

# Living life to the fullest!

## *Catholic morality and lifestyle*



### Approaching the Topic

'How do we define good and evil? On what basis do we distinguish between right and wrong?' All the great philosophers, right up to our own day, have wrestled with such questions. At a more practical day-to-day level, whether we realise it or not, all of us are constantly making choices based on some system of values. Even the choice not to subscribe to a particular value system is in fact a choice of values. In this leaflet we will explore the Catholic approach to morality. Rather than get hooked on debating the rights and wrongs of particular issues, our approach will be to sketch a simple framework for understanding how our Catholic beliefs influence our lifestyle.

Every family has a system of values to guide the smooth functioning of the household. As a healthy family grows, it learns to adapt its values to changing times, sort out the essentials from the unessentials, and learn from its mistakes. It learns that not every member responds to issues in the same way. It learns that there are times for relaxing its expectations and times for holding firm, times for dialogue and time for 'No arguments, please!', times for reverting to tried and true formulas, and times for seeking innovative solutions. (What eldest child has not said, 'Hey, you never let **me** do that when I was his age!') The task of applying values to concrete situations can be a tricky tightrope to walk, in the Church as much as in family life! This is because its moral code is different from the rules that are applied in the army or the legal system. It arises from the fact that a family is more than an organisation or a society. It is a relationship of love. This analogy provides a backdrop against which we will discuss Catholic morality.

### What Catholic morality is *not*

When it comes to its moral codes, unfortunately the Church often gets a bad press. The media seems to delight in portraying the Church as an autocratic grandparent, hopelessly out of touch with the times; or a narrow-minded policeman harshly applying the letter of the law with little compassion for the individual. Alternatively, it presents the Church as a massive rule book. To be Catholic is to stay on the 'right side of the line'.

This negative view has developed partly through an unfortunate

tendency to isolate morality from the basic beliefs of the Church. You see, Catholic morality is not like an arbitrary behaviour code that was zapped down from the sky two thousand years ago. Essentially, our moral code has developed as a human response to our experience of being loved by God. God gives us life and calls us to live it to the fullest. So morality is not just about 'staying on the right side of the line'. It is about living up to the fullness of our God-given potential. Let's explore this further.

## A response to a gift

Through faith in the risen Christ, Christians experience God's love as engulfing the world, freeing us to discover our deepest identity. It is in this outpouring of God's Spirit, in the reality of being infinitely loved, that we find meaning for our existence.

The early disciples felt this truth intensely at Pentecost. They rejoiced in the Good News of Christ's resurrection and basked in the new freedom to be themselves, to reject sin, to reach out to others and to share their joy.

Such an experience of liberation drew from them a loving response. Unshackled from their fears, barriers between one another collapsed. The desire and possibility for union grew. And so they formed a community whose lifestyle witnessed to the life-giving presence of the risen Christ in the world.

Whether it was the way they reared their children, went about their work, managed their financial affairs, helped the poor, or handled their sexuality, their central motivation stemmed from their union with God through Christ. This is essentially the way Christian morality developed. Not because God said, 'You must do this, or else I will punish you', but rather because Christ's followers joyfully responded to the gift of the Spirit, saying: 'We want to live this way, Jesus, because we love you, and because if we don't we will be missing out on the fullness of life you offer us. We would be punishing

ourselves by settling for less.' So the Church's moral code has arisen from what is basically a way of living and relating in response to God's love for us.

Of course, human as we are, the reality of sin means that we need established guidelines to call us back to our original vision when we stray. Moral codes of behaviour fulfil this function, but they do not make sense by themselves. They must be interpreted in the context of loving relationships and a vision of salvation.

## God's love, God's law

When we speak of morality as adherence to God's law, then, we are not speaking of a rigid structure imposed upon the freedom of the human spirit. On the contrary, we are concerned with seeking the most



life-giving response that will affirm the intrinsic worth and dignity of the human person. God's law is one of love that liberates us from or tendency to stagnate at one level of existence, and challenges us to reach for the fullness of our human potential. This is more than simply developing healthy self-esteem and being a 'nice' person. Since our source of life comes from God, not ourselves, so too must the ultimate criterion of our moral behaviour be derived from a genuine searching to know God's will, not simply our own human construct of what is right and wrong, good and evil. Our concern

# PUTTING IT SIMPLY

## Catholic morality

- is a response to God's gift of love.

## It is about:

- life choices,
- attitudes,
- a lifestyle

## that are

- life-giving,
- others-centred,
- community-oriented,

## undertaken by a community of people who

- believe in the risen Christ,
- have discovered the freedom of a new way of life,
- wish to pass on this way of life to future generations,

## and so commit themselves to

- calling each other to be accountable to those values,
- seeking the best expression of those values for their times,
- standing firm in those values even in times of trial and opposition

## so as to

- witness to the world the freedom of knowing and loving Jesus Christ.

as a Christian community is to always seek the eternal truth which will guide us in our approach to our contemporary situation. We do not simply allow the pressures of modern society to construct standards based on convenience, or on conformity with the prevailing culture. Sensitive to the signs of the times, and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church undertakes this task of interpretation of God's laws and the formulation of an appropriate moral code, based on what is revealed in the Scriptures and Christian tradition.

## Apply God's law

### Respect and compassion in service of the truth

While Catholic morality boldly holds out some clear absolutes, the Church also recognises that these must be applied with compassion and sensitivity to each person's unique journey through life. We sometimes speak of the 'gradualness of the law' which means that the Church understands that moral 'perfection' is never an overnight accomplishment but a life-long journey that proceeds at a

different pace for each person. The life of every Christian involves ongoing conversion. What is important is that, as a community, we sincerely strive for the fullness of the Gospel life, that we call each other to these ideals, and encourage one another as we go.



## Stories

*As these people's comments show, a Gospel lifestyle is not simply about 'keeping the rules'. It is about striving for the fullness of life!*

### Sex in marriage

'The Church's teaching about sex in marriage is not just about staying out of someone else's bed, it's enjoying the one you're in! As a married couple, our witness to the sanctity of the marriage bond includes striving for a life that exudes intimacy and enthusiasm for one another. We want our children to see the evidence of the freedom, fulfillment and joy that comes from sex in marriage; not just hear us warn against sex outside marriage.' (Jenny and Ray)

### God or money?

'As a Catholic confronted with the Church's "option for the poor", the most difficult thing I find is not generosity, but lifestyle. It is relatively easy to give from my surplus while maintaining a nice, comfortable standard of living – but one that perhaps contributes to a "system" that keeps others in need. It is much harder to forgo the standard of living I could have, while my income is being diverted into initiatives that challenge the materialistic status quo.' (Anthony)

### The safest choice of all

'As a doctor, and the mother of two teenagers, one of the insidious things that disturbs me about the "safe sex" campaign is that it robs young people of the safest choice of all, by not even mentioning it. The underlying presumption of the "condom solution" is that no one is capable of preserving sex for a committed marital relationship. What I respect about the Church's stance is that it has the guts to say, "Hey, there is another option: if you don't sleep around and don't use drugs, it is almost impossible to get AIDS". There is an optimism about the Gospel that respects the tremendous spirit of the individual to rise above one's predicament and reach for more life-giving possibilities.' (Patrice)

### It starts at home

'The peace of Christ is not just teaching your children that war is wrong. It is about showing them how to make peace at home: the way Doug and I reconcile with one another after an argument, the way we handle difficult neighbours, the way we keep our cool in congested traffic. Large-scale world changes start with small changes in people's lives.' (Laura)

The Church recognises, too, that God's authority is supreme, and that no human structure (even Church structures), however useful and necessary, can ultimately judge the motivations of the human heart which are known only to God. While the official teaching office of the Church outlines certain aspects of the moral law, each Catholic must take personal responsibility for his or her moral choices. To be unthinking robots is certainly not in tune with the message of the Gospel. Our conscience, therefore, is the essential guide in an individual Catholic's life. This does not mean that we simply follow our whims and personal opinions. Catholics have a duty to form their conscience; that is, to educate themselves in the teachings of the Church from reliable sources (not the often misleading reports in the secular press!), to bring their decision-making to prayer, and to place themselves in a supportive Catholic environment which will give them every possible opportunity to hear, interpret and follow a Gospel lifestyle.

This latter point is more and more important today, with the breakdown of many traditional Catholic cultural influences which, in the past, naturally supported the Church's teachings. As

we have repeatedly noted throughout these leaflets, Catholicism is a community way of life, not just an assent to a set of beliefs. We need more than Church teachings to lead a Catholic lifestyle; we need other Catholics. For instance, if I surround myself with friends who think that children are a burden, it will be much harder for me to hear and respond to the Church's call for the protection of the unborn child, than if I have friends who rejoice in their children and are ready to support pregnant women and families. This is not to say we should never befriend people with opposing points of view, but simply to recognise that our friends do have a tremendous influence upon us. For Catholics, an informed conscience entails not only acquiring intellectual information about Gospel values; it

means seeking an environment that will support and nurture those values.

In dealing with issues of morality, it is important, too, to distinguish between the 'sin' and the culpability of the 'sinner'. The Church recognises that people can be at different levels in their moral maturity. While the 'sin' remains what it is, the way of dealing with each 'offender' in a pastoral situation can be different. Church laws seek to enlighten and challenge in a way that is loving and appropriate, and which enables the person to take the next step towards a more Gospel-like lifestyle. This does not mean we water down our high ideals, but that we apply them with compassion and good sense, lest we offend the greatest ideal of all: love for one another as Christ has loved us.

## The truth will set you free!

*'Love one another as I have loved you.'* This great commandment, given by Jesus to his closest disciples, inspires all Catholic morality. In practice, however, it can often be difficult to apply, as illustrated by the subtlety of the attitudes outlined below.

### 'It feels right'

It is true that God's law brings life and wholeness. However, it is also true (as Jesus showed us) that pain is often a necessary prelude to joy. Conversely, superficial and immediate happiness is not always an indication that a choice will prove right in the long term.

### 'It won't hurt anybody.'

We are not always aware of the far-reaching consequences of our actions. Catholic morality has a strong sense of the social dimension of sin. We are bonded, not only as part of the human race, but in a very intimate way as part of Christ's body. Catholics are called to make decisions with a mentality of 'we', not just 'me'.

### 'It depends on the

### circumstances.'

It is true that circumstances play a part in determining the culpability of a particular action. For instance, being forced to kill a person in self defence has a different moral character to malicious killing. This is not to be confused, however, with a concept known as 'situation ethics' which involves a relativising of the moral principle and has been rejected by the Church.

### 'If it's legal it's OK.'

In Nazi Germany the government deemed it acceptable to kill Jews. This abhorrent scar on human history reminds us that no human law can ever override God's commandments. In many situations, our Catholic beliefs compel us to challenge what is considered legal, our respect for a greater law: God's truth.

## Your Story

### Think About It

- What code of behaviour motivates your lifestyle?
- Where has this code come from?
- Have you deliberately chosen this code or have you unthinkingly adopted it?

Recall an experience of being loved by someone. How did this experience affect the way you related to others?

### Talk It Over

Our deepest desires for those we love can tell us a lot about our own beliefs and lifestyle. Whether or not you have children of your own, reflect on these questions:

- What kind of morality do I (would I) want my children to learn from me?
- How do I (would I) wish to see those moral values expressed through their actions and choices?

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