

October 13, 2019

***Making Good Moral Decisions as Disciples of Jesus**

Over the next few weeks, as bulletin space permits, I will be sharing with you some insights into Catholic moral theology, the formation and following of conscience, and discernment in our spiritual journeys.

For many centuries, especially in the western (Roman Catholic) tradition of the Church, much of what has become known as moral theology arose alongside the need to form priests as confessors. However, for most of our history there was no specific, separate area of study called “moral theology.” Guidance in one’s moral life was considered as a dimension of one’s spiritual life. Penance was connected not only to confession of sins but seen as an essential spiritual practice connected to various times and seasons, helping one become a better and wiser person. Asking the question “What should I/we do” was tied to prayer and discernment.

After the Protestant Reformation exposed, among other things, the woeful level of education and theological knowledge of many priests, the Council of Trent called for a revitalization of priestly formation. What results are the seminary-type formation centers we still have to this day. And in those seminaries special attention was (and still is) given to what came to be called moral theology. Building on the theology of Thomas Aquinas but filtered through a desire to systematize and make more uniform what was taught, the discipline of moral theology was separated out from spirituality. Moral theology focused first and foremost on specific descriptions of physical actions, categorizing them as sinful or not sinful; venial or mortal; and so on. Great weight was given to what was considered the “natural law” as well as the level of authority one could attach to a moral statement or doctrine, resulting in more and more situations being sent to the Vatican for an official decision, rather than letting them be handled at the local level. The role of the person in a specific decision was considered in terms of their culpability—either through mitigating circumstances or looking at what they truly intended—but was not viewed as part of their overall spiritual journey. It was as though learning to pray and being open to God was a completely different thing from making moral decisions.

Although this summary necessarily simplifies what is an extremely complex subject, the way moral theology developed from the late 16th century until the mid-20th century made it heavily focused on what objectively constituted a sinful action. And through detailed discussions of the natural law, supported by authoritative interventions by institutional Church authority, most issues were clearly categorized as sins or not as well as their objective level of seriousness. This enabled priests to offer what was considered consistent, sound advice in the confessional, as well as enabling all people to examine their conscience against an objective list of sins and then confess them.

There was, however, a problematic side to this kind of sin-centered, physical act-centered, and law/authority-centered approach. For one thing, it tended to focus a lot of energy on issues that pertain to individual decision-making more than to social and communal well-being. In particular, issues in the areas of sexual and medical ethics have come to dominate the discussion, because they can be more easily described in terms of concrete actions. To this day many confessions continue to be overly focused on such concerns. For example, confessing “bad thoughts” or “bad acts” (meaning sexual ones) but saying nothing about lack of patience, needless judgment, prejudice and other such relational realities.

Secondly, although such a development might help priests and other specialists analyze various moral issues and specific cases, it tended to sideline how real people make their moral decisions. We do not typically go to a manual or list of what is right or wrong and then make our moral choice. Rather, in the

midst of complex lives we reflect and pray and try to do the best we can under the given circumstances. We learn from moral norms and guidelines and they form a background to what we do, but we do what we do for very personal reasons, which are not generally captured by such abstract (objective) moral analyses. This can lead to a disconnect between what was objectively called a sin and what the person himself or herself believed to be a sin. Over time such disconnects effectively undercut the cogency of the Church's teaching in a given area. We see this today, for example, with such things as the use of birth control methods and sterilization. People end up confessing, if they confess at all, things that they do not really think are morally bad; only what they think the Church is telling them is morally bad.

October 20, 2019

***Making Good Moral Decisions as Disciples of Jesus (continued)**

Last week I outlined broadly how the Church's moral theology became separated out from spirituality, with moral theology focusing especially on questions of sin, law, and the objective characteristics of individual moral actions. How many of us grew up with that approach and remember people asking "Is it a sin to eat meat on Fridays?" "Is it a sin to not tell the whole truth?" "Is it a sin to have a bad thought?" and so on? And the answers given were not usually "What is your heart telling you?" or "More information is needed" but a clear "Yes, Yes, and Yes," with only the seriousness of the sin (mortal or venial) perhaps in question. It could seem as though any action we do has a definitive Yes/No judgment attached to it, no matter who a person was or how limited their circumstances.

The value of such an approach lay in its seemingly clear objectivity. Many would like to maintain this approach and insist moral decision-making is a matter of knowing an objective teaching and either falling short (sin) or not. Tied to the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation), it allows a Catholic to name their sins in kind and number, receive absolution, and feel free to receive communion. In practice, however, such an approach too easily becomes a letting go of a feeling of guilt more than a true experience of conversion. And, it tends to focus a person on a narrow list of sinful actions rather than on the totality of life and all of one's relationships. Moreover, it does not do justice to the complexity of how real people make decisions. At heart, an action by itself is neither moral nor immoral. It is an action. Unless the human person as subject is brought into the equation, no moral theology can do justice to moral-decision making.

This "turn to the subject" was picked up on by many different theologians. The most famous is probably Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II, who wrote extensively in the area of moral theology, focusing on what he called the "acting subject." Although they differed in their approaches and their conclusions, what these thinkers had in common was a recognition that moral evaluations cannot be made apart from the concrete, "as-is" human persons involved in the decisions, and this meant paying more attention to how people actually make such decisions. A cautious affirmation of this approach was given at the Second Vatican Council in the Pastoral Constitution on the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*, #51) where it talks about making decisions as responsible parents and says such decisions must be based on "objective standards" that do justice to "the nature of the human person and his acts," not just on the actions alone. But the Vatican Council did not give any specifics on how to create such objective standards. And so, this desire to do justice to the complexity of human decision making and the conundrum of uniting objective norms to the full relational reality of the human person as a unique subject continues to this day in those writing about Catholic moral theology. I want to touch on three examples—use of the principle of double effect, the focus on personal conscience, and a renewed emphasis on virtue-based ethics—to set the stage for the real purpose of these articles: to offer a paradigm for how to go about making good moral decisions as Catholic Christians.

Refining and using the principle of double effect in a moral analysis was a way many have found helpful. It does more justice to the complexity of actual decision-making and recognizes that the intention of the person has a major role to play in any moral analysis. In brief, this principle recognizes that most actions have multiple consequences beyond the main intended purpose of the person doing the action. Does the person have to take into consideration reasonably foreseeable consequences? If so and if some are harmful, can a person still consider their action morally good, if the primary intention was good? One of the classic cases had to do with ectopic pregnancy, where the embryo lodges in the fallopian tube rather than implanting in the womb. As the unborn baby grows it will rupture that tube well before viability, leading to death of both the unborn baby and the mother. Can there be a morally good action to intervene surgically in a way that will foresee the death of the unborn child in the act of treating the mother's life-threatening condition (the rupturing of the fallopian tube)? It seems like there should be, and the principle of double effect enabled moral theologians to analyze the situation with more complexity and nuance. That action, they said, could be morally good, if certain conditions were met. In essence, it was judged morally good, if the surgery waited until the fallopian tube showed initial evidence of rupture and the surgery was directed at repairing the tube by slicing open the ruptured section and reattaching the ends, losing the baby in the process. It was judge morally bad, if the surgery directly removed the embryo.

In both scenarios the mother is saved and the unborn child is lost, but one action is judged morally bad and the other morally good. In one case the primary intention and the action corresponding to that intention is directed at saving the life of the mother. In the other the primary intention might seem to be to save the mother but the action corresponding to that intention is aimed directly at removing the unborn child. I cannot cover all the nuances of this principle in a bulletin article. Moral theologians debate these nuances still. If interested, you can read up on it online. But you can see how it allows for a more sophisticated analysis of a moral action, even if there are reasonably foreseen but not directly intended harmful consequences. It has helped to inform Church teaching on specific cases, especially in the area of medical ethics, but it became used in so many situations and ways that many have questioned its ongoing helpfulness.

A second way to bring the subjective human person into the heart of moral decision-making that many have found helpful has been to focus on the role of conscience. In the process there has been greater attention paid both to what conscience is, what it means to have a well-formed conscience, and questions about the moral quality of actions that might be objectively deemed morally wrong but are the best person can do in following their conscience. For a long time the tendency was to limit the understanding of conscience to a judgment of whether one was following a clear moral teaching or not, and how willful was someone in seeking or ignoring the truth of that moral teaching. Under such a scenario it is difficult to see how a person's action could be judged morally correct, if those actions on the objective level contradict a clear moral teaching of the Church.

However, as theologians re-thought the teaching of Thomas Aquinas that one must follow one's judgment of conscience, if well informed and of good intent, even if the whole Church disagrees with it, a more personalist understanding of conscience emerged, alongside the more forensic/judgment-based one. This personalist understanding is captured at the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*, #16: *"In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core*

and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths". Conscience, in this renewed understanding, is not simply an external, rational judgment—it includes that—but captures who we are at the depths of our being, taking into consideration our entire person and circumstances.

I will have much more to say on conscience and formation of conscience later, but for now, I hope you can see that this personalist understanding opens up all sorts of questions. It places a huge emphasis on proper formation, because the more immature our moral compass, the more immature (and thus more prone to error) our judgments in specific situations. Yet, even then, if it is the best we can do, can such judgments be morally acceptable? This, again, continues to be greatly debated among Catholic moral theologians. It has led to a distinction between what is morally right/wrong on an objective level and what is morally good/bad on the subjective level. But how much disconnect can there be between the two before it renders all moral judgments relative? This is at the heart of the current debate over divorced and (without annulment) remarried Catholics participating in full Eucharistic communion. Pope Francis touches on it briefly in his Apostolic Exhortation on marriage and family, *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia, #303)*: *"Naturally, every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one's pastor, and to encourage an ever greater trust in God's grace. Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal. In any event, let us recall that this discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized".*

A third way to bring the concrete human person and his/her unique subjectivity into an analysis of moral questions has been a focus on virtues and virtue-formation as the real core to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. For many decades, even centuries, it was as if the main goal of moral formation was to develop detailed, comprehensive, rational norms, which people could learn about and then apply to their life situations. It enabled people to go down a list of objective sins and prepare a good examination of conscience in preparation for confession. It emphasized the objectivity of the norms of natural law and often applied them to very detailed situations, as though the conclusion was obvious, even though Thomas Aquinas was adamant that the more specific the situation, the more the application of natural law had to be entrusted to the person's own unique prudential judgment. With a focus on virtues, the attention turns to a dynamic rather than static understanding of morality. We can grow in those good habits or we can regress. In turn, most decisions that have moral consequences flow from who we are as persons, our formed character, without a great deal of rational deliberation. The more that character is virtuous, the more we can trust that our actions will be morally right. But what becomes, then, of the role of objective norms in making moral decisions? On the other hand, this virtue-centered approach respects well the totality of the human person and is well-equipped to reconnect moral theology with spirituality. Not just *"Is this a sin?"* but *"What kind of person is God asking me to be."*

October 27, 2019

***Making Good Moral Decisions as Disciples of Jesus (continued)**

Recognizing the importance of the actual "as is" human person(s) making the moral decisions—whether through the use of moral principles such as "double effect" or a personalist understanding of conscience

or a focus on virtue ethics—has moved moral theology back into closer integration with spirituality. Prayer, discernment, penance and fasting, adoration, meditation, reflection on Scripture—all the many spiritual practices we build into our lives—are not only the way God’s Spirit can speak to us and move our hearts. They also aid us in making the best moral decisions possible. One way to contrast the older and newer approaches is through the first question we ask when making a moral decision. Do we first ask *“Is this a sin?”* Or, *“What kind of person is God asking me to be?”* The second question points the way toward making mature moral decisions. Making moral decisions begins with a conversion of our heart, a willingness to say yes to God as disciples of Jesus, a desire to become the person God wants me to be.

To be a disciple of Jesus, then, is necessarily to be on a journey that begins with conversion and continues with ongoing conversion. Rarely, if ever, does someone have everything in good order in their lives. Their work relationships are fine; their home life not, or vice versa. Their family responsibilities fine, but struggles with temptations and addictions. And so on. To be human is always a work in progress. But there are decisive moments that do orient our lives, or a portion of our lives, in the right direction and enable us to make morally mature, sound decisions. The paradigm here is Simon Peter in the story from the gospel of Luke (5:1-11). The fishermen have been hard at work all night with no success catching fish, but Jesus gets into the boat and asks them to cast their nets one more time, resulting in a huge catch of fish. Simon falls to his knees and says *“Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”* Simon Peter has done nothing specifically wrong, no specific sin to confess. Yet he has an overwhelming sense of having fallen short of who he should be. That is a moment of conversion for him. But it is not one and done. We know that he will need another when he tries to stop Jesus from journeying to Jerusalem and another when he denies Jesus three times. He will continue to need conversion after the resurrection, so he can recognize that Gentiles do not need to keep Jewish ways in order to be Christian. In those moments of conversion (recognizing his need for God and how far short his life falls from that) Peter is able to make the decisions necessary to follow Jesus.

Conversion orients our heart toward God’s way over our selfish ways. Before we can make mature moral decisions, we need to have a heart open to God. If we are not willing or able to follow the Lord in some area(s) of our lives, then we cannot pray *“What should I do, Lord?”* Rather, we have to pray *“Lord, change my heart to be willing to accept whatever is your way.”* Moral decision making, in other words, starts with a conversion of heart and an openness to conversion all of our lives. The struggle is to surrender in trust to God, all that we are, possess, want to hold control over. It does not mean that we will lose it; rather, that we are surrendering in trust to God. If we have surrendered to God, then we can better trust the peace or lack of peace deep in our hearts. God speaks in that peacefulness. On this level, there is really only one moral norm: *“say yes to God.”* A good reflection for each of us would be to take the gospel passage from Mark (10:17-22) on the rich man who wants to do good but is unable to follow Jesus *“because he has many possessions.”* Read it several times. Put yourself into the scene as the rich man and ask: *What it is that I hang onto, am unable to surrender to the Lord?* And pray, *“Lord, give me a heart that can say yes to you.”*

Our lives can be in good order but, if we cannot say yes to the Lord in a specific area, our lives will get sidetracked. When I was on the seminary faculty years ago, I remember praying about whether I should become a pastor or remain on the faculty. Nothing was clear. No insight. No sense of what God wanted, until I realized that I had not surrendered the question and possible answers to God. I wanted both! In effect, I realized, I was praying: *“God let me have it all; I will do it all for you.”* Interestingly, once I figured that out and truly was able to say to the Lord, *“I will serve you in the seminary the rest of my life, if you desire; I will serve you never teaching again, if you desire,”* a calm came to me and I knew I should

say yes to being a pastor. The discernment was clear and peaceful. In the end, it did not mean giving up teaching completely. But to get there I had to be willing to let go of my preferred answer.

Conversely, our lives might be in poor order, but, if we are willing to say yes to the Lord in a specific area, we can make good moral decisions in that area and begin to have it influence other parts of our lives. I have seen many a parent be excellent moms and dads, even though other parts of their lives are not so excellent, because they embraced parenthood not for themselves but for the sake of their child(ren). In the course of that parenting many come to recognize the need for other fundamental changes in their lives. Such changes take time. But the journey has begun, and overall the person's heart is open to God.

November 3, 2019

***Making Good Moral Decisions as Disciples of Jesus (continued)**

When this re-integration of moral theology and spirituality is done, the first step is not consulting a list of objective sins but coming before the Lord in prayer with a heart that is open and willing to do what God asks. In other words, moral theology, like spirituality starts with conversion. Anything that helps us along the process of conversion is a step toward making objectively good moral decisions—all the many spiritual practices we build into our lives. Yes, we will need objective moral guidance through moral norms, especially in areas that can so easily lead us astray, and moral norms are essential for the development of a well-formed conscience, as we will see. But the goal of moral theology is no different than the goal of a mature spiritual life—to be good, loving persons; not just to make morally correct decisions but to do so for the right reasons.

St. Thomas Aquinas uses the example of two people who give alms to someone in need. One does it out of vainglory, to get the attention of everyone and to try to prove how good they are. The other does it out of genuine concern for the one in need, unconcerned about getting any recognition. Both do the same objectively correct material action—to help someone in need—but in so doing the one furthers their moral badness, the other their moral goodness. Intentional actions affect our moral character and form us as persons. When it comes to making decisions, nearly all of them flow from that moral character. The better formed we are, the more integrated as human beings we are, the more intentional we are in developing our character, the more likely that our actions will be not only be morally right but deepen our good character. The less formed we are, the more likely that we will have many blindspots and make morally wrong decisions. The more malformed we are, the more likely that our actions will not only be morally wrong but further mis-shape that character.

To make good moral decisions, then, means we have to pay attention to our character and the formation of that character. As mentioned earlier, this has led many Catholic moral theologians toward an ethics of virtue and virtue formation. They re-read St. Thomas Aquinas and realized that the focus on material actions and an analysis of such actions is not the heart and soul of his moral theological thinking. Even his emphasis on the natural law allowed for the virtue of prudence to be at the center of all moral judgments pertaining to very specific, concrete circumstances. This emphasis on *virtues* (habits of good behavior that can be developed and deepened over time through intentional practice) and *character* (the totality of who a person is rooted in their fundamental stance toward life, i.e. conversion) as essential to any moral analysis helps to move moral theology past an analysis on the physical, material action alone. It brings the concrete human person into the center of moral decision-making. It calls attention to the social environment and welfare of people and the need to provide all children with supportive family, educational, and cultural environments. Virtue and character formation includes

learning about moral norms and analyzing actions but stresses the development of the whole person. In turn, such an emphasis values highly helping people learn to pray, to take time for quiet and solitude, be willing to sacrifice and offer penance, to read and reflect on the Scriptures, to be actively involved in outreach to those in need and those who are different from us. Virtue and character formation prizes the mature, wise mentors of our lives and invites a further question for good moral decision-making. *“What would [put in the name of someone whose wisdom you admire greatly] do in this situation?”* On this level the basic moral norm is *“Would the best, most mature and morally good people I know do this or not?”*

November 10, 2019

***Making Good Moral Decisions as Disciples of Jesus (continued)**

In the previous articles I have suggested two key “steps,” if we truly want our lives to be morally good and the decisions we make to be morally right. They are the same steps we would take, if we were talking about our spiritual life and asking how to be as open to God as possible so that the goodness of God can flow through our actions. One overarching step is connected to conversion. It is a willingness to surrender who we are to the Lord. It includes a deeply felt recognition that we are dependent always on the gracious, loving presence of God in all that we do. It leads us to a repentant heart, acknowledging our failings, our lack of trust, our sinful actions, our need for God’s mercy. At this level sin is basically a hardness of heart, a refusal to open ourselves to God, an unwillingness to acknowledge our own need for God’s mercy.

Some people have a very specific experience of such repentance and conversion. They can tell their conversion story, tie it to a specific time and date, and how their lives dramatically changed. Others have no overwhelming conversion experience but have come to recognize God’s overwhelming love and mercy over time, often by being part of a faith community and praying with and being supported by that community. I would put myself in this second category, and for me that community has been the Catholic Church. It is important to recognize, no matter how one’s sense of conversion has occurred, that it is never once and done. Our lives are continually challenged to be open to further conversion. As we mature, we realize that we are never at a point where everything in our life is open to God. Again and again we feel the tug to surrender some situation, some attitude, some decision more fully into God’s care, if we truly want to do the right thing. Without conversion, everything we do is tainted by that hardness of heart, even actions which our unconverted heart thinks is for the good. With conversion there is no guarantee that what we do is completely right and good, but we can begin to trust the sense of peace or lack of peace in our hearts, as we bring our lives and decisions before the Lord in prayer.

A second “step” in being morally good and making morally right decisions is connected to virtue and character formation. Our human nature allows us to develop good habits and patterns of behavior, which can maximize our ability to be morally good and make morally sound decisions. Of course, our human nature also allows us to develop bad habits and patterns of behavior as well. Almost all of our daily actions follow from such development of character—how patient we are; how fearful, self-centered, transparent, honest, prudent, rash, considerate, judgmental, generous, and so on. How is such character formed? Through our exposure to all the influences of life and how we integrate them into our personality. That is why infancy and childhood are so important. Children who are loved and cared for, who have access to health care and nutrition and good living conditions, who do not have to face the devastation of war, who are given a chance to be educated and develop their creativity, who are surrounded by good people who model character to them—such children have a much greater

opportunity to develop a mature, well-integrated character. Teens and young adults who connect to well-formed peers, who find wise mentors, who have people to turn to when they face disappointments and failures in life—well-formed character will be much more likely to occur.

One cannot overestimate the importance of the communities into which one is born and grows up. If these are communities of fear and hate, of self-centeredness and control, then most will grow into that type of life. If these families and other communities are communities of goodness and hope, of care and support, then well-formed character centered on virtuous living is much more likely to result. In all cases, a community like the Catholic Church can play a vital role. It confronts members and others with a message that challenges everyone to conversion. It has developed wisdom and practices and structures that encourage patterns of good behavior, making formation in virtuous living more likely. It connects people to the reality of a life of virtue, of holiness, and the call of God for each of us to become holy. In its social doctrine (the dignity of the human person, the common good, preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, subsidiarity and active participation in decision-making, solidarity) the Church makes it clear that true virtue and character embraces more than just “my” good, and takes us beyond a narrow class, ethnic, or national focus. And, in its teaching on moral issues the Catholic Church gives us a third “step” in making morally right decision as disciples of Jesus—concrete moral norms, grounded in the Scriptures and the natural law, which provide wisdom as we form our conscience and make moral decisions, especially in very complex situations.

November 17, 2019

***Making Good Moral Decisions as Disciples of Jesus (continued)**

We now are in a position to appreciate the role of concrete moral norms and how they aid us in making morally right decisions and becoming morally good persons.

Because conversion is never one and done and most people have parts of their lives that remain unconverted, even after surrendering their lives to the Lord, concrete norms challenge us to deeper conversion. For example, the Church’s social doctrine says that, though it is not against the natural law to have private property and develop private wealth, all that we own still needs to be evaluated in light of the dignity of every human person and the common good of all. This leads to a concrete norm called the “preferential option for the poor and vulnerable,” which means that those in true need have a moral claim on our resources. It is not easy to be fully at peace with the idea that others might have a moral claim on our hard-earned resources, and so such a norm challenges us to conversion of heart. We are embracing that norm fully when we not only do not resent those in need, but when we actively desire and rejoice to use our resources to help them. That takes conversion.

Concrete norms aid as well in formation of virtue. No one is perfectly formed. Growing up, we all have some unhealed patterns of actions in our lives, even if we are the Pope. Concrete moral norms provide a safety net so that we are not ruled by unvirtuous passions or first instincts that are misguided. For example, we might be someone whose anger gets easily triggered (me!). Yes, we have to work on it and try to form better patterns, but most likely that will be a life-long task. Having a norm that insists we forgive all who we think might have harmed us, calls us to virtue, even when we do not feel like it. It helps us respond in a way that goes against our first instincts and leads to actions that are more truly virtuous. The more we are aware of the areas of our life that are unhealed, the better we can turn to concrete norms to guide us in those areas. It is not accidental that the Church has developed a fair number of norms surrounding, for example, marriage and sexuality, the economy, medical decisions when near death, and so on. All of these are areas that bring out strong passions, good and not so good, and so can benefit from being guided by a wisdom enshrined in concrete moral norms.

Even when we are truly open to God and our lives are in good order, norms still play an important role. Because they bring a time-tested, community-based wisdom to bear, they can help us see beyond our immediate situation so that we make decisions that benefit both the good of the whole community and our own personal long-term good. Take the concrete moral norm that we are morally required to provide medical treatment where the reasonably foreseen benefit is proportionate to the reasonably foreseen burden being placed on a patient (so called “ordinary means”). Or, to put it negatively, we may but we are not morally required to provide medical treatment where the reasonably foreseen benefit is disproportionate to the reasonably foreseen burdens (so-called “extraordinary means”). This allows us, for example, to remove ventilation or life-support, when the underlying medical condition can no longer be treated and will end in death. Even someone who is open to God and well-formed in character might have a difficult time removing such life support. To know that, under the proper circumstances, it is supported by the wisdom of the Church’s concrete norm, can be a tremendous help.

As helpful and important as such concrete norms are, it is also important to understand that the Church’s wisdom comes to us over many centuries and diverse cultural situations. It is not monolithic. It can develop over time. For example, for much of the Church’s history the loaning of money to make any profit was considered a sin (called usury). Now we would define usury not simply as loaning with interest but as practices of loaning that are excessive and harm the welfare of a person or community. Think of redlining practices in selling homes; excessive interest charges on loans and credit cards; preying on people’s weaknesses to have money in the short term but getting them in debt for the long term. Or, for many centuries slavery was accepted as not against the natural law and therefore morally allowable, as long as the master treated the slave humanely. Now (specifically beginning with Pope John Paul II) the Church calls it an intrinsic evil, wrong in all circumstances. Killing another human being was once deemed always a sin, even if done to protect oneself or others. Now we talk about legitimate self-defense and the possibility of just wars. At one time organ donation was considered morally wrong. Now, under the right circumstances, it can represent the height of moral goodness.

Even objective moral norms, then, need to be properly understood, if they are to be of benefit in personal moral decision making. A prime example of this is when the Church’s norm states that something is “intrinsically evil.” This is shorthand for saying that there are no circumstances or good intentions that can make a certain action morally right. Often such norms are tied to very grave matters. For example, “Direct abortion is intrinsically evil;” “Slavery is intrinsically evil;” and so on. But not always. For example, “Lying is intrinsically evil;” “Masturbation is intrinsically evil;” and so on. Also, many very grave matters (for example targeted bombing in war when there will be known civilian casualties) are not usually described in terms of “Intrinsic evil,” and so that designation or lack of that designation does not immediately determine the moral priority in a situation. Such norms have to be prudently understood and carefully interpreted, when applying them to one’s specific personal situation.

Much more could be said about conversion, formation in virtue, and applying moral norms. But in the end, it comes down to a specific person (or group) who has to make the best decision they can, given their background, formation, knowledge and circumstances. Human moral action means taking responsibility for what we do and its reasonably foreseen consequences, not simply following a law or a norm blindly. In other words, norms strongly support but do not usurp the need for personal responsible decision-making. All of these realities flow into what we call “conscience,” when a person needs to make a decision that has moral or spiritual consequences. It is in such decisions that the objective reality and norms and the subjective human reality of the person(s) acting and his/her

circumstances all come together. They might do so very cohesively. For example, when we pray and reflect on the gift of human life, even when we are dealing with an unexpected and maybe even initially unwanted pregnancy. Knowing the concrete norm of not destroying human life, surrounded by family and friends who will support us and the baby even if untimely, recognizing that abortion pushes one to being someone who we do not want to be, and surrendering the whole situation into God's hands—all can lead to a courageous and peaceful decision to bring forth life.

At times, however, these realities do not converge very smoothly. Even then, we are called to make the best and objectively most responsible decision we can make, given the circumstances. What happens if that decision contradicts the Church's wisdom? What happens if we have faulty information or have been poorly formed in our development years? What truly is a sin at that most personal decision-making level? That is the role of conscience and the formation of conscience, which will be the final piece in fitting together all that leads to morally right decisions and being morally good persons.

November 24, 2019

***Making Good Moral Decisions as Disciples of Jesus (continued)**

All these reflections on conversion, formation in virtue and character, concrete moral norms, the interplay between an objective moral rightness and a subjective moral goodness come together in the reality of conscience. Here is a reminder of how the Second Vatican Council defined conscience: *"In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths."* (*Gaudium et Spes*, #16).

Notice that conscience is part of the dignity of every human person. Objectively, then, every human person is morally obliged to follow his or her conscience, even if others disagree with the actions that flow from that person's conscience-based decisions. One is morally obliged to follow a well-formed conscience, even if that choice leads to a decision that others believe to be wrong. Take the choice of one's religious practice. If made at that deepest core where a person believes God's voice is echoing in their heart, a person's choice in religious matters is to be respected and not coerced: *"In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious."* (*Declaration on Religious Liberty*, #3). This was a hugely debated topic at the Second Vatican Council. Isn't the Catholic faith the truest and fullest path for salvation? If so, how can we encourage someone to follow their conscience, if they end up choosing another religion or no religion? Aren't we encouraging error? No, says the Council. It might be an objectively wrong decision but the objective good of conscience which leads to the person's subjective good needs to be respected. No one is to be forced into being Catholic, and we should not presume that someone is sinning in choosing otherwise.

On the other hand, conscience does not guarantee that we are making the most objective morally right and best decision. Again, the Second Vatican Council: *"Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin."* (*Gaudium et Spes*, #16). The term "Invincible ignorance" captures the idea that God judges the

subjective goodness or badness of our actions within the scope of our knowledge and formation. Before a child reaches an age to make reasonable judgments about his or her actions, there is no personal sin, even if the actions taken are objectively reckless and harmful. If a person is under tremendous emotional distress, has been raised in a very violent or neglectful or abusive environment, has limited reasoning ability, and so on, then the degree of personal responsibility can be lessened or negated altogether. Limited knowledge (such as a child) or limited freedom (such as one under duress or force) can contribute to decisions of conscience that are not sinful but objectively are in error.

Nor is conscience a static reality within a person. Conscience is the person's interior sense of who they are at the deepest level. To violate that is to violate who one is. But that is a dynamic reality. We can grow in the depth of our conscience, and in our ability to follow through on following our conscience. We cannot claim we are following our conscience, if we refuse to inform and form our conscience with the best wisdom of others, including the Church's wisdom tied to concrete moral norms. In the quote above, willful and habitual sin deadens our conscience (for example, think of someone who habitually lies, cheats, steals, and so forth). The unwillingness to develop a more responsible conscience in these areas is itself a sin. A truly well-formed conscience means a person with a fundamental conversion to God; who is intentionally trying to grow in goodness and virtue through regular practices of a spiritual life; who seeks the wisdom of others, including the Church's moral norms, praying and reflecting on that wisdom and integrating it into one's life. With such a well-formed conscience, one is obliged to follow it and encourage others to do the same. But even with such a well-formed conscience, one can still make erroneous moral judgments. Lack of proper formation, limited understanding of the wisdom that is available in a given area, or not yet fully converted in an area of life can all lead to decisions that are not personally sinful—for one is following one's conscience as best as possible—but objectively should have been avoided.

And so, with respect to conscience, here are five "Is/Is Nots." Conscience: 1) IS who we are at the deepest level; IS NOT a feeling of guilt or lack of guilt. 2) IS a prudent judgment of actions as compatible with the best of who we are; IS NOT a good angel on one shoulder telling us what to do and a bad angel on another tempting us to do what is wrong. 3) IS based on objective moral standards; IS NOT simply one's subjective opinion or feeling. 4) IS always to be followed, if well-formed and certain; IS NOT always certain and/or well-formed. 5) IS always a moral good, when well-formed, even if not always right; IS NOT always right.

With respect to formation of conscience, here are seven "Do/Don'ts": 1) DO take time to reflect; DO NOT make hasty decisions that can deeply affect yourself or others. 2) DO read, ask questions, and study so as to get the best, most objective and accurate information on which to base a judgment; DO NOT presume you know everything already. 3) DO seek out the wisdom of God's Word, of Church teaching and practice, of wise and mature people; DO NOT presume you can make good decisions without the wisdom of others or simply act as everyone else is acting. 4) DO seek to grow in maturity of conscience by looking at consequences of past actions; DO NOT repeat past mistakes. 5) DO surround oneself with supportive environments of mature, loving, wise people; DO NOT separate oneself from communities and groups that exhibit good moral values. 6) DO trust actions that come from good habits (virtues) and healthy, fully integrated parts of our lives; DO NOT trust actions that come from bad habits (vices) or hurting, unhealed and fragile parts of our lives. 7) DO pray; DO NOT think you have a well-formed conscience without prayer.

December 1, 2019

***Making Good Moral Decisions as Disciples of Jesus (continued)**

It is important to recognize that conscience is not simply a feeling of guilt or no guilt. We can have all kinds of guilt over things that are minor and unimportant. Someone we respect disapproves of something we have done, and we feel guilt. Not wanting to disappoint often opens up feelings of guilt. Having an extra potato chip or two at night—guilt. The presence of such guilt is not an indication of whether we did something wrong or not, only that we feel guilty. We have thoughts come into our mind that are not the most wholesome. Someone feels guilty about them. But did we consciously try to have such thoughts and dwell on them or did they just pop up? There is, if unwanted, no sin attached. Conversely, we do not feel any guilt perhaps over something we have done that is truly wrong. The lack of guilty feelings does not indicate a good conscience, only that we have no feelings of guilt. Conscience goes to our most deeply held values and sense of self and asks: “Is this truly something that I embrace in the depth of my being; at my core do I believe this to be objectively the best way to be or action to do? Is this compatible with who I want to be; with the best of who I am?”

Also, conscience clearly has an important subjective dimension to it, because no two people are alike. But it is not naively subjective. It is not one’s personal opinion or feeling about an issue, as though all opinions and feelings are equal. Someone might feel, that it is morally acceptable to help a person near death die more quickly by assisting them in taking a set of drugs to hasten death. It is not easy to walk with someone who truly wants to die, has at times deep physical and/or emotional pain, and begs you to help them. And in some countries and states it is even legal to provide such aid. But it is still morally wrong. It violates moral norms that have been in place for centuries. It contradicts the Church’s clear teaching against euthanasia and assisted suicide. It distorts the role of the doctor. It places pressure on people in a vulnerable situation to believe they are a burden and no longer valued. Long term it focuses on the value of personal freedom as the highest value rather than the value of human life and the common good of the whole community. Too many people equate their feelings of wanting to lessen someone’s suffering, tied to how they themselves would feel helpless in such a situation and maybe to a firm belief that individual freedom of choice is the highest value in that situation, and say they believe in conscience it is acceptable to help a person die more quickly. Helping a person die is the best we can do and be as persons and a community? No, it is not. That is not a decision of a well-formed conscience. To follow through on such assisted death is a tragedy and objectively a moral wrong. It is right to strongly resist such social trends and to work for laws preventing such actions.

However, is it possible that an individual might recognize all the above, prayed about it, reflected on it, realize that they are going against a clear moral norm, and in the depth of their being believe (albeit wrongly) that in a specific situation such a choice is the morally right choice to make? Yes, it is possible, because not everyone has access to the same support systems; not all are surrounded by enough resources to make that choice less tempting. That is why we cannot judge the person’s subjective sinfulness. We can and should objectively condemn the decision. We should not condemn the person, even though we strongly disagree with their decision and are saddened by that decision. We should pray for them, asking God to help them change their hearts, so that they can embrace a fuller understanding of human life and community. We should act toward them with compassion and mercy, surrounding them with God’s love. And, we should continue to publicly and strongly advocate for the objective moral norm.

It has been my experience that in situations where someone comes to a decision that goes contrary to a time-honored moral norm, they often do not seem to be making a deep-seated decision of conscience. A person is often caught in a flurry of emotions, feels overwhelmed, and makes the decision with a rather restricted focus. That is why conscience needs to be tied to a willingness to integrate objective

moral standards and not be equated with my own opinion or feeling. That is their important and necessary role. Not to usurp a decision of conscience but to guide us and challenge us, especially when we are in a difficult situation and really do not have a clear sense in the depth of our being about what to do. In other words, one's conscience might not be as well-formed or certain as it could be. In such a case, a mature conscience turns to the moral norms of the community for the wisdom necessary to make an objectively good decision. And, even if we still believe at the depth of our being that we must make a decision that contradicts that wisdom, a mature conscience has the humility to admit that we might not be making a morally right decision. It is simply the best we can do at the time.

December 8, 2019

***Making Good Moral Decisions as Disciples of Jesus (conclusion)**

Given all that I have written previously about moral theology, spiritual practices, moral principles and moral norms, conscience and formation of conscience, virtue and character, how does one put all of it together into a pattern of life that can help us grow as a disciple of Jesus, as we make the best moral decisions possible? In my experience it is a matter of integrating into one's life an ongoing cycle of five, ever-repeating, intertwined steps: Look, Pray, Seek Wisdom, Decide, Act.

Step 1: Use your current wisdom to **LOOK** at and assess the situation; try to view the situation and issues as clearly as possible. So many decisions that impact our life on a moral and spiritual level go awry from the start, because we have not stopped to ask whether we are seeing the situation in as full and clear a light as possible. What is happening and what and who exactly is involved? What are some of the motives? What are possible consequences? What good can happen? What bad can occur? Am I seeing the situation as objectively as possible or letting my passions distort what I see? Is this an area which taps into my formed character at its best or is it an area that touches on an unhealed area of life? Looking means being as attentive as possible to all that is happening within me and others, trying to gather as much helpful information and insight as possible.

Step 2: PRAY that your heart is open to doing what is right. Am I willing to do what is right and do it for the right reasons? Am I willing to say "yes" to God, even if, in the end, my sense of what needs to be done is not the one I originally hoped for? Do I want the best for everyone involved in the situation, including myself? Am I willing to let go of something, if God asks it of me? Praying is, of course, not a "step" that is done once and then done. Prayer accompanies and surrounds everything we do during the decision-making process. Do not be afraid to bring the situation before the Lord; place it at the altar or the cross; image yourself walking with the Lord and telling your story to the Lord. Listen with your heart and see if you get a sense of the Lord speaking within it. Keep a heart open to what brings the deepest sense of peace, even if the decision is difficult. If uneasy with all of the options, it might indicate a need for more prayer and reflection. God loves us. Jesus walks with us. The Spirit can guide us. Knowing and experiencing that in the depth of our being can often be the key to being at peace with what follows.

Step 3: Broaden one's understanding of what is good and right and **SEEK THE WISDOM** of others. Mature decision making always wants to learn from others so that we have as broad and deep an understanding as possible into what we are facing. Shared wisdom almost always will keep us on the right path better than a decision we make strictly on our own. Take time to learn from others, to gain knowledge that might help one overcome a blindspot or guide one in the midst of a situation that stirs deep passions.

- The wisdom of the Church and its Tradition. Do the Scriptures have something to say to me? How might the values of Jesus apply to this situation? The commandments? The beatitudes? Stories from Jesus' life? Is there a teaching of the Church that applies to this situation? Whom could I ask? Are there concrete moral norms that can guide me? Do I understand the underlying values those norms are reaching for? Are there moral principles that the community of faith has developed to help me understand better what is at stake in the situation I am facing?
- The wisdom of key others. Who in my life shows solid, mature formation and character? What do/would they say about my situation and why? Do I have a mentor I can turn to for advice? Parents, family, respected friends, professionals who are experienced in dealing with this situation? Have I researched the best knowledge available about my situation? Do I need to consult a priest or pastoral minister to make sure I am properly understanding a concrete moral norm and its limits? Do I need to get a second opinion on a matter?

The more we can see our situation from the standpoint of others, especially healthy and wise others, the greater the likelihood we will have the best objective understanding of the situation. There is a difference between intelligently knowing something and wisely understanding something. Seeking the shared wisdom of others leads to that deeper and wiser understanding. If I am doubtful about my own understanding of what to do, then rely on the judgment of wise others whom I trust.

Step 4: Use head and heart and **DECIDE**. Make a personal judgment about the most reasonable course of action one can take at this time. Remember that God does not ask us to do the impossible, but only desires us to make the best and most reasonable decision we can, given the circumstances. This is the traditional moment of conscience—a prudential judgment applying everything we know and are to the situation at hand. What is my conscience—the deepest core of who I am—telling me to do? Am I doing not only what I believe to be the right thing but also have the right reasons for doing it?

Step 5: Commit oneself to **ACT** on the decision in as responsible a manner as possible. What are the first steps I specifically need to take to put this decision into practice? Are there ways to act on this decision that are more responsible than other ways. For example, it might make me feel better to tell everyone about my decision, but is that the most responsible approach? In the end, we cannot become paralyzed out of fear of making a mistake. Even actions that carry with them serious consequences are one step in a life-long journey. God does not abandon us but will guide us in light of that decision. If we have gone through the process of discernment as outlined above, then we can and should act, even if others disagree with us, all the while praying for continued wisdom and guidance from God. After taking a course of action, has anything changed that would make me re-evaluate the decision? If so, look anew at what one is facing and move through the steps again.

LOOK → PRAY → SEEK WISDOM → DECIDE → ACT. If one integrates that pattern into the rhythm of life, moral decision-making will become part of an ongoing spiritual journey of discipleship and the decisions we make will have a better chance of aligning with what God truly wants for us.

Fr. Buersmeyer