

PART THREE
LIFE IN CHRIST

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHRISTIAN MORALITY

(Catechism nn. 1691-1775)

Some basic perspectives

We now move to Part Three of the Catechism, which reflects on the life we are to lead as disciples of Jesus. Section One is entitled 'The Human Vocation: Life in the Spirit.' We begin with some basic perspectives (Catechism n. 1691-1775).

Living a Christian Life

In his circular letter to the Christian Gentile Churches of the East, Paul writes:

'Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must not longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ!' (Ephesians 4:17-20).

Paul is generalizing, and speaking in terms with which his readers were all too familiar. He is reminding them that being a disciple of Jesus demands a life-style radically different from that to which they were previously accustomed, when they were 'dead through the trespasses and sins' (Ephesians 2:1). Paul makes his declaration with all his apostolic authority 'in the Lord'. Without Christ, their lives had been aimless; they were 'alienated from the life of God', their understanding was darkened, their heart hardened. They had become insensitive, and had given themselves up to unrestrained, wanton, ruthless, dissolute indulgence of all their unresolved, discordant desires. All of this was only a vain attempt to fill up the emptiness of their lives. Jesus had warned against such behaviour (Mark 7:22), where everything is taken to excess and there is no direction, no harmony, no beauty, and no peace. Such lives are characterised by lack of clarity. Everything is confused. The light of Christ has not yet penetrated the darkness.

Paul continues:

'That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Ephesians 4:21-24).

'That is not the way you learned Christ!' It is Jesus who has revealed the true God and therefore the meaning of creation, and how we, as human beings, are to live in response to grace. This is 'the truth that is in Jesus'. They 'learned Christ': something more than learning about him. Paul hopes that their education did not stop with conversion, but that they have gone on to learn the kind of mature wisdom that is the subject matter of his letter, including what it means to live as the body of Christ. If the Christian communities, including those in Ephesus, have been properly taught they would have learned to put away this deceptive way of living, following their passions without the restraint of reason (the meaning of 'lust'). Such a life can lead only to corruption and death.

To the Romans Paul writes:

‘Our old self was crucified with Christ so that the sin-body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin’(Romans 6:6).

And to the Colossians:

‘See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition ... and not according to Christ’ (Colossians 2:8).

Paul wants them to cease living the way they used to live when they were blinded by ignorance. He wants them to allow the Spirit of Jesus to renew their way of looking at life and the way they choose to behave.

Paul also writes:

‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect’(Romans 12:2).

This transformation can come about only by ‘putting on Christ’.

‘We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day’(2Corinthians 4:16).

This renewal has already occurred when they were converted to Jesus and received into the Church. However, Paul knows that it is always possible to be unfaithful to grace and to fall back into former habits. To guard against this Paul exhorts them to clothe themselves in the new nature that they have, the life of Jesus in which they participate thanks to the gift of the Spirit. It is a life in which they share in God’s own ‘righteousness and holiness’(Ephesians 4:24).

Christian morality and the Spirit of Jesus

Christian morality is essentially and radically a morality lived by a person who has the Spirit of Jesus. Paul writes to the Thessalonians:

‘We ask and urge [Greek: *parakaleô*] you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.’

The Stoics of Paul’s day had worked out a system of ethics based on their understanding of human nature. We find Christians of a later period attempting to do the same, for they saw the importance of expressing their moral teaching in terms of the current ethical philosophy, both in order to appeal to their non-Christian contemporaries in language that was understandable, and to demonstrate the reasonableness of the Christian position. This procedure has an obvious validity, but it must not be allowed to obscure the truth that Paul invariably argues, not from an understanding of human nature and its requirements, but from the example of Jesus who shares his Spirit with the believer.

Jesus' Teaching

Christian living is modelled on that of Jesus and is possible only because of the Spirit of Jesus dwelling in us. A person cannot live Christian morality without faith. As a consequence, Christian morality cannot be imposed on non-believers, for living a Christian life is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. When Paul 'urges' (Greek: *parakaleô*) the community in Thessalonica to behave in a certain way, he is conscious of 'calling' (Greek: *kaleô*) from or on behalf of another (Greek: *para*). Paul sees himself as the instrument of a call made to the Christian believers by the risen Christ. His appeal is made 'in the Lord Jesus' and 'through the Lord Jesus', that is to say, in communion with him and with his authority.

Paul is not simply offering suggestions. He is speaking of 'how you ought to live'. However, the obligation to behave in a certain way does not flow from some moral strength they should have as human beings. Rather, it flows from the fact that they have received a share in Jesus' Spirit.

Jesus' teaching and example

Obviously, if we want to live as disciples of Jesus we should listen to him. Jesus tells us that the kind of perfection to which we should aim is the kind of perfection that we see in God:

'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48).

Luke makes it clear that the perfection to which Jesus is referring is one of compassion:

'Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate' (Luke 6:36).

Jesus also makes it clear that our basic orientation is to be one of obedience to God. This is what it means to 'love' God.

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment' (Matthew 22:37-38).

'Blessed are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:3).

'You will enter the kingdom of heaven only if you do the will of my Father' (Matthew 7:21).

'Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18:4).

It is also clear from Jesus' example and teaching that we are to 'love' others, in the sense that we are to act for their spiritual good.

'A second commandment is like the first: You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:38).

'Do to others as you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7:12).

'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (Matthew 18:5).

'This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12).

Jesus is clear on the point that our lives are ultimately judged by our love:

‘Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me’(Matthew 25:41-43).

Jesus quotes with approval the commandments of the Torah regarding treatment of one's neighbour.

‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. Honour your father and mother’(Matthew 19:18).

Rarely does Jesus give more specific directives. We find the following attributed to him:

‘You cannot serve God and mammon’(Matthew 6:24).

‘On the day of judgment you will have to give an account of every idle word you utter’(Matthew 12:36)

‘Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, irresponsible sexual behaviour, theft, false witness, slander’(Matthew 15:19).

‘Woe to you if you cause one of these my little ones to stumble’(Matthew 18:7).

And, in response to a question put to him on divorce:

‘What God has joined together let no one separate’(Matthew 19:6).

‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery’(Matthew 19:9).

Jesus' teaching in the area of morality is perhaps picked up best by Paul when he writes:

‘Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’(Ephesians 5:1-2).

‘Living in love’ is the key. It is interesting to note the Gospel narratives in which ‘compassion’ has a key role in determining the actions taken by Jesus. We see it is the narrative of the leper (Mark 1:40-45). Jesus sees the leper and is ‘moved with compassion’, and out of this compassion he embraces the leper when the Law required that he dismiss him. Similarly when Jesus encountered the crowd. Mark tells us:

‘As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things’(Mark 6:34).

It is the same with the widow who had lost her only child (Luke 7:35). The same point comes out in Jesus' parables of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20), and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33). The priest and the Levite see the wounded man and continue on their journey. The Samaritan sees him and is ‘moved with compassion’. This leads him to stop and care for the stranger.

Christian Morality and Freedom (Catechism n. 1730-1748)

There is a necessary link between living a moral life and the exercise of freedom. Jesus does not praise the man who buried his talent for fear that he might lose it (Matthew 25:24-30). Jesus wants us to live and live to the full (John 10:10). We are to dare to live, and to learn to love through the exercise of our God-given freedom. Our freedom can be restricted by others. It can be restricted from within. Freedom is always an achievement – the fruit of a life of courageous decisions. In John’s Gospel we hear Jesus say:

‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free ... Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed’(John 8:31-36).

Paul reminds us that Jesus has set us free: free from all that would inhibit us from living life to the full, and free to live a beautiful, moral life, following Jesus’ example and enabled by the gift of his Spirit – the Spirit that is experienced within the Christian community and in the heart of believers. We might reflect on the following words from Paul to the communities in Galatia:

‘For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery’(Galatians 5:1).

‘You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another’(Galatians 5:13).

In a similar vein he writes to the Corinthians:

‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom’(2Corinthians 3:17).

Let us listen, too, to his words to the communities in Rome:

‘Your sanctification is the fruit of your having been freed from sin and enslaved to God. It is all in view of eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’(Romans 6:22-23).

‘Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness’(Romans 6:16-18).

‘The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death’(Romans 8:2).

‘You have been set free from bondage to decay to obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’(Romans 8:21).

In all these statements Paul is primarily concerned with inner freedom: freedom from the passions that enslave the heart – freedom to love with the heart of Jesus.

James and Peter also speak of freedom:

‘Those who look into the perfect law, the law of freedom, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in all they do’(James 1:25).

‘As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honour everyone. Love the family of believers’(1Peter 2:16-17).

‘They are promised freedom by those who themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them’(2Peter 2:19).

Pope John-Paul II has some reflections on freedom in his encyclical “*The Splendour of Truth*”. He writes:

‘Only the freedom which submits to the Truth leads the human person to his or her true good. The good of the person is to be in the Truth and to do the Truth’(n. 84).

‘Freedom itself needs to be set free. It is Christ who sets it free: he has set us free, for freedom’(n. 86).

The Pope reminds us that acceptance of truth is a condition for authentic freedom, and quotes Jesus’ words:

‘You will know the truth and the truth will set you free’(John 8:32).

He also states:

‘Freedom is acquired in love, that is, in the gift of self’(n. 87).

In his *Seeds of Contemplation* (page 91), Thomas Merton writes of:

‘freedom from domination, freedom to live one’s own spiritual life, freedom to seek the highest truth, unabashed by any human pressure or any collective demand, the ability to say one’s own Yes and one’s own No and not merely to echo the Yes and the No of state, party, corporation, army or system. This is inseparable from authentic religion. It is one of the deepest and most fundamental of human needs, perhaps the deepest and most crucial need of the human person as such. For without recognising the challenge of this need no one can truly be a person, and therefore without it we cannot truly be human either. The frustration of this deep need by irreligion, by secular and political pseudo-religion, by the mystiques and superstitions of totalitarianism, have made us humans sick in the very depths of our being. They have wounded and corrupted our freedom, they have filled our love with rottenness, decayed it into hatred. They have made us a machine geared for our own destruction.’

Freedom

In his *Freedom, Authority and Community*, John Courtney Murray SJ writes:

‘Freedom is inwardness, spontaneity, the capacity to find within oneself the reasons and the motives of one’s own right decisions and action, apart from external coercion. Freedom, therefore, is authenticity, truthfulness, fidelity to the pursuit of truth and to the truth when found. In further consequence, freedom is experienced as duty, as responsibility, as a response to the claims of justice, to the demands of rightful law, to the governance and guidance of legitimate authority. In its intimately Christian sense, however, freedom has a higher meaning than all this. Freedom, in the deepest experience of it, is love. To be free is to be for-the-others. The Christian call to freedom is inherently a call to community, a summons out of isolation, an invitation to be with others, an impulse to service of the others.’

In his *The Christian Response* (page 64), Michel Quoist writes:

‘Even if you were to find yourself behind prison bars, you could still be free if you wanted to be free, because human freedom is situated at the deepest level of the spirit. Unless you are reduced to a state of unconsciousness, nothing can take your freedom from you, because nothing can imprison the human spirit against its will. Only you can effectively limit your own personal freedom. If you want to be free, you have to struggle against yourself, you have to win your freedom ... You are not free until you can stand on your feet. You are not free until the spirit holds the reins over your body, your emotions, your imagination. But then, what good is love if you do not know anyone to give it to? What good are your triumphs over heredity, the subconscious, the unconscious, your bad habits, your constraints? What good is your self-mastery, your desire to be of service, your freedom, if you do not know how to make use of the freedom you have won? If you are not free for something, you are not really free, for you will find yourself the plaything of indecision, instability and anxiety. Once you have become detached and are master of yourself, real freedom is the possibility that you have of choosing the good and of resolutely keeping to your choice. Real freedom comes to fulfilment in obedience to God whose will is mediated to us through the Church, those who have a legitimate authority in our regard, our daily obligations, and the ordinary circumstances of our lives. Genuine obedience presupposes genuine freedom, but genuine freedom is created by repeated acts of obedience.’

Let us conclude this reflection on freedom with a statement from Saint John Eudes (died 1680) in his *The Admirable Heart of Jesus*. It is quoted in the Catechism n. 1698, and links us back to the first point made in this chapter: the freedom we long to experience is the freedom of the Heart of Jesus given to us by his Spirit:

‘I ask you to reflect on the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ is your true head, and that you are one of his members. All that is his is yours: his Spirit, his heart, his body and soul, and all his faculties. You must use all these as your own, to serve, praise, love, and give glory to God. You belong to Christ as members belong to their head. And so he longs for you to use all that is in you as your own, for the service and glory of the Father.’

Asceticism

Asceticism is an area fraught with danger. In his *Theological Investigations* volume 3, page 58, Karl Rahner writes:

‘Some see in the ascetical attitude a contempt of the world, unfaithfulness to and flight from earthly tasks, the disguised resentment of those who are incompetent in the business of living, of those who despise the world because they are too weak and cowardly to hold fast to it and to master it courageously in all its greatness and difficulty.’

Honesty is needed here, because the criticism can contain more than a grain of truth.

Christian asceticism consists in the choice to let go whatever inhibits love. This is something that varies from person to person, and from situation to situation. The blessing of the community is an important safeguard, as we see, for example, in the asceticism of religious orders in which the members forego sexual intimacy, the security that can come from control over one’s financial situation, and the ability to make one’s own decisions without regard to the community and those in the community who exercise leadership.

It is important that, in the words of Rahner, ‘in Christian asceticism we become free, not in order to wall up our heart but to give it away, to God and to the world.’

Making a moral decision (Catechism n. 1749-1761)

Making a truly moral decision requires humility and wisdom. Neither of these is automatic. For a choice to be truly moral we need to weigh a number of considerations. What are the social implications of the act we are considering? Clearly not everything can be predicted, but a serious look at consequences, for ourselves and for others, is to be included in our discernment. We need to reflect on cultural influences, particularly on how they might bias our judgment. We are to learn from the wisdom of past human experience, especially as this has been embodied in laws that have provided sound guidance. We are to consult broadly, aware that our own self-interest might colour our judgment, and aware that others have special expertise and insight. We are to see how our religious beliefs might enlighten us in what can be a moral dilemma.

Others can help us make wise and so morally good decisions. However, only in rare circumstances is it appropriate for us to hand the decision over to them, for we are called to be responsible for what we do. Obviously we need to have some criteria that will help us know when it is appropriate to trust another person and when to distrust them. Some of the following criteria may help: Is the person generally trustworthy? Is he/she knowledgeable in the area of the advice being offered to us? Does what he/she advises fit in with what we already know? Does the advice, whether it attracts us or not, make sense to us and sit well with our conscience? Does the decision that we make in following the advice bear fruit in love?

Feelings

It is important that we recognise that the morality of our actions is judged by what we do, and by our intentions in behaving the way we do. Circumstances, too, must be considered (see Catechism n. 1750). A basic principle is that the end does not justify the means (Catechism n. 1753), in other words, a good intention does not of itself make an action morally good.

Morality and feelings (Catechism n. 1762-1775)

A final note. It is important to realise that feelings are in themselves neither moral nor immoral. One thinks of the feelings of well-being that we experience (joy); of the desire we have for what we perceive as being good (hope); of the feeling of wanting to avoid what we perceive as being a threat to our well-being (fear); and of the sense of loss we experience when something that we perceive as being for our well-being is taken from us (grief). The same is true of other feelings. From the point of view of morality they are neither good nor bad. It is what we say or do under the influence of these feelings that takes us into the area of morality.