

Applying Church Teachings in the Process of Making Moral Decisions

Magisterium, *Sensusfidelium*, and Theology

This article will describe the teaching authority of the Church, known as the *Magisterium*; the source of moral theology, known as the *sensusfidelium*; and the discipline of theology in order to answer the following questions: What or who is the Church? How can the Church help us to make moral decisions? How does the Holy Spirit guide the Church today?

The Catholic Church teaches that Scripture and Tradition form one source of revelation. The two are considered one source, because Tradition is understood as Scripture in the ways it is lived, prayed, and proclaimed in the life of the faithful community. It was the followers of Jesus Christ, the early Church, who wrote the Bible, and it is the Church today that continues to keep the Word of Scripture vital in the contemporary community of God's People.

There are many models, or ways of describing what the Church is and how it functions. Through the centuries of Church history, the Church has been known as the following:

1. institution with a hierarchical authority and administration
2. prophet to the world
3. servant of all God's People
4. missionary
5. mother
6. Body of Christ
7. teacher
8. community of disciples
9. Temple of the Holy Spirit

The Second Vatican Council described the Church as "The People of God who share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964], 9*). In each of these models, the Church serves as a source and a guide for moral decisions and for developing moral character. It is in the role of teacher that the Church exercises its authority as a source for the formation of Christian conscience. This teaching authority is called the Magisterium (in Latin, *magister* means "teacher").

The Catholic Church is responsible for proclaiming and living the "Good News" of Jesus, the final command or sending forth: "Go and preach the Good News to all people, even to the ends of the earth" (see Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15). The Catholic Church maintains that the Pope, and the bishops in union with the Pope, is responsible to teach authoritatively on faith and morals with unique prerogatives. Aided by the Holy Spirit, the Magisterium helps to protect the Church from errors. Either a worldwide gathering of bishops, called an ecumenical council, or the Pope, as head of the bishops, can exercise ultimate doctrinal or moral authority in rendering a definitive judgment on a particular question. When the



Pope defines a dogma of faith, he is said to speak *ex cathedra*, “from the chair,” meaning he is speaking in his authority as successor to Saint Peter, the first Pope. The most recent pronouncement of such an extraordinary statement is the teaching about the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, defined by Pope Pius IX in 1950. Other examples of ordinary teaching authority include the sixteen documents generated by the Second Vatican Council, pastoral letters of bishops’ conferences, encyclical letters of the Pope, or bishops’ pastoral letters to their own dioceses.

The presumption of truth in the Church’s teachings is based on faith that it is the Holy Spirit who guides the Church and will not allow the Church to turn away from God or to self-destruct. Since the Second Vatican Council described the Church as “the People of God,” we understand that the Holy Spirit guides popes, bishops, and laypeople. The Church believes that the People of God have been gifted with an instinct or “sense” about moral truth called the *sensus fidelium*. Vatican II taught the following:

The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterized the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when from the bishops to the last member of the laity, it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. (*Church*, 12)

Because the Holy Spirit is present in the entire People of God, the *sensus fidelium* is a source for moral decision making that complements and includes the magisterial authority of the Church. The *sensus fidelium* is not a majority vote nor a public opinion poll but a charism of the Holy Spirit moving the Church toward truth. The authority of the Church, therefore, is found in Scripture and Tradition expressed in the Magisterium and the *sensus fidelium*.

The question remains as to how to use these sources to make a moral decision. With regard to obedience to authority, one must avoid two extremes:

1. Unquestioning obedience where people are more comfortable under the guardianship of others; the motto here would be “Just tell me what to do.” Though assent of faith and respect for the wisdom of authority are true virtues, blind obedience is not the same as making a moral decision. Moral choice always involves a personal decision.
2. Rejection of authority—the opposite of unquestioning obedience. This is not a sign of maturity but rather a sign of adolescent behavior. For people of reason informed by faith, the acceptance of authority does not mean the abandonment of reason. As people of faith, we assent to a mystery in some situations, even when understanding is not possible.

The balanced and mature way of using authority as a guide for making moral decisions is to respect the wisdom of the Church and combine Church teachings with the other sources: Scripture, natural law, the *sensus fidelium*, empirical sciences, and theology. Church teachings are available to the public and can be found in such sources as the sixteen documents of Vatican II or the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994). These magisterial sources form a foundation for making decisions on many issues.

The process of applying the universal values included in these sources to specific decisions that challenge us today is the work of moral theology. Theology is the science that studies and speaks the Good News to each new generation in terms and ways that are meaningful. A theologian is a degreed professional who writes or teaches about the faith, describing the foundations of faith for diverse audiences and investigating implications of the faith for the way we live. New moral situations and challenges emerge as medicine, technology, and global societies continue to develop. Issues not yet even dreamed of will confront us tomorrow. Today we can clone animals; tomorrow humans? Today we



can map human genes; tomorrow re-engineer them? What we will be able to do might not be what we should do. Moral theology will help us in making those decisions.

Even though most of us are not official “moral theologians,” we can use the same method to make moral choices. To do moral theology, even in everyday life, is to consult all the sources of reason and faith, including Scripture, natural law, Magisterium, *sensus fidelium*, empirical sciences, and theology, and then ask the questions: What if? What else? How? When? As a student of moral theology, you can gift others with your understanding so they can come to the necessary freedom in God to make their decisions well. Your study is not only for you but also for others, a gift to the Church and to your society.

Recognizing Moral Issues

Recognizing moral issues can be a challenge. We are surrounded with realities that often numb us into complacency. In society, issues such as war, poverty, immigration, or child abuse seem so overwhelming that we might feel any individual effort we attempt to make would be insignificant and futile. In scientific and medical advances, many issues are morally controversial—stem cell research, fertility and reproductive technologies, and so on—and most of us lack the professional expertise to decide for ourselves the value and goodness of such progress. Living in a fast-paced world of ever changing politics, economics, social values, and scientific and medical breakthroughs can dizzy us. Ignoring the issues or even insulating ourselves from them may seem easier. Students often explain that they consider reading or watching the news to be a depressing waste of time. They feel that because they cannot solve the issues, they would rather not be confronted with them. Ignorance of contemporary issues seems to create a more manageable personal life. After all, why should we invest personal concern, time, or emotions in problems we cannot solve?

Remember what was said previously: Insulating myself from moral challenges that surround me is, in fact, a decision. It is actually a decision to live a life where other people’s problems are not our problem. We are all in it for ourselves. The attitude of “You work on your problem, I’ll work on mine” is a characteristic of individualism so woven into the fabric of our contemporary society that it can be a stumbling block to true moral living.

A primary challenge to moral living, then, is to live with eyes and hearts wide open to the realities of the world of yesterday and today and to the possibilities of tomorrow.

Faith traditions, including Christianity, have rich histories of leading people to holiness in and through the challenges of daily life. Christians call this Incarnational living. This means that the ordinary and the extraordinary events of our lives can be made holy because Jesus Christ became part of our human reality, embraced it, and transformed it into God’s reality. To become fully human, therefore, requires a moral decision by each of us to be aware of the needs, hopes, dreams, possibilities, fears, and pain of other humans and the world we share. Put into a Christian phrase, it is called Christian intentionality. However, it goes beyond all faith traditions. Natural law theory, at the same time, would argue that it is a universal imperative placed on all humanity. This universal imperative—to be human—is integral to Incarnational living and to Christian intentionality. Admitting the interdependence of all humanity is a first step in moral living.

When I admit that I am a part of a living, breathing, human community, I have awakened my “moral imagination.” The next step is to inform myself of what is happening in the world, for better or worse. Moral issues can be found as close as my classroom, dorm, family, sorority, fraternity, or campus, or as far away as the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Asia, and now, outer space, beyond the planet Earth. (For example, “Star Wars” missile defense systems; satellites of all kinds—where would television and



cell phones be without them?; space junk; and proposed colonies on the moon are some of the everyday issues in the news that will not be going away; in fact, they will only increase.)

Moral issues, moreover, go further. Moral issues are also political, economic, medical, or sexual. Moral issues are present in the bedroom and the boardroom, the media and advertising, banks and food pantries, universities and preschools. What might I do? The daily newspaper might be a good place to begin a personal confrontation with the real world, but even here, some critics of journalism would remind us that the reporting of news involves moral decisions about what information to include or exclude, which nuances to add, and so on. Therefore, no news is *pure* information. With that caution in mind, I can continue with the news as a starting place: What are the headlines? What stories have been deemed by the editorial staff to be worthy of our intellectual and emotional energies? The wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East; conflict in Africa; acts of terrorism; child abductions; airplane crashes; wildfires; global warming; political disputes; economic trends; scientific breakthroughs; acts of heroism.

Turn then to the sports section. What stories have been included along with the statistics of winners and losers? Allegations of misconduct by players, coaches, officials; bribery or betting scandals; performance-enhancing drugs. Who is deemed worthy of admission into a hall of fame? Who are our true sports heroes?

Now turn to the entertainment section. Check the movies that are playing. What do they say about society's appetite for violence, sex, deceit, or decadence? Are there some movies that challenge us to explore new ways of viewing reality or that open our eyes to the needs and tragedies of people? What entertains us or makes us laugh? Slapstick has amused us for many generations, but is it at the expense of respect for a particular race, gender, or creed?

Turn to the business section. Money is never morally neutral, because it involves the human being who needs it, earns it, spends it, shares it, invests it, saves it, and so on. Businesses are deemed moral or immoral depending on how they affect the lives of workers, stockholders, CEOs, managers, and consumers. Dishonesty, greed, or corruption can topple the smallest or the mightiest corporation, affecting the lives of countless people. Mergers, takeovers, and acquisitions might seem objective and carefully calculated but can involve the often-hidden human expense of loss of jobs; diminishment of income; destruction of pensions and insurance coverage; uprooting of families; and changed lives, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Economic and business decisions can improve the quality of life for many people or line the pockets of the exclusive few.

Turn to the comics section. Some of the wisest philosophers of our day share their profound insights in the form of a comic strip. Many have taken on the issues of honesty, fidelity, and friendship and the consequences of deceit, selfishness, laziness, pride, and so on. Their pithy wisdom and often-humorous look into our own humanity make this section of the paper the first section many people open each day. Here, we see our own moral dilemmas unmasked. We can relate to Garfield's sloth and gluttony or Lola's disregard for speed limits and traffic lights. A successful comic strip is one that helps us to see ourselves. Comics are valuable moral material as we humorously examine what makes us "tick" and how we choose to become a certain sort of person.

The local newspaper is a valuable, but not exclusive, tool for broadening our moral imagination. Internet, television, radio, magazines, and periodicals add to our sources of moral issues. Though we might not have the energy to address a study of every issue confronting humanity, there are times when we are personally challenged to deal with a specific moral dilemma. For example, honesty is a moral issue in politics, economics, business, entertainment, sports, and so on. There are ramifications of honesty or dishonesty at the international, national, or local levels of all human endeavors. Sometimes honesty can be a personal issue in the classroom, in research, or in personal relationships.



What Would I Do If . . . ?

This incomplete question can frame the scenario for many decisions a student might encounter. Try these examples. What would I do if someone offered me a copy of an exam I was scheduled to take tomorrow? What would I do if I needed an “A” to get into graduate school, and the only way I could be sure to get it was to take answers into the exam room by writing them on my hand or on hidden notes? What would I do if I saw someone else doing this? What if I could save money on cable access or Internet access by splicing wires and “sharing” with my neighbors? Most of these scenarios involve personal integrity and might be guided by conscience, but what if the issue seemed more complex and required information and guidelines from sources other than a personal sense of right or wrong?

Let’s take a high-visibility example on campus that affects the school and its reputation. What if I am an athlete on scholarship? There are many demands on my time and energy. My grades were good enough to get into college, but keeping up my GPA has been a challenge. I feel a sense of responsibility to my team and my school to stay eligible to play. Traveling to away games creates academic challenges. I miss Thursday and Friday classes almost every time we travel. I get notes and the instructor cooperates, but it is tough to grasp the information and the concepts. If I do not do well on midterms, my career on the team and my scholarship are in jeopardy. Teachers have accommodated my absence from midterms by sending the exam with a proctor who will let me take the test on the bus or in a hotel room. They all trust me to be honest, but the pressure is on. I have a responsibility to my team, my school, and my family. It would be so easy to use notes of some kind to help me get the grade I need. So much is riding on this that I am confused as to the right thing to do.

Certain questions and sources should inform my decision. What are the facts here? What is my GPA? What have I needed to do in order to maintain it? What are the team and school rules for administration of exams off campus? What is the likelihood of being discovered using unauthorized assistance? What would be the consequences of being discovered? How prevalent is such activity? What are the consequences if I do poorly on this exam? What are the consequences if I lose my scholarship? What would be the consequences for the team if I were discovered? Will the whole team be held suspect? These are all real questions and concerns for such a decision. When asking so many questions, I feel like a detective and a lawyer, but decisions have ramifications for myself and society. Detectives and lawyers try to raise questions that are important and significant, but how do they find answers?

The Bible offers stories about people who needed to make difficult decisions. The Bible also puts forth both honesty and responsibility as important virtues. Warriors and great leaders are praised for their cunning in securing favorable outcomes in difficult situations. The point seems that God helps those who help themselves. At the same time, other stories praise those who put their trust in the Lord during times of insecurity and self-doubt. Some stories seem to say that honesty is its own reward, even if the results are undesirable. Is the Bible telling me to do whatever it takes to meet my responsibilities, or is it saying that my greatest responsibility is to be honest at all costs? These values seem to be in conflict in my life. How can I choose both when they seem mutually exclusive? Even the Ten Commandments include a prohibition against deceit but also a command to honor my mother and father. The moral dilemma seems to be whether living up to so many expectations justifies cheating on an exam.

Seeking wisdom in this difficult decision, I could turn to the natural law, which I believe to be inherent to human behavior. What is the essential human obligation in this situation? What do reason and my conscience tell me? My conscience would bother me if I referred to unauthorized notes in order to do well on my exam. Maybe I could rationalize my way out of feelings of guilt. Maybe those feelings would haunt me even though I would be glad to stay on the team and keep my scholarship. Would I be able to live with myself?



Does my faith tradition, my church, offer any advice that might help me here? I remember my pastor once noting how difficult it is to maintain integrity in today's complex world. I remember a religion teacher who once said that *how* we reach our intended goal does matter. From what I remember, it seems that the decision is either moral or immoral depending on the integrity of the intention, the means, and the circumstances. The result might be desirable but wrong because of the means used. This all seemed so useless and academic when we discussed it, but it makes sense now. If I use notes on a closed-book exam, even if I intend to accomplish something important to me and other people, I will go against my integrity. I cannot use dishonest means to meet my responsibilities in this situation. Cheating is not the answer to my moral dilemma. The situation worries and frightens me, but I know this is my decision for now—to try my honest best and face the consequences with whatever courage and hope I can muster.

Some decisions are difficult and complicated. We might even question a decision and wonder if we made the right choice, the “good” choice. How do we know if we have made the best decision? That is difficult. Sometimes, only time will tell. Sometimes, if new information becomes available, we might need to change our mind about a decision. If a person has truly sought the sources of moral wisdom, has reflected and prayed about a decision, chooses what to do, and then discovers it was the wrong choice, he is free to change his mind and make a new choice, but he need not be troubled with guilt for his original decision. As people of reason, we can only stand where we are and make decisions with the resources available to us. As people of faith, we believe in a God who understands our human limitations and forgives our failings. Integrity before God is to live life as best we can. Morality is a lifelong journey of discovering and choosing the good. Subtract an “o” from “good” to discover the real purpose of our journey—God.

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