



THE DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
**Office of Human Life,
Family and Bioethics**



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A Bit of Bioethics

THE MORALITY OF THE HUMAN ACT

As we noted last month, “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.”¹ This is the natural law revealed to every conscience. So how do we apply this in everyday life? Why so much attention to human acts and morality? Because so many aspects of our daily lives present moral dilemmas—some of which have grave implications.

Eternal communion with God is the ultimate fullness of this life

Every human act, whether morally good or bad, is directed toward a rational purpose, or something worth pursuing because it brings about our fulfillment or flourishing;² in other words, all deliberate acts are done with a reason in mind which is aimed at something we believe is good for us. The *ultimate fullness* for the human person is gained in heavenly eternity: “God’s eternal life is in fact the end to which our living in this world is directed and called.”³ Therefore, the first moral principle of natural law is to “love the Lord with all your heart . . . and your neighbor as yourself” as Jesus Himself told the scholar of the law who wanted to know how he could inherit eternal life. (The New American Bible, Luke 11:25-27)⁴

Fulfillment is brought about by good moral choices

From this we derive the first practical principle that good is to be pursued and evil is to be avoided.⁵ In a concrete way, we demonstrate this principle by making choices that affirm, protect and foster those “goods” by which a human being flourishes and by refusing to destroy, violate, neglect or diminish in any way those same goods. In protecting these goods of the person, we safeguard the good of his person, the image of God, and thereby manifest our love of the Creator at the same time.⁶ Such goods by which a human being prospers are precious gifts from God that bring about our fulfillment: life itself, good health, marriage, knowledge, authentic friendship, etc. Thus, our responsibilities include the Golden Rule: do

¹ Paul VI, Pastoral constitution on The Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, (December 7, 1965) §16 http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

² William E. May, *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), 55.

³ John Paul II, Encyclical on The Gospel of Life *Evangelium vitae* (March 25, 1995) §30. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html

⁴ May, *Catholic Bioethics*, 57.

⁵ May, *Catholic Bioethics*, 55.

⁶ John Paul II, Encyclical on The Splendor of Truth, *Veritatis splendor*, (August 6, 1993) §13 http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html

unto others as you would have them do unto you; the Silver Rule: Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you; and the Pauline Principle: do not do evil to bring about good.⁷

Good moral choices require true moral judgments

When faced with a moral dilemma, one must make a moral judgment.⁸ Every choice through which we act is “a *decision about oneself* and a setting of one's own life for or against the Good, for or against the Truth, and ultimately for or against God.⁹ Therefore, to achieve the true fullness of life, that is, eternal communion with God the Creator, we must make good moral choices informed by true moral judgments.¹⁰ We accomplish this by collecting and interpreting objective information, seeking competent advice, calling upon the assistance of the Holy Spirit and His gifts, and using our reason with knowledge of the divine law.¹¹ Conscience is at the center, but it can be obstructed by ignorance or rejection of the Gospel and/or teaching authority of the Church, poor influences by others, enslavement to passion, etc.¹²

True moral judgments expressed through the human act define our character

The human act, in the moral order, is the carrying out of one's informed, fully voluntary choice which reflects who we are and inclines us to our future choices; it defines and shapes our character.¹³ “By their fruits you will know them....every good tree bears good fruit, and a rotten tree bears bad fruit.” (Matthew 7:16-17) It is so because, as beings comprised of body and soul, our outward physical actions are also expressions of our inner nature.¹⁴ Therefore, a deliberate act of the will determines who and what we are and will be, unless we freely choose another pathway. For example, if I freely choose to lie, I define myself as a liar, and I dispose myself to lie again in the future—unless I choose not to lie and redefine myself as one who does not lie anymore.

The end cannot justify the means

According to St. Thomas the human act has three sources of morality:¹⁵

1. the **object** willed (the act itself); it is the “**what**.”¹⁶
2. the **end** intended (the motive(s) for doing the act); it is the “**why**.”
3. the **circumstances** (the context of the act); it is the “**who, where, when, how, etc.**”¹⁷

⁷ Ryan T. Anderson, “When ‘Catholic Positions’ Are Not,” *First Things*, November 2017, n.p. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2007/11/when-catholic-positions-are-no>; May, *Catholic Bioethics*, 59.

⁸ “...although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God” *Catechism of the Catholic Church with modifications from the Editio Typica*, 2nd edition Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1997, 1861.

⁹ *Veritatis splendor*, § 65 http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html

¹⁰ May, *Catholic Bioethics*, 49.

¹¹ *Catholic Catechism*, 1788.

¹² *Catholic Catechism*, 1791.

¹³ Louise A. Mitchell, “Integrity and virtue: The forming of good character.” *The Linacre Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (2015): 149

¹⁴ Mitchell, “Integrity,” 156

¹⁵ Austin Fagothey, *Right and Reason: Ethics Based on the Teachings of Aristotle & St. Thomas Aquinas* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books, 1959), 146-151; *Catholic Catechism*, 1750-1754; May, *Catholic Bioethics*, 50-52

¹⁶ It should be noted that some aspects of the object (or act) may appear to be circumstantial, but actually, are essential to defining what the object is. For example, the act of taking something becomes theft by circumstances that determine the essence of the act (taking something that belongs to someone else who is unwilling to let me have it). These are better considered as essential circumstances that define the act; in this case, the neutral action of taking becomes a moral evil, theft. Whether the item is taken from a poor widow or a rich tycoon does not change the essence of the act (theft is theft) even though it might influence the degree of repugnance for the evil; it is therefore an accidental circumstance (which is meant by the third source of moral quality to be discussed). Fagothey, *Right and Reason*, 147-148.

¹⁷ As noted, this quality is meant to include those circumstances that do not describe the essence or moral quality of the act itself, but rather, they are “accidental” aspects of the specified act that contribute to the degree of moral goodness (or evil) and may even modify one's responsibility, e.g. an emergency situation or undue social pressure.

Fagothey, *Right and Reason*, 147-148; *Catholic Catechism*, 1754.

For a human act to be a true moral good, the object, end and circumstances must all be morally good.¹⁸ If one element is bad, then the human act in its totality cannot be a moral good. It follows, that a bad object cannot be made good by a morally good motive, that is, “the end cannot justify the means.”¹⁹ Acts that can never contribute to human flourishing, e.g. abortion, rape, adultery and euthanasia are intrinsically evil. Additionally, even if an evil act is planned but thwarted from successful execution, the civil punishment might be avoided, but the moral guilt persists because the deliberate will for the act is as valid as the act itself.²⁰

Virtue is the fruit and the seed of morally good acts

Human or moral virtue is the “habitual and firm disposition to do good” that is both “the fruit and seed of morally good acts.”²¹ It is *acquired* by human effort through study, deliberate acts, and repetition; it is perfected by divine grace.²² The most important of these are the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance; prudence guides the other virtues and is, as St. Thomas Aquinas called it, “right reason in action.”²³ Through virtue, one “pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions.”²⁴ These are his human acts.

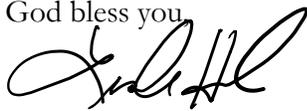
In sum, we are free to choose good or evil, but if we want to have eternal happiness, we have to know, desire and pursue that which is good through our human acts which define who we are. The more we practice that, i.e. the more we develop virtue, the more likely we are to grow in the likeness of Christ.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Why so much attention to human acts and morality? Because so many aspects of our daily lives present moral dilemmas—some of which have grave implications. In the coming months, there will be moral dilemmas for which you will need to make moral judgements regarding immunization with vaccines produced using cell lines from aborted human fetuses, moral duties in the voting booth, etc. A fresh understanding of these basics is a necessary start to ensuring right reason.

“...pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience and gentleness. Compete well for the faith. Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called...” (1 Timothy 6:11-12) And let us continue to pray without ceasing!

God bless you



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¹⁸ *Catholic Catechism*, 1755; Fagothey, *Right and Reason*, 151. May, *Catholic Bioethics*, 52.

¹⁹ *Catholic Catechism*, 1753; Fagothey, *Right and Reason*, 151.

²⁰ Fagothey, *Right and Reason*, 159; We sin in our thoughts, words, deeds and omissions. *Catholic Catechism*, 1853.

²¹ *Catholic Catechism*, 1803, 1804.

²² *Catholic Catechism*, 1810; The Theological virtues (Faith, Hope and Charity) are *infused* by God into the souls of all the faithful; they inform and animate the Human virtues. *Catholic Catechism*, 1813.

²³ *Catholic Bioethics*, 1805.

²⁴ *Catholic Bioethics*, 1803.