



*How Catholics Live*



Section 3:

*Some Fundamental Principles  
of Catholic Morality*



*To Luke E. Hart, exemplary evangelizer and Supreme Knight from 1953-64, the Knights of Columbus dedicates this Series with affection and gratitude.*

*The Knights of Columbus presents  
The Luke E. Hart Series  
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

# SOME FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC MORALITY

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PART THREE • SECTION THREE OF  
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

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*What does a Catholic believe?  
How does a Catholic worship?  
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the  
*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

*by*  
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## A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

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This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith.

The Catholic Information Service recommends reading at least one Hart series booklet each month to gain a deeper, more mature understanding of the Faith.



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PART III: HOW CATHOLICS LIVE  
(MORALITY)

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## SECTION 3: SOME FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC MORALITY

(This booklet, which is Part III, Section 3 of our course on **Catholic Christianity**, together with the following booklet, *Virtues and Vices*, (Part III, Section 4), explains some basic principles of “natural law” morality, as defined in *Human Nature as the Basis for Morality* (Part III, Section 2). Part III, Sections 5-10 will focus on the “divine law,” that is, the Ten Commandments.)

### 1. *The point of principles*

#### 1) Principles are *certain*.

If there is one thing the modern secular mind claims to be certain about regarding morality, it is that no one can really be certain about morality. If there is any one thing about religious believers that is utterly incomprehensible to most of the media, public education, and journalism today, it is the fact that believers claim they can know what is really, truly, good and evil – in other words, moral principles. Typically

modern people always say of morality that it is “a complex issue.” G. K. Chesterton explained why: “Morality is always terribly complicated – to a man who has lost all his principles.”

2) Principles are *universal*.

They are like scientific laws or formulas, like “ $F=MA$ ” or “ $E=MC$  squared”: statements that are true for all times and places and situations. Just as all matter obeys the laws of physics, all men ought to obey the laws of morality. In any field, universal principles bring order into chaos.

3) Principles are *objective*.

Moral principles such as the Golden Rule (“do unto others what you would have them do unto you”) are based on objective facts (in this case the fact that all persons are equal in moral value and rights). Moral principles are not arbitrary and subjective but realistic and objective, as scientific principles are. The method of discovering them, of course, is not “the scientific method,” for good and evil have no qualities that appear to the senses such as color or shape, and cannot be measured by mathematics.

2. *Moral principles are necessary for salvation*

If you do not believe in any moral principles as objectively true and binding, you will probably not believe in sin either, for sin means disobeying real moral laws. (“Sin” means more than that – divorce from God – but not less.) And if you believe there is no sin, you cannot repent for sin. And if there is no repentance for sin, there is no salvation.



This is not merely the teaching of some individual writer, or even of the *Catechism*, or of the Church; it is the serious and repeated teaching of all the prophets and especially of Christ himself.

That does *not* mean that people whose minds are so confused that they do not clearly understand sin and repentance cannot be saved. If you are lost in a forest, it is possible to get out even with a faded road map, or even none at all. But it is far better and safer to have a map that is clear and accurate.

*Having* moral principles – *believing* them – is very important, but *following* them is even more important. “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God but the doers of the law who will be justified” (Romans 2:13).

Again, this does *not* mean sinners are not saved, but only saints. There are no other kinds of people besides sinners, and the saints are the first to tell us that. The difference between the saved and the damned is not the difference between saints and sinners, but between repentant sinners and unrepentant sinners.

### 3. *The three moral determinants: what makes any act good or evil?*

“The morality of human acts depends on:

— the object chosen;

— the end in view or the intention;

— the circumstances of the action” (CCC 1750).\*

These are the three essential “sources” of the morality of human acts.

\*CCC= *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

- 1) *Object* refers to the object chosen by the will, an act that the will chooses to perform; it is “a good toward which the will deliberately directs itself” (CCC 1751).

Whether an act of will is good or bad depends upon the object chosen by the will. Reason is able to recognize the essential nature of the various objects that can be chosen by the will and to judge whether they are good or evil, depending on whether or not they are “in conformity with the true good” (CCC 1751).

- 2) The *intention* with which a person performs an act is distinct from the object chosen by the will. The same act can be performed with a good or bad intention. A bad intention can make an act bad that in itself can be good, such as giving alms to the poor in order to show off before others. A good intention, however, can never change an act that is intrinsically bad into one that is good. As noted above, it is the nature of the object chosen by the will that determines whether an act is good or bad in itself. A good intention cannot change the nature of the object chosen from bad to good. The end (a good intention) does not justify the means (a bad act). It is never right to do “evil, that good may come” (Romans 3:8).
- 3) The circumstances of an act do not change the nature of an act from bad to good or vice versa, but they can “contribute to increasing or diminishing the moral goodness or evil of human acts” (CCC 1754). Stealing a man’s money is worse when the man is very poor and already has barely enough to eat. Circumstances can also either diminish or increase one’s responsibility for an act.

When a person is not feeling well or is in pain, he is not as responsible for losing his temper and saying unkind words as when he is feeling fine and in good health. If an act is bad, however, this remains unchanged by the circumstances; “they can make neither good nor right an action that is in itself evil” (CCC 1754).

Any one of the three elements alone is enough to make an act evil, but one alone is not enough to make it good, because for any human work to be good, each and all of its essential “sources” must be good. For instance, a good building can be spoiled by a bad foundation, bad walls, or bad electrical wiring. In a story, one good feature (e.g., a good plot) is not enough to make a good story if the story lacks good characterization or a good theme. So with a human act. The object and the intention and the circumstances must all be right. You must 1) do the right thing, 2) for the right reason, 3) in the right way. Three common but oversimplified moralities each exaggerate one of the three factors and downplay the other two. Legalism stresses the objective act itself. Subjectivism stresses the subjective intention. And “situation ethics,” or moral relativism, stresses changing situations, or circumstances.

#### 4. *The three relationships*

Life is largely a series of relationships. Every person in the world is related, in right or wrong ways: 1) to others, 2) to self, and 3) to God. Thus morality has three parts: 1) social ethics (your relationships with others), 2) individual ethics (your relationship to yourself: virtues and vices, character), and 3) the

ultimate meaning and purpose of human life (your relationship with God).

As C. S. Lewis says, humanity is like a fleet of ships, and morality is like their sailing orders. It tells them three things: 1) how the ships should cooperate with each other and not impede each other; 2) how each ship should stay shipshape and afloat; 3) and most important of all, the fleet's mission, why they are at sea in the first place.

The three parts are related in a hierarchy of dependence: social morality depends on individual morality, and both depend on the purpose of human life. The ships cannot cooperate socially if each one is sinking individually, and it does no good for them to be afloat at all, individually or collectively, if they have no reason to be there, no destination. Modern secular morality usually shies away from this last question, for "the ultimate purpose of human life" is really what religion is all about. But it is clearly the most important of all. As Thomas Merton said, "We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God." All the problems of human life fit into that one sentence.

##### 5. *The three levels of love*

Love is the most basic human motive, the strongest human energy, and the most important human relationship. "Love makes the world go round." And therefore it is the most basic moral value. St. Augustine defines morality as *ordo amoris*, the right ordering of love, and immorality as disordered love.

We find ourselves able to love on three different levels: we can love what is greater than ourselves (God), we can love

ourselves and what is equal to ourselves (other human persons), and we can love what is less than ourselves (things in the world).

The essential moral rule for right loving is to love according to reality. This means *adoring* God, *loving* persons, and *using* things.

- 1) How are we to love God? Christ says: “with your whole heart, and soul, and mind, and strength” (Mk 12:30). God deserves total love, the love of worship and adoration, because of who and what he *is*: infinitely good and the Creator of our very being. Adoring things, or even human persons, is idolatry, and foolishness. Only God is God. To treat non-God as God is to live in unreality. Even other persons, though their value cannot be measured in things, or money, or quantity, are not God, not infinite, not perfect, and not to be adored. Great harm will come if we place divine burdens on human shoulders.
- 2) We are to love our neighbor “as ourselves,” that is, with the same kind of love with which we love ourselves. However we may *feel* about ourselves at the moment, we always will our own good, our own best interest, our own true happiness; and we should do the same to others.

This love is in our power, for it is a free choice, not a feeling. We are not commanded to *like* all men, for liking is a form of love that is not under our power. It is a feeling, not a voluntary choice. If Christ had commanded us to like everyone, he would have been a very foolish psychologist.

The reason we are commanded to love our neighbor is the same as the reason we are commanded to adore God: to conform to reality, to face the facts – in this case the fact that others are in fact the same kind of beings we are: neither God to be adored, nor things to be used, but created persons made in God's image, to be loved as equals, as children of the same divine Father.

Neighbor-love is violated by loving our neighbors either too much (idolatrously, as God) or too little (using them as things).

- 3) The things of this world are to be loved proportionate to what they are – e.g., we should respect higher animals, which have feelings, more than lower animals such as insects, which do not; we should respect animals more than plants (we kill plants to feed animals, but do not kill animals to feed plants); and we should respect living things more than non-living things.

God created *things* to be used for *people*. When things such as money are treated as ends, people are usually treated as means. This reverses the order of reality.

Things can be loved too little (not appreciated) or too much (treated as ends); persons can be loved too little (used as means) or too much (adored as gods); but God cannot be loved too much, only too little.

## 6. *Three universal moral rules*

If there are three moral rules that are obvious to every morally sane individual and culture, they are probably the three mentioned in the *Catechism* (CCC 1789) as “some rules [that] apply in every case:”

- 1) “One may never do evil so that good may result from it. [“The end does not justify the means” – that is, a good end does not justify an evil means.]
- 2) “[T]he Golden Rule: ‘Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.’<sup>56</sup>
- 3) “Charity always proceeds by way of respect for one’s neighbor and his conscience....”

These three rules are not *sufficient* for morality, but they are a *necessary* minimum.

### 7. *Three kinds of acts*

Human acts are divided into: a) the morally *indifferent* (which are permitted), b) the morally *evil* (which are forbidden), and c) the morally *good* (which are commanded).

Within this third category, some morally good acts are *commanded*, or required as our moral duties. Other moral acts are *not commanded* but *commended* (or recommended), as going “beyond the call of duty,” such as martyrdom, heroic sacrifice, and “turning the other cheek.” These are “the evangelical (gospel) counsels,” summarized in Christ’s Beatitudes (Matthew 5). They go beyond the Ten Commandments. One does not sin against the Commandments if one is less than heroically saintly in following these higher “counsels” or ideals. We should not feel guilty about not being heroes all the time. But if we never aim higher than the minimum, it is very unlikely that we will attain even the minimum. And above all, we will miss the joy and drama and beauty of morality – the “beatitude.”

### 8. *The meaning of conscience*

Conscience is our morality-detector.

“Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey...calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil...”<sup>47</sup> (CCC 1776). Deep down, we all know we are really (objectively) obligated to do good and avoid evil, whether we (subjectively) want to or not.

Since this obligation binds us even when we do not want it to, it could not have come from our human will and wants. It comes to us, not from us, and is powerful evidence for the existence of God. Even the atheist treats conscience as an absolute moral authority, for like everyone else he admits that it is always right to obey your conscience and wrong to disobey it. But what could give conscience such absolute authority except God? The only explanation of this datum is that “man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man’s most secret core.... There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths”<sup>47</sup> (CCC 1776). “When he listens to his conscience...man can hear God speaking” (CCC 1777). “Conscience is the aboriginal vicar of Christ”<sup>50</sup> (CCC 1778).

#### 9. *The three functions of conscience*

Conscience gives us three things:

- 1) an awareness of good and evil;
- 2) a desire for good and aversion to evil; and
- 3) a feeling of joy and peace and rightness at having done good, and of unease and guilt at having done evil.

These three functions of conscience work in the three parts of the soul: 1) the mind, or intellect, or reason; 2) the will; and 3) the emotions, or feelings.



- 1) “Conscience is a judgment of reason [understanding] whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in process of performing, or has already completed” (CCC 1778).
- 2) “Moral conscience<sup>48</sup> ...enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil” (CCC 1777).
- 3) Conscience is also an intuitive feeling “approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil” (CCC 1777).

10. *Some common errors about conscience*

- 1) Conscience is *not just a feeling*. It is first of all a *knowing*, an awareness of the truth about good and evil.
- 2) Conscience is not *infallible*. It can err, like anything in us. It can mistake what is evil for good, or good for evil. Therefore one of the first things conscience obligates us to do is to *educate and inform our conscience*. This “education of the conscience is a lifelong task” (CCC 1784), like the education of the mind or the training of the body.
- 3) “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself” (CCC 1790). We are always obliged to obey our conscience, even though it is not infallible. If your conscience leads you honestly to believe that a certain act is morally obligatory, it is morally wrong for you to avoid the act your conscience commands. If your conscience tells you something is morally forbidden, it is wrong for you to do the thing your conscience forbids, even if your conscience is

wrong, because (assuming you are honest) you do not *know* that your conscience is wrong, and you believe it is right, and it has the authority of God's prophet in your soul (cf. CCC 1777-78).

- 4) Ignorance resulting in errors of conscience may be either *vincible ignorance* or *invincible ignorance*.

*Vincible* ignorance, sometimes deriving from personal irresponsibility when we take little trouble to find out what is true and good or when our conscience is blinded through habitual sin, is ignorance that can and should be overcome and conquered. We are responsible for this ignorance in our conscience. A medical student who neglected to learn basic anatomy or the known causes of certain diseases would be guilty of vincible ignorance. The excuse, "I didn't know what I was doing," after a disastrous medical intervention, may be true, but it would not excuse because he *should* have known.

*Invincible* ignorance is ignorance one could not conquer and is not responsible for. One might not even suspect his ignorance in a particular matter, or there may simply be no way of overcoming the ignorance at the time an action is carried out. Until the conscience of children is formed in a moral sense, their ignorance is invincible. One who rents an automobile from a reputable agency and is involved in an accident because of serious mechanical defects in the automobile is invincibly ignorant of the defects.

- 5) Conscience is *not merely negative but positive*. Like the prophets in Scripture, it always offers a message of hope.

Even when it condemns us for having done evil, it offers hope of repentance and forgiveness, like a map that tells you of the right road as well as the wrong ones. “If man commits evil, the just judgment of conscience can remain within him as the witness to the universal truth of the good, at the same time as the evil of his particular choice. The verdict of the judgment of conscience remains a pledge of hope and mercy” (CCC 1781). Conscience, like God, condemns sins, but not sinners.

- 6) Conscience is *not a passive “given,” but can be trained*, like a muscle. It can also atrophy, like a muscle unused.

“The education of the conscience is a lifelong task...[; it] guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart” (CCC 1784).

“In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path;<sup>54</sup> we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church”<sup>55</sup> (CCC 1785).

An indispensable exercise is honest listening. “It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience” (CCC 1779).

For the voice of conscience speaks softly. It respects our freedom, and requires an effort of free will on our part to listen to it. The voice of God usually speaks this way: in

“a still, small voice” (see 1 Kings 19:12). We must train ourselves to hear it.

The two most important keys to hearing it are these:

- a) We must honestly and passionately will to hear it, to know the truth.
- b) We must be alone with ourselves and God to hear this gentle voice. It can easily be drowned out by external noise. “This requirement of *interiority* {an inner life} is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection” (CCC 1779), especially in our complex modern society.

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#### Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

<sup>56</sup> *Mt* 7:12; cf. *Lk* 6:31; *Tob* 4:15.

<sup>47</sup> *GS* 16.

<sup>47</sup> *GS* 16.

<sup>50</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk,” V, in *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* II (London: Longmans Green, 1885), 248.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Rom* 2:14-16.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *Ps* 119:105.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. *DH* 14.





*“Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response.”*

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34  
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission  
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

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