

Christian Morality

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Basis of Catholic Christian Moral Teachings

The basis of all Catholic Christian morality is our belief in the God who created all things and in Jesus who taught us even better how to live. We believe we are created in God's image and that we, and all creation, are basically good. Yet we recognize our own tendencies toward evil, especially in an excess of our desires. The Ten Commandments are part of the code known to the early Israelites that helped them to live better lives in relationship with Yahweh. We believe in the same values, with certain changes because of our knowledge of Jesus Christ.

We believe Jesus, as God become human "God among us," has most truly shown us how to live. Our moral life is based on trying to live and treat others as Jesus did. The Bible is the primary source for information on the life of Jesus. In it, we find that the Reign of God (or Kingdom of God) is the central focus of Jesus' teaching.

Exactly what the Reign of God might mean is not clear. However, we know that it is a way of living which transforms us when we live it and transforms the world when our actions are consistent with it. At the core of the teaching are the two commandments: "Love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole mind, and with all your strength" and "Love your neighbour as yourself." This implies that a certain selflessness is an intrinsic part of the Reign of God, where we treat others as though they were Christ, since we see Christ in them.

Jesus demanded faith of his followers (miracles only happened for people of faith) and on-going conversion (repentance), recognizing that we will never do all that we could. But Jesus challenged all to become his disciples, leaving home and possessions, and "taking up your cross." Thus, it is not always easy to follow his teachings. The Catholic Church maintains this ideal that we all should be trying to live a perfect life. Since we know that it is not possible, we have sacraments like Reconciliation, penitential rites at Mass, and one time during the year (Lent) when we try to focus on our own lives and how we are continually called to be better. We must, as Jesus' followers, always continue to strive to be better, without focusing on the mistakes of the past.

Catholic Moral Teachings

Catholic moral teachings can be divided roughly into two types: social teachings (involving all of society) and personal teachings (involving each individual's call to live a moral life).

Social teachings have to do with the social order, with what we often call "social justice." This is based on the dignity of human beings created by God and on a focus on the common good of all. Over the last century there have been many papal encyclicals on social justice, enumerating the rights of all people to a just

wage, freedom from oppression, fair treatment, freedom from discrimination, adequate food, shelter and clothing, etc. Such issues were included in the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*). These recognize that working for justice in the social arena is not something extra, but an intrinsic part of living the gospel. If we are not doing something, we are not fully living the gospel!

Individual Christian Morality

The individual teachings are based on trying to help individuals be the kind of person a Christian is called to become. Again, this is not a light or easy undertaking. Rather than following a set of rules, we are called to constant conversion: a process by which our whole life is shaped by the gospel message. We are to make God the centre and source of our being. We are to allow ourselves to be transformed by that redemptive, healing presence of God and then allow God to continue to work through us to redeem and heal others and the whole world, enemies as well as friends, the outcasts as well as the respectable, the poor as well as the rich, sinners as well as the righteous; a constant process of conversion.

How do we do this? We have to keep trying to find our way. One person asked if it meant that we give up all we had. Jesus did ask a rich young man to do just that. If we cannot, then perhaps we are too materialistic. If much of our time is focused on having a BMW, Porsche, a big house, monthly vacation, a large varied wardrobe, etc., then maybe we have strayed from the gospel message that says we are to share our surplus with those who have less.

Guilt? Sin?

Within the context of conversion, one always needs to look at the past in order to critique our actions, such as during Lent. This is important so that we can choose how we want to act in the future. We are not to keep looking back! Guilt, as a motivation to do better next time, can be good; guilt, as a looking back, cannot be good. We are generally familiar with the latter, since it is used by many parents. A general focus on individual sin in the past has led often to an emphasis on guilt. A focus on continued conversion can get away from too strong an emphasis on guilt and sin.

Because of an overemphasis on sin and guilt, they have not been strongly preached in the last couple decades. It does not mean that we somehow no longer believe in personal sin. With an emphasis on our relationship with God, we can recognize when we do not live up to that relationship (when we sin) without an overemphasis that focuses too much on the act itself.

Interestingly, an overemphasis on relationship with God can, if we let it, undermine our own sense of ongoing conversion. We can get to the point where we think of our individual relationship as "good enough" and have no sense of all the more we could do, if we only recognized it.

Conscience

The basis for moral decisions is an informed conscience. We have the responsibility to “train” our conscience based on studying the gospel message, Church teachings, our own education and experience and follow it! This does not mean doing whatever we want, but what we come to know as right, even if it is difficult, especially if it is difficult!

We know that following our conscience does not guarantee that we will not make mistakes. One of the best gauges we can use to try to prayerfully evaluate our conscience is to look back on our actions periodically and compare them to the ideals in the gospel stories (e.g. Luke 6:27-38: Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, do good to those who hate you, give to others).

Source: <http://www.aboutcatholics.com/beliefs/christian-morality/>