

# MORAL LIVING

## *By Jimmy Seghers*

### **Introduction**

Perhaps there is no issue that defines our age as does the question of what constitutes moral behavior. Two opposed positions stand at the center of this debate. Those who adhere to *objective morality* hold that moral behavior is determined by immutable principles that define certain action as intrinsically evil regardless of their attending circumstances. There are no exceptions. Therefore, for example, the intentional killing of an innocent person is always called murder and is a grave evil no matter the circumstances. Abortion, then, would fall under this principle, and could never be morally justified. It's murder!

Those who adhere to *subjective morality* reject the idea of absolutes with the exception, of course, that there are absolutely no absolutes. Therefore, for example, the intentional killing of an innocent person may not be murder and a grave evil depending on the circumstances. In the case of abortion the mother's desire not to deliver her baby constitutes a sufficient condition that morally justifies taking the baby's life.

In between these polar positions are those who maintain objective principles of morality when a given behavior may affect them negatively, but hold to subjective principles of morality when that is judged to be in their best interest. This is sometimes called the *double standard*. Let me illustrate. Some years ago the owner of a lucrative business instructed his accountant to keep two sets of books. One set recorded accurately the income and expenses of this enterprise. The other set, used for filing income taxes, exaggerated the expenses and underreported the revenue. The owner rationalized that filing fraudulent tax returns was morally correct. However, he was quite indignant about the crass immorality of his accountant when he discovered that the accountant, who was lying and cheating for him, was also lying and cheating from him.

The reality is that subjective morality and the double standard create a climate of moral anarchy that ultimately reduces right and wrong to whomever has the most power. In other words, might makes right. Let's consider abortion as our example. Based on the same principle that morally justifies abortion, what is to prevent me from killing any innocent person for my personal gain or convenience? Granted it may be illegal, but I must be caught and convicted. Besides, laws defining murder may change as was the case in Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, and our own country.

It's important to recognize that legality does not make actions moral any more than illegality makes behaviors immoral. No society can sustain itself by relying exclusively on law, policemen, the courts, and jail. In this context, let's examine further the issue of murder as witnessed in the headlines of our daily newspapers. I randomly chose headlines from the *Times Picayune* on Saturday, February 9, 2008.

A 23 year-old woman killed two fellow students at Louisiana Technical College in Baton Rouge, then committed suicide. In Portsmouth, Ohio, William Lane stabbed his estranged wife in front of her fifth-grade class and then his girlfriend behind her home before he took his own life. In Kirkwood, Missouri, Charles Thornton killed five people at a City Council meeting because of his rage over thousands of dollars in parking tickets and citations. In Reno, Nevada Darren Mack was given a life sentence in his ex-wife's stabbing death and the attempted murder of the judge who handled their bitter divorce. In New Orleans two young men were wounded, one fatally, in a shoot-out behind a Central City snowball stand.

What is the lesson to be learned? The real issue in these violent acts is not the availability weapons, but a culture of death caused by a society that has embraced subjective morality. When one type of murder becomes legal and politically acceptable, all forms of murder also come into play by those who feel justified by their circumstances. Once the murder of innocent babies, became legal and morally acceptable, what is the moral restraint that would prevent a murder of revenge?

The Catholic Church courageously stands alone as it proclaims her members the obligation to adhere to behavior that is based on principles of objective morality, not the sifting sands of popular opinion and the winds of what is deemed politically acceptable. The reason for this unchangeable stance is the truth that God demands behavior based on objective principles.

### **The Ten Commandments**

On Mount Sinai God gave the Hebrew people the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:2-17; Deut 5:6-21; the summary in the *Catechism* is marvelous, CCC #'s 2052-2557).

**1. I am the Lord your God; you shall not have strange gods before me.**

This commandment sums up our duty toward God, and it is the foundation of all the other commandments.

**2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.**

The second commandment protects the honor of God's sacred name and forbids rash oaths.

**3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.**

This commandment establishes a holy time of rest in the Lord with our family and friends away from the labor of work. The Catholic Church obligates all Catholics to attend Mass on Sunday as the minimum requirement of fulfilling this commandment.

**4. Honor your father and your mother.**

This commandment expressly addresses the obligation of children to their parents. However, it covers the duties to extended family members, elders, pupils to teachers, employees to employers, subordinates to leaders, citizens to their country, and to those who administer or govern it.

**5. You shall not kill (literally "murder").**

This commandments establishes the sacredness of every human life.

**6. You shall not commit adultery.**

All humans are called to a vocation of chastity. So while the emphasis of this commandment focuses on any sexual relationship of a married person with someone other than their spouse, it also forbids a sexual relationship between unmarried persons. Also forbidden is lust, masturbation, pornography, prostitution, homosexual acts, acts of contraception, polygamy, incest, living together, and divorce and remarriage.

**7. You shall not steal.**

This commandment forbids unjustly taking or keeping the goods of one's neighbor, and wronging him in any way with respect to his property.

**8. You shall not bear false witnesses against your neighbor.**

The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others.

**9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.**

This commandment forbids consenting to illicit sexual desires.

**10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.**

The tenth commandment forbids consenting to illicit desires to acquire another's goods.

Notice they are called "commandments," not suggestions. According to the *Catechism*: "They express man's fundamental duties toward God and toward his neighbor;" therefore, "they are fundamentally *immutable*, and the *oblige always and everywhere*" (CCC 2072). "In their primordial content" the Ten Commandments are "*grave obligations*" (CCC 1072). Thus, murder must always be considered a serious sin that destroys the divine life in the soul bringing spiritual death.

However, the Commandments also carry obligations in matters which, in themselves, are light. Insulting someone in anger also violates the Fifth Commandment, but its gravity is not grave and would not destroy the life of grace in the soul (CCC 2073). Therefore, the New Testament makes a clear distinction between sins that are mortal and those that are not (1 Jn 5:16-17).

The seriousness with which God demands obedience to his commands is seen in Deuteronomy beginning with chapter 27, when Moses ordered the Levites to pronounce blessings and curses on all the people while the tribes of Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali as they stood on Mount Ebal, and the tribes of Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin stood on Mount Gerizim (Deut 27:11-13). Moses ended this great discourse with these words:

"I call heaven and earth today to witness against you; I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him" (Deut 30:1-20).

One final note before we examine Jesus' teaching. There is a vital connection between love and obedience. They are interchangeable terms because obedience is love acted out.

In the opening paragraph on the Ten Commandments the *Catechism* cites Matthew 19:16-19:

"Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" To the young man who asked this question, Jesus answers first by invoking the necessity to recognize God as the "One there is who is good," as the supreme Good and the source of all good. Then Jesus tells him: "If you

would enter life, keep the commandments." And he cites for his questioner the precepts that concern love of neighbor: "You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother." Finally Jesus sums up these commandments positively: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (CCC 2052 citing Mt 19:16-19).

For the Catholic Church, the words of Jesus are decisive. Keeping the commandments is an essential requirement "to have eternal life" (CCC 2064, 2068).

According to Murphy's Law, the Golden Rule is formulated as follows: "He who has the gold makes the rules." While this statement is intended to evoke humor, it certainly applies to God and eternity. Moral living lies in conforming our intentions and behaviors to God's commands. God makes the rules that we are to live by because he knows what is best for us both in this life and in the next. The consequences of our choices are eternal. The history of the human race amply demonstrates the disastrous results of doing things "our way." We need only reflect on the slide into the darkness of paganism that is rapidly enveloping our country. I have known many highly successful men and women as the world judges success. However, I know of no one who is truly happy and at peace that has not made God the center of his or her life.

It is a fatal flaw to think that morality is a man-made system of ethical behavior based on one's determination of right or wrong. Genuine morality finds its origin in God. God first revealed his ethical program to Adam and Eve. Subsequently, he reaffirmed it with the Ten Commandments. However, it finds its perfection in the life and teaching of Jesus.

### **Not Merely a System of Ethical Behavior**

We have moved ahead of ourselves in the sense that the focus on objective standards and the Ten Commandments, might give the false idea that Christianity is merely a system of ethical behavior. In that case Christianity could be reduced to a set of rules. This was the narrow, legalistic morality of the Pharisees that Jesus condemned (Mt 12:1-14, 22-30; 23:1-33). Jesus came to institute a radical new way of living. He came to *make* us good by transforming us interiorly with the divine life:

"I come that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

We enter this new life through the sacrament of Baptism, which fills us with sanctifying grace. Grace first transforms our soul; then it transforms our actions. The dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit also infuses us with the moral virtues, especially the *cardinal virtues* of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, which are the foundation of the other moral virtues.

- *Prudence* guides us to see what we should do and what we should avoid in order to save our souls, as well as leading us to choose the best means to reach heaven.
- *Justice* directing us to render to each person that which is his due.
- *Fortitude* gives us the strength to do God's will when it is difficult when we are in the midst of trials and difficulties.

- *Temperance* gives us the strength to control evil desires and to use rightly the things that please our senses.

Christianity is not fundamentally a set of rules to be followed, but a life to be lived. It means embracing a vocation to follow Christ (Lk 9:23, 59; Mk 8:34; Mt 19:16; 23:7-8). St. Paul called us to this interior transformation when he wrote:

“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13:14; cf. Gal 4:19).

In his letter to the Philippians St. Paul gave the motto that should direct every Christian’s behavior:

“Have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5).

Jesus set the example that we are to follow:

“For I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:15).

Jesus made this statement when washing the feet of his Apostles. Shortly, thereafter, He specified the daunting manner in which every Christian is called to live:

“A new commandment I give you that you love one another; *even as I have loved you*, that you also love one another” (Jn 13:34).

If that is not intimidating enough, he added His criteria of determining who is His genuine disciple:

“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

I have often wondered how many of us could be fairly convicted of being a Christian if our life was evaluated on that principle?

The imitation of Christ is humanly impossible apart from grace, but with grace even loving like Jesus becomes possible (Jn 15:5; Phil 4:13). Loving like Christ loves always entails the death of self. Thus, St. Paul understood that following Christ always passes through the cross:

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:19-20).

Pope John Paul the Great gave us the following summary:

“Following Christ is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being. Being a follower of Christ means becoming conformed to him who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross (cf. Phil 2:5-8). Christ dwells by faith in the heart of the believer (cf. Eph 3:17) and thus the disciple is conformed to the Lord. This is the effect of grace, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us”<sup>1</sup>

So while the Christian must recognize and avoid what is forbidden, his emphasis should be positive because it is centered on what ought to be done. After all, we will be judged according to the good we have lived as well as the evil we have done.

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<sup>1</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, # 21.

## **Freedom**

Freedom is another of the fundamental ideas about which much confusion exists. It certainly does not mean the individual can do whatever he wants. Freedom is that power of the will that allows us to choose to act or not to act. Because the acts we choose are both free and deliberate, we are responsible for them. Therefore, God holds us accountable for our actions. As a reminder we acknowledge at Mass: “I confess ... that I have sinned *through my own fault* in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do.”

Beginning with the devil's deception of Adam and Eve, there exists the false notion that sin is a proper exercise of our freedom, indeed, sinning sets us free. The history of the human race, as well as our personal experiences, demonstrates the folly of this idea. St. Paul instructed the Galatians:

“Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1). What does this mean?

Jesus freed us from the slavery of sin. We must exercise that freedom by choosing what is good, often in a fierce struggle against our disordered passions, and the temptations of the world and the devil. Only the foolish choice of sin brings us back under the tyranny of sin and its addictive tentacles. God made us free because where there is no freedom there is no capacity to love. It is amazing that He who needs nothing and created us out of nothing, longs to be freely chosen by us in return. This is the mystery of creation and Redemption. It is the wonder of God's love.

## **Conscience**

In the fable *Pinocchio*, Jimminy Cricket sings: “and always let your conscience be your guide. The Catechism clarifies the meaning of conscience:

CCC # 1778

“Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed.”

## **The Tale of Two Men**

In the sixteenth century St. Thomas More (d. 1535) and Martin Luther (d. 1546) took opposite positions based on their understanding of the principle of conscience. St. Thomas More was beheaded on July 6 because he refused to support Henry VIII's divorce of Katherine of Aragon and his marriage to Anne Boleyn. His final words on the scaffold were: “The King's good servant, but God's First.” Luther used his principle of the “Bible alone” (*sola scriptura* in Latin) to rupture Christianity.

The Protestant scholar Keith Mathison judges that Luther's most famous statement regarding the authority of Scripture was made at the Diet of Worms in 1521, which is cited below:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, p. 95.

“Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or of councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by *manifest reasoning* I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my *conscience* is taken captive by God’s word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against one’s conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”<sup>3</sup>

Luther added two sources to the authority of Scripture: *his* manifest reasoning and *his* conscience. Both were highly subjective, but he rejected the objective guides of Apostolic Tradition and the teaching authority of the Church. Only Luther, of course, could decide the extent to which *manifest reasoning* was persuasive to him. Only Luther could determine the manner in which his *conscience* “is taken captive by God’s word.” In 1522 Luther wrote: “I do not admit that my doctrine can be judged by anyone, even the angels. He who does not receive my doctrine cannot be saved”<sup>4</sup>

### **Conscience is Not Opinion or Feelings**

Under the high sounding claim of elevating the Bible to the lofty position of the supreme, ultimate authority in matters of faith and morals, Luther’s principle of individual interpretation subjected God’s revelation to the whims of each individual. Thus the *World Christian Encyclopedia* reported in 2001 that there were 33,820 Christian denominations.

For Martin Luther and many contemporary Christians, including many Catholics, conscience is a murky idea adrift in a sea of subjective feelings cut off from objective reality. The purpose of conscience is to recognize good and evil, but *it does not determine what is good and evil*. Someone may feel that a very large animal with tusks, a long trunk and big ears is a canary, but it still won’t chirp, lay eggs, or fly. Until 1930, for example, *all* Christian churches taught that contraception was seriously sinful. Protestant churches abandoned this clear consistent teaching in 1930 and 1931. Many Catholics abandoned the teaching of the Catholic Church in the rebellion against *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. However redefining sin does not change its underlining reality just as renaming an elephant doesn’t make it a canary.

### **Forming Conscience**

What is often missed in the discussion of conscience is the serious obligation each person has to properly form his conscience. Training ones conscience does not mean that we can do whatever we “feel” like doing, or that we should follow the herd in what is considered acceptable behavior. Many have the fallacious idea that “their conscience” is a kind of trump card that overrides all other considerations. God is truth. Because Jesus is the Word who is God, He is “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Therefore He is the standard to which all consciences should be formed.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Bettenson editor, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. 199 – emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> Grisar, *Martin Luther: His Life and Work*, pp. 420-422.

CCC # 1783

Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.

Some one might object: “That all sounds well and good, but in this confusing world with so many conflicting voices how is it possible to know the truth, even about God? After all, the men and women who split Christianity into numerous denominations are not fools. Many of them are sincerely trying to understand the truths God had revealed so they could faithfully follow them. So how can we form a certain conscience built on the bedrock of Christ?” These are important questions.

God has never left his people adrift without sure guides who taught his children what to believe and how to behave. In Old Testament times God sent Moses and other prophets as conduits of truth. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon the priest-scribe Ezra “read plainly from the book of the law of God, *interpreting* it so that all could understand what was read” (Neh 8:8). The sacred text affirms that Ezra and the Levites “were *instructing* the people” (Neh 8:9).

In the New Testament Jesus gave the Church to the world as a sure guide in forming consciences. When writing to his spiritual son Timothy, St. Paul was inspired to say:

“If I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the *church, the pillar and bulwark of the truth*” (1 Tim 3:15).

This unique infallible authority in matters of faith and practice was invested in Peter and his successors, the Popes, and those bishops who teach in union with him.

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:18-19).

The great advantage this gives Catholics cannot be overestimated. In the insanity of the prevailing culture that promotes divorce, fornication, adultery, pornography, abortion, and homosexuality, Catholics have a certain guide to form their consciences. Undeterred by the shifting winds of opinion, the Catholic Church’s clear proclamation of the Gospel has remained unchanged into the twenty-first century.

### **Natural Law**

This discussion regarding conscience, guided by divine revelation as authentically taught by the Catholic Church, does not mean that those who do not belong to the Catholic Church get a pass.



Oh, no, they are just disadvantaged, because they only have the natural law to rely on. No one can live a morally reprehensible life without answering to God for his misbehavior. This is why authentic evangelizing is a vital part of the Christian message.

CCC # 1954

The natural law is written and engraved in the soul of each and every man, because it is human reason ordaining him to do good and forbidding him to sin . . . But this command of human reason would not have the force of law if it were not the voice and interpreter of a higher reason to which our spirit and our freedom must be submitted.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of natural law is easy to understand when we consider physical nature. It is the nature of a rock, for example, to sink when we toss it into a pond. In contrast, it is not the nature of a man to float if he falls off a ladder. However, in the context of human behavior and conscience the natural law is built into human nature and is knowable by reason, but that is not easy.

Humans have the capacity to know by reason alone what behaviors are in accord with human nature and are therefore good. Those behaviors that are not in accord with his nature are evil. Unlike divine revelation, the natural law is built into human nature. Every law, however, has a lawgiver. God, who is the creator of mankind, is that lawgiver. This explains why those who reject God also reject the idea of the natural law.

St. Paul addresses the natural law in his Letter to the Romans. Reading his words below brings sadness, because it sounds like he is describing contemporary American society:

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife,

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<sup>5</sup> Quoting Leo XIII, *Libertas praestantissimum*, 597.

deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them" (Rom 1:18-32).

The Catholic Church defends the validity of the natural law, but it is not specifically a Christian doctrine. The idea is clearly taught in the writings of pagans like Aristotle, Sophocles, and Cicero among others.

### **True Morality: Love In Action**

When I search for a words to describe God's love, "wildness" and "folly" come to mind, but these terms, like every other expression seems woefully inadequate. God is the great lover beyond our imagination, because He "is love" (Jn 4: 8). St. John adds:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son" (Jn 3:16).

Even the Apostle John, who stood at the foot of the cross was at a loss of words describing God's love. He could only remark in awe that He loved us "unto the end" (Jn 13:1).

St. Margaret Mary speaking about Jesus' love wrote: "Here is the Heart which loved me so much that it spared nothing, to the point of being emptied and consumed, to give them proof of that love." Our past sins, faults and present limitations must remain a source of humility and repentance. Humility, so we will recall our vulnerability and rely on Jesus. Repentance, so we can constantly express our gratitude for the limitless mercy given to us.

In responding to Christ, the self-sacrificing love expressed in our actions is everything. The great mystic and director of souls, St. John of the Cross, wrote: "The smallest movement of pure love is worth more to the Church than all works put together." St. Therese said on her deathbed: "It is love alone that counts." The saints recognized the amazing reality of God's love, he invites us, "abide in my love" (Jn 13:33; 15:9). Free falling into Jesus arms was the key to their holiness.

In an ancient homily given to a married couple on their wedding day, the priest reminds them that their life is hidden before their eyes. However, they can anticipate that their life together will be filled with good times and bad, joy and sorrow, fulfillment and sacrifices. Everyone finds the trials and sacrifices of marriage difficult and burdensome. Love makes it bearable. Perfect love makes it a joy.

What is said of marriage applies to our relationship to Jesus Christ, who Sacred Scripture describes as the heavenly bridegroom. When our love is little, keeping the the Commandments are irksome. However, when our love is perfect keeping the commandments, even surrendering our life, is a joy. The fire of God's love was poured into us during our Baptism and Confirmation. When we acknowledge our littleness and have confidence in God, it flames up inside us. Aware of our weakness, we then rely on the power of the Holy Spirit who transforms us into Christ. Then we can acknowledge with St. Paul:

“When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10).

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