism 30

### **Chapter 2: Moral Theology** 31

- 33 Introduction
- 33 What is Moral Theology?
- The Christian Concept of Mankin 34
- Moral Expectations of Christian 37
- Moral Requirements for Man 38
- Our Sources of Moral Theology 40
- Conclusion 44
- Supplementary Rea 45
- Advanced Conce 46
- Vocabulary 🔿 48
- Study Questions 50
- Practical Exercises 51
- 52 From the Catechism

#### **Chapter 3: Freedom and the Moral Act** 53

- 55 Introduction
- 56 The Moral Life
- The Moral Act 57
- Knowledge and Moral Responsibility 58
- Sidebar: How Ignorant Are You? 60
- The Gift of Human Freedom 61
- Several Aspects of Human Freedom 62
- 64 Conclusion
- Supplementary Reading 67
- 68 Vocabulary
- 69 Study Questions

- Practical Exercises 71
- From the Catechism 72

#### 73 **Chapter 4: The Moral Conscience**

- Introduction 76
- 77 What is Conscience?
- 78 Sidebar: The Gifts of the Holy Spirit
- 79 Sources of the Conscience
- 80 Nature of the Conscience
- 81 Formation of Conscience
- 82 How to Develop a Well-Formed Conscience
- 84 Principles of Conscience
- The Malformed Conscience 85
- The Conscience and Our Obligation to Others 86
- 87 Conscience and the New Commandment
- Conclusion 88
- Supplementary Reading 89
- Advanced Concepts 93
- 95 locabularv
- Question
- Practical Exercises
- From the Catechism

### Chapter 5: Morality and the Law

- Introduction
- What is Law?
- Types of Law
- Just Civil Law 106
  - Conflicts Between Conscience and Civil Law
- 109 Conclusion

108

- 110 Supplementary Reading
- Advanced Concepts 112
- 113 Vocabulary
- 114 Study Questions
- Practical Exercises 115
- From the Catechism 116

#### 117 **Chapter 6: Morality and Action**

- 119 Introduction
- 120 Analysis of the Human Act
- 123 The Principle of Double Effect
- 124 Errors in Moral Theology
- 127 Conclusion
- 128 Supplementary Reading
- 132 Advanced Concepts
- 135 Vocabulary
- 136 Study Questions
- Practical Exercises 137
- 138 From the Catechism

Table of Contents

- 139 Chapter 7: Sin and Conversion
- 142 Introduction
- 145 What is Sin?
- 147 Sin in Sacred Scriptures
- 149 Mortal and Venial Sins
- 150 Causes of the Loss of the Sense of Sin
- 153 Cooperation in Evil
- 154 Effects of Sin
- 155 Conversion and Forgiveness
- 156 Sidebar: God Forgives, So Why Confess?
- 158 The Sacrament of Reconciliation
- 159 Contrition
- 160 The Last Things
- 166 Conclusion
- Supplementary Reading 167
- 170 Advanced Concepts
- 172 Vocabulary
- 174 Study Questions
- 177 Practical Exercises
- 179 From the Catechism

181 Chapter 8: The Ten Commandments and The Beatitudes

- 183 Introduction
- 184 The Ten Commandments and the Teaching of Christ 

   248
   T

   250
   T

   187
   The Precepts of the Church
   251

   187
   The Beatitudes as the Perfection of the Moral Law
   253

   190
   Sidebar: The Beatitudes
   255

   192
   Conclusion
   256

   193
   Supplementary Reading
   257

   195
   Vocabulary
   257

   96
   Study Questions
   257

   97
   Practical Exercition
   257

- 198 From the Catechism

### 199 Chapter 9: The First Commandment

- 201 Introduction
- 203 Faith
- 204 Sins Against Faith
- 205 Hope
- 205 Sins Against Hope
- 206 Charity
- 207 Sins Against Charity
- 208 The Worship of God: The Virtue of Religion
- 208 Sins Against Religion
- 213 Conclusion
- 214 Supplementary Reading
- 216 Advanced Concepts
- 219 Vocabulary

- 221 Study Questions
- 222 Practical Exercises
- From the Catechism 224
- **Chapter 10: The Second Commandment** 225
- 227 Introduction
- The Grandeur of God's Name 227
- 229 Oaths
- 229 Oaths in Sacred Scripture
- 231 Lawful Use of Oaths
- 231 Vows
- 232 Sins Against the Second Commandment
- 233 Why is it Necessary to Pray?
- 238 Types of Prayer
- 238 The Battle of Prayer
- 239 Conclusion
- Supplementary Reading 240
- 240
- Vocabulary Study Questions 241
- ractical Exercises 242
- From the Catechism
- Chapter 11: The Third Commandment 247 Introduction
- 248 The Sabbath in the Old Testament
  - he Lord's Day in The New Testament
- 250 The History of the Christian Sunday
  - The Obligation to Attend Holy Mass
  - Fulfillment of the Precept of Attending Mass
  - The Obligation to Rest
- Conclusion
- Supplementary Reading
- Vocabulary
- Study Questions
- Practical Exercises
- 260 From the Catechism
- **Chapter 12: The Fourth Commandment** 261
- 263 Introduction
- 263 The Family as a Community of Love
- 264 Observance in the Old Testament
- 265 Duties of Parents to Their Children
- 267 Duties of Children to Their Parents
- 268 Relations with Extended Family
- The Importance of Spousal Unity 269
- 269 Civic Obligations of Citizens
- 271 Governmental Obligations to Citizens
- 271 Conclusion
- Supplementary Reading 273
- 275 Vocabulary
- 276 Study Questions
- 277 Practical Exercises
- 278 From the Catechism

Table of Contents

### 279 Chapter 13: The Fifth Commandment

- 281 Introduction
- 282 Respect for Human Life
- 283 Sins against Human Dignity
- 284 Respect for Our Own Lives
- 285 Respect for the Lives of Others
- 287 Abortion
- 290 In Vitro Fertilization
- 291 Embryonic Stem-Cell Research
- 292 Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide
- 293 Just War
- 295 Self-Defense
- 296 The Arms Race
- 296 Capital Punishment
- 297 Integrity of the Human Body
- 300 Conclusion
- 301 Supplementary Reading
- 305 Advanced Concepts
- Vocabulary 307
- 309 Study Questions
- 311 Practical Exercises
- 312 From the Catechism

## Midwes 313 Chapter 14: The Sixth and Ninth **Commandments**

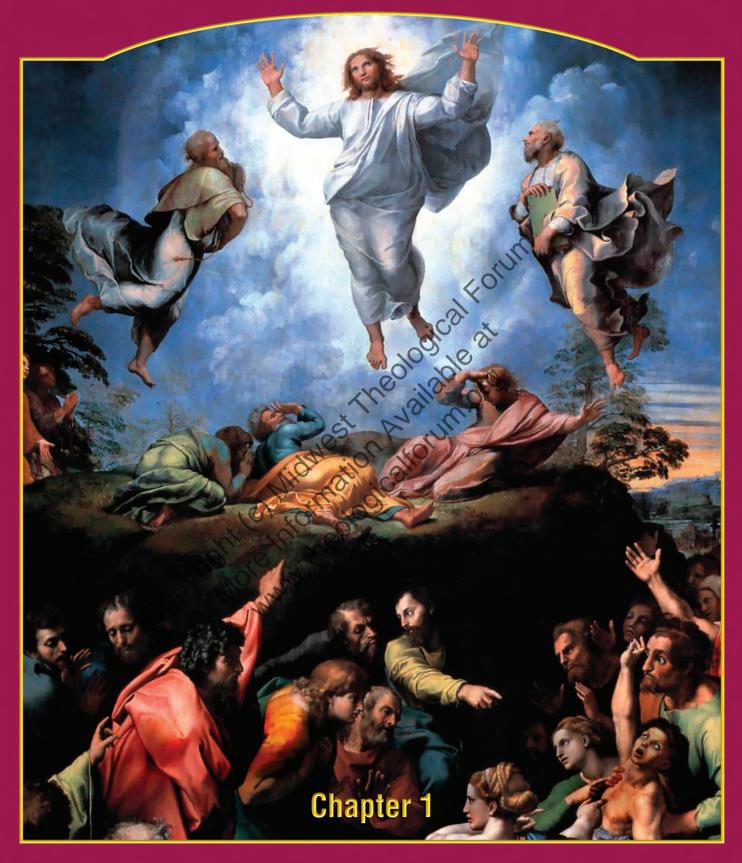
- 315 Introduction
- 317 Marriage and Creation
- 317 Purposes of Marriage
- 319 Properties of Marriage
- 320 Marriage and Sexuality
- 321 Theology of the Body
- 322 Sins Against Marriage
- 325 Sins Against the Openne s to Life in Marriage
- Sidebar: Working with G 326 Natural Family Planning
- 328 Sins Against the Integrity and Dignity of the Conjugal Act and Against the Dignity of the Child
- 329 Sins Against Chastity
- 332 Sins Against Chastity in the Old Testament
- 332 Education in Chastity
- 333 Sidebar: "How Far Can We Go Before It is a Sin?"
- Sidebar: The Sex-Crazed Media and the 335 Christian Response
- 337 Conclusion
- 338 Supplementary Reading
- 343 Advanced Concepts
- 345 Vocabulary
- 348 Study Questions
- 350 Practical Exercises
- 352 From the Catechism

### **Chapter 15: The Seventh and Tenth** 353 **Commandments**

- 357 Introduction
- 358 Human Dominion over Creation
- Stewardship 359
- 360 Seeking the Common Good
- 361 Social Doctrine of the Church
- 362 Role of the Faithful
- 364 International Solidarity
- 366 Ecology
- 367 Theft
- 369 Covetousness
- 369 Restitution
- 371 Conclusion
- Supplementary Reading 372
- 376 Advanced Concepts
- 377 Vocabular
- 378 Study Questi
- 379 Practical Exercises
- 380 atechism

- Introduction 382
- 383 The Idea of Truth in Sacred Scriptures
- Truth and Freedom
- 386 Truth and Discretion
  - 387 Lies and Their Consequences
    - Gravity of the Sin of Lying
  - Sins Against the Reputation of Another 390
  - 391 The Duty to Make Reparations
  - 391 Obligation to Keep Secrets
  - 392 Truth and Martyrdom
  - 392 Conclusion
  - 394 Supplementary Reading
  - 396 Advanced Concepts
  - 397 Vocabulary
  - 398 Study Questions
  - 399 Practical Exercises
  - 400 From the Catechism
  - 401 Chapter 17: Epilogue: Living the **Christian Life**
  - 403 The Imitation of Christ
  - Encounter with Christ 403
  - The Spiritual Life of a Christian 405
  - The Universal Call to Holiness 407
  - 408 Conclusion
  - Christian Morality: A Program for Life 410
  - Vocations in the Christian Life 416
  - **Art and Photo Credits** 419
  - 425 Index

## **Our Moral Life in Christ**



## The Basis For Morality

### OUR MORAL LIFE IN CHRIST

## CHAPTER 1

## The Basis For Morality

magine 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.



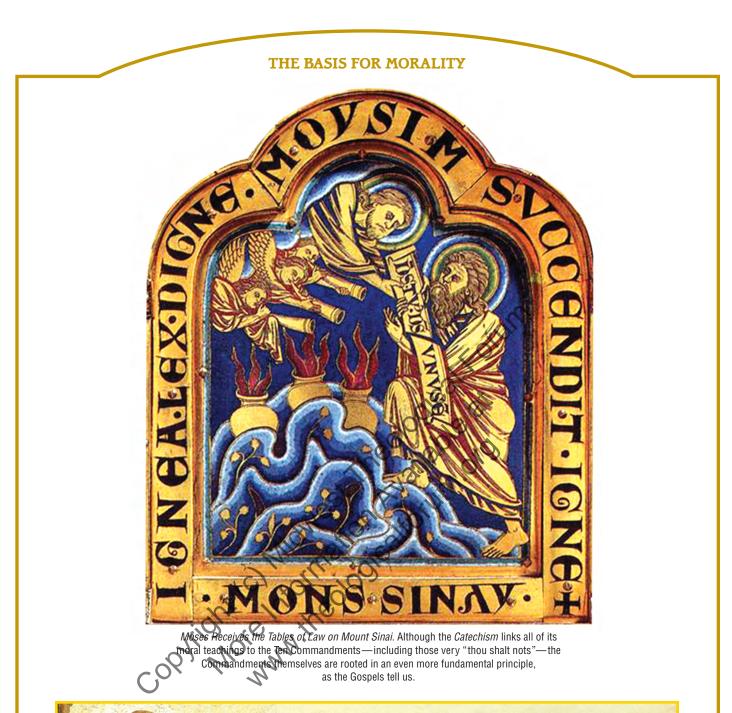
The Bible of Ripoll opened to Genesis. We need to study our "playbooks," the Bible and the teachings of the Church, to learn what Jesus expects of us.

That we may enjoy eternal life with God is the reason Christ became man, suffered, died, and rose again from the dead. His sacrifice on our behalf saves us from the power of sin and death—perils that exist because we sometimes use our God-given free will to make poor moral decisions. 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.<sup>1</sup> (CCC 2001)



## **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?

Chapter 1: The Basis For Morality

### **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 that some kind of moral standards must exist, 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 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*.

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 DAW 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

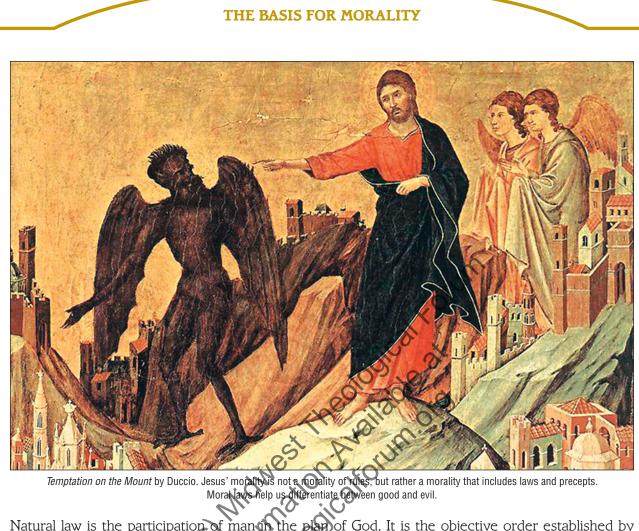


The Samaritan Woman at the Well by Carracci. Love of God and neighbor—Jesus himself fulfills the precepts of the Law: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

ople 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 hardship 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.



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."3

Moral law is not just about vules, but about happiness. When morality is seen only as a series of cold and rigid "thou shall 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."<sup>4</sup> (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 tells 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."5 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."<sup>6</sup> (CCC 1711)

### OUR MORAL LIFE IN CHRIST

Love of God and neighbor, then, is the basic principle on which the 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 fulfi 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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, achievence perfection, and obtain salvation.<sup>9</sup>

**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.<sup>10</sup>

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MORAL LAW

Moral law is composed of 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.<sup>11</sup> 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