

Moral Decision Making and Personal Discernment: A Catholic Approach

Catholic Bishops of the United States

“How do I know if I’ve chosen correctly? Is this the morally right thing to do? How do I know if I’ve chosen the right vocation? How do I know if this course of action, this relationship or this chosen life-style is best for me?” There are few easy answers. Whether one is facing specific moral decisions or broader vocational questions, the Catholic tradition speaks of discernment as that process by which a person uses one’s own reasoning ability, the sources of divine revelation (Scripture and tradition), the Church’s teaching and guidance, the wise counsel of others, and one’s own individual and communal experiences of grace in a sincere effort to choose wisely and well.

Moral decision making is a particular type of discernment process. In order to decide the right course of action, particularly about matters that may be complex or controversial, Catholics must be open to the wisdom of God manifest in all these sources – one’s family, the Church, the Word of God, the sacraments, communal and private prayer, the stories of the saints. At the same time, data from the physical sciences, information from the social sciences, and the insights of human reason can all contribute to one’s discovering moral truth.

The bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed that Christian morality is determined by objective standards. “These, based on the nature of the human person and his or her acts,” (*Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World*, no. 51) are not intended to preempt human evaluation and discernment, but neither are they reducible solely to sincere intentions or an evaluation of motives.

The Catholic tradition has generally accepted a tiered or sequential approach to Christian ethics, as reflected in the traditional levels of natural law theory. Certain values and derived norms remain timeless and absolute. At the most basic or objective level are certain principles and values that reflect human nature as imprinted by the design and will of the Creator. The belief that “good is to be sought and evil avoided” is one such fundamental principle.

Similarly, the inherent and abiding worth of such basic values as life, love, and truth are indisputable. Each is a constitutive dimension of human well-being to be preserved and fostered if one is to be a responsible and virtuous person. People of all races, nations, and times have been able to discover and affirm these as true. The Church holds that “there can be no real conflict between the teaching of reason and faith correctly understood.” (*Faithful to Each Other Forever* 27) Whether through reasoned reflection or Spirit-inspired revelation, or both, humanity can discover, at least in general outline, the meaning of life, the image of God incarnate in the human heart and history.

In some instances, the linkage between a core value and the subsequent positive or negative norm derived from it is so self-evident that the prescription or proscription shares the absoluteness of the value itself. For example, if one accepts that human life is a value, that a certain dignity adheres innately to all living members of the human species, then certain actions, particularly if specified carefully, would in all cases be right or wrong. Thus, the Church holds that the direct killing of the innocent (e.g., abortion, euthanasia, murder, bombing aimed at noncombatants) as well as all directly intended bodily harm to innocent persons (e.g., rape, child or spouse abuse, and torture) are always and everywhere morally wrong.

In other instances, the linkage between fundamental values, norms for behavior, and specific case applications, while real, is more difficult to discern. While we agree that one should always do the “loving thing” or the “life-respecting thing,” determining what that means in terms of a given case or context may not be so self-evident. For example, when, if ever, is it “loving” or “life-respecting” to cease life-sustaining treatment on a terminally ill patient? While the Church believes there are still objectively right and wrong answers to such moral dilemmas, the process of moving from absolute values to general norms to specific case judgments requires the virtue of prudence. Prudence refers to the ability to exercise judgment in practical matters. Prudence is one of the four cardinal or hinge virtues of the Christian tradition.

John Paul II notes that this prudential or providential discernment process is accomplished through the “sense of faith,” which is a gift given by the Holy Spirit to all the faithful. “The Church, therefore, does not accomplish this discernment only through the pastors, who teach in the name and with the power of Christ, but also through the laity.” (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5)

Still, as the bishops reaffirmed at Vatican II, there is a special teaching role or office within the Church, entrusted to the bishops in communion with the pope. “Endowed with the authority of Christ,” it is our responsibility, “by the light of the Holy Spirit,” to discern and to teach the faith that is to be believed and put into practice. (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 25) It is our unique duty, in conjunction with the Holy Father and other bishops of the world, “to ensure that the Church remains in the truth of Christ” and to lead the People of God ever more deeply into that truth through “an even more mature evangelical discernment.” (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 5)

Finally, there is the area of subjective responsibility. The Church has consistently taught that a person of sincere conscience may have perceived and acted on a moral situation in a manner inconsistent with the teaching of the Church. Still, provided she or he did so with no intentional malice or desire to do wrong, the Christian tradition has recognized mitigated subjective culpability for a decision that objectively is wrong and ought not to have been made. Subjective culpability is determined by how diligently one strives to form correctly his or her conscience and how sincerely one follows that conscience.

In the end, whether choosing one's vocation or making a moral decision that relates to or affects one's vocation, each person is bound to live with and to stand by his or her own discernment or perception of God's will. In either case, "the art of discernment of spirits comes into play. If the content of the experience is in harmony with the Gospel data of revelation and tradition and results in a rekindling of faith, strengthening of hope, and fostering of love, then it probably is an experience of God. A sense of greater integrity, peace, and joy or renewed call to a personal conversion of heart are validating qualities." (*Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood* 44)

Ultimately, each person must discern his or her own moral decisions and wider vocational calling. With all the input and support possible, both from individuals and communities, one must still face the future based on decisions made before God in the recesses of one's own heart. As the bishops at Vatican II phrased it, "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths." (*To Live is Christ*, no. 14)

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