Lesson 52: Introduction to the Moral Life

Revision from previous lesson:
Throughout all the previous lessons, you have learned the most basic teachings of the Holy Catholic Church from our Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. However, all these teachings of the Church need to be practised as a way of life at a personal level. What we believe about God and His Church must affect the way we choose to live. This is why living a moral life is important. Therefore, living a moral life based on the teachings of the Church is the other side of the same coin of the Catholic faith. In other words, we must live out what we believe. In these next few lessons, you will learn about the moral teachings of the Church in greater detail. In this particular lesson, you will be introduced to some basic principles upon which all Catholic moral teachings are based.

Current lesson:

1. In John 10:10, Jesus said, "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full". The Christian faith is more than just about receiving the Sacrament of Baptism in order to be "officially accepted" into the Church. It is also more than just observing a set of rules for fear of offending God. Our faith in Christ, and the Baptism that we receive, gives us new life in Him. He desires for this life to be a full and abundant life. This abundant life that we receive in Christ means living in His love and light. In other words, it involves living a life that is righteous and upright, a life that is moral.

   CCC 1691: "Christian, recognize your dignity and, now that you share in God's own nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning. Remember who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Never forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of the Kingdom of God."

2. Living a moral life as Christians means that we recognise our dignity as people who have received the gift of abundant life from Jesus Christ, our Saviour. This moral life is based on some very important principles that we should always observe. All the moral teachings of the Church flow from these principles.

   These principles may be described or listed differently by various moral theologians of the Church. However, they are all ultimately just different ways of expressing the same principles which reflect the mind of the Church about God, humanity, and the rest of creation.

3. **The Primacy of Love**. Jesus Himself taught this principle very clearly in Sacred Scripture:

   Matthew 22:37-40: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets too."

   Loving God and loving our neighbour is the essence of all our moral laws. It sums up everything that is found in the Ten Commandments that were given by God to Moses, in

the teachings of all the prophets of Israel, and in all the laws that the Israelites were required to observe in their history. It also sums up all the moral teachings of the Holy Catholic Church today.

4. Evidently, paying lip service by saying that we love God and we love our neighbours is not good enough. This lip service must also be accompanied by a way of life that demonstrates this love.

   Many Catholics often focus on the "minimum" that they need to observe in order to prevent themselves from sinning. Indeed, the Church does have stipulations on the "minimum" that a Catholic needs to observe, and these are all found in the moral code of the Church. However, the call of the Gospel is not for us to forever be attempting to observe the minimum just so that we will not trespass the code. If we truly seek to love God and our neighbour, then our focus will be on giving our best to make these moral principles come alive in our hearts and minds, and in our daily actions. The point of the moral life is excellence, not bare minimum. Remember that the heavenly life is a life of excellence.

5. In contemplating the law of love, the most perfect rule of life for us is to always observe the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) to the best of our abilities. It is when we seek to practise the Beatitudes that we are truly striving to love God and love our neighbour perfectly. Remember that the Beatitudes are not just a set of beautiful philosophies. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that "[T]he Beatitudes are at the heart of Jesus' preaching" (CCC 1716). They present a new set of moral standards by which we are called to live the Gospel life radically as disciples of Jesus. Living out the virtues of the Beatitudes means living like Christ Himself.

6. **Sanctity of Life**. Because God is the Creator of all human beings and has given every human life a dignity that cannot be taken away, every human being is therefore precious to God regardless of whether this person is already born or not, whether this person is young or old, and whether this person is able or disabled.

   CCC 2258: "Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being."

   Based on this principle of Sanctity of Life, we are to consider that every human being is precious. People, because of their intrinsic dignity, are more important than things. Our moral life can be measured by whether we seek to threaten or enhance the life and dignity of other human beings.

   The dignity of human beings can be protected, and we can be a healthy human community, only if the rights of all peoples are safeguarded and everyone does his best to fulfil his responsibilities to protect all human beings. A human being needs a place to live in, clothes to wear, and food and water for sustenance. Every person has a fundamental right to live and a right to own whatever is necessary to live a decent life. As Catholics, we ought to see ourselves as having duties and responsibilities towards other human beings in this regard.

7. But it is not just human beings that are important, although they may be the most significant matter when it comes to protecting the rights of God's creation to exist. At another level, we as human beings have also been called by God to provide care for all of His creation (Genesis 1:26). All human beings have been entrusted by God with a responsibility to exercise stewardship by respecting God's plan for the whole of His creation. Consequently, we must protect not just human beings, but also animals, plants, nature, and natural resources, instead of exploiting and abusing them.

   This does not mean that we should place the needs of nature equal to or higher than the needs of humanity. It only means that we should not take advantage of nature in an attitude of greed, and we should take from nature only what we need. But neither should we exalt nature so much that it occupies a higher position of dignity than mankind. Pope Benedict XVI had clarified this in June 2011 when he spoke to new ambassadors to the Holy See: "A correct understanding of the relationship between man and the environment will not end by absolutising nature or by considering it more important than the human person."

   But at the same time, the way we provide care for creation has an immediate as well as long-term impact upon other inhabitants of planet earth. All human actions inflicted upon nature have favourable outcomes or painful consequences. Therefore, if we care for other human beings of this generation as well as the generations to come, we need to be responsible in how we exercise responsibility over nature.

8. **Fidelity in Relationships**. As human beings, all of us live as a part of a larger human family. We therefore have to live in such a way that we serve the general well-being of the whole human family rather than bringing harm to it. This requires that we be like Christ Himself, who came "to serve and not to be served" (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45). Just as Christ was faithful to humanity, so must we be faithful to this humanity for which He came and died.

9. Such fidelity in relationships will impact the way we relate in friendship with other human beings. If we are to enjoy true friendships with other people in such a way that we respect and value them, then our friendship with them must be chaste. When we learn about the Catholic Church's way of understanding chastity, we come to understand how to enjoy proper sexual relationships in such a way that the dignity of other people is respected.

   CCC 2347: "Chastity is expressed notably in *friendship with one's neighbor*. Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all. It leads to spiritual communion."

10. Fidelity in relationships is also important in the context of marriage and family. The Catholic Church teaches us that marriage is not just a private matter between two individuals. Marriage is the very foundation of the family, and it is in this context that children will learn values that will assist them to be fully able to participate in society (CCC 1663, 2225, 2363). Therefore, living a moral life means that marriage cannot be understood as a " form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 66).

11. Therefore, for the sake of the individual, the family, and society as a whole, all human persons have a right and an obligation to participate in society in order to work together for the common good and well-being of all people. It is also in this spirit that the needs of the disadvantaged, such as the poor and the vulnerable, must be given due attention.

    The human society needs to be organised in terms of its economics, governance, and laws, so that the human dignity of every person in this society is protected and every individual is enabled to flourish and develop in the human community.

12. **The Common Good**. The social teaching of the Catholic Church spells out that we are all keepers (i.e. guardians) of our brothers and sisters in the human family, whoever and wherever they are. This means that there must be a just distribution of resources so that everybody's basic needs are met. Such resources or goods are not just limited to physical resources but also spiritual ones.

    We must be concerned not just for humanity at the local level, but also nationally and globally. This is especially true since the world has become much more interdependent with the development of science, communications, and modern means of transportation. We need to learn how to respond to the human need in a way that corresponds with the social teaching of the Holy Catholic Church.

13. The morality of a society can be observed by how well its most vulnerable members are taken care of. In a world that is driven by greed, and where the division between the rich and the poor is deepening, the Church teaches us to prioritise the needs of the poor and the vulnerable.

    CCC 2444: "'The Church's love for the poor… is a part of her constant tradition.' This love is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, of the poverty of Jesus, and of his concern for the poor."

14. In this world, people need to work in order to make a living. But more than just making money to earn their wages, work is a form of our continuing participation in God's creation. Because of this, the dignity of work must be protected, and the basic rights of all workers must be respected. This means that they have the right to be paid fairly, to organise themselves in such a way that their rights are protected, and also a right to own private properties so that their basic needs are met.

15. In the lessons to come, we will not be able to cover all aspects that are necessary in the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. However, we will cover some very fundamental aspects that do flow from these moral principles that we have introduced in this lesson.

16. The principles above do seem very ideal, and we may wonder if it is possible for any human being (Catholic or otherwise) to observe such ideals perfectly in this fallen world.

    The Catholic faith always presents us with the ideal of perfection, for the simple reason that God is perfect (Psalm 18:30). In the same way, Jesus says, "You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Jesus, in presenting this requirement, would mean that such a requirement is not impossible. Human beings are

essentially created good (Genesis 1:31) because man and woman were created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). This means a human being has the potential to be good and to do good, and to give life to others.

Of course, this does not ignore the fact that humanity is also fallen. It is a fact that human beings do awful things to one another and to creation. It is a reality that human beings do violate the dignity of other human beings and of creation. We are easily seduced away from the good that we were meant to be and to do. We easily become selfish and self-centred. The history of humanity tells the truth about us and our sinful condition.

This is why God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, calls us to acknowledge our sinfulness and to constantly set our hearts against doing what is wrong and actively strive to break free of the power of sin over us. Striving against sin in our lives and in the world is a characteristic of the moral teachings of the Church. We are exhorted by Saint Paul to put the old self to death in order to become the New Man in Christ (Ephesians 4:17-24). The moral teachings of the Church command us to work hard to become more than we have been, to actualise our potential to keep being and doing good (i.e. becoming holy). The moral teachings of the Church are meant to make us uncomfortable with sin.

All this is possible because we do not strive alone. Jesus is present in our lives. He had already promised His Apostles and all who follow Him, "I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Matthew 28:20). He is present with us and in us through the Holy Spirit, to empower and enable us to live holy lives. This means that living the moral life is not just about obeying a code or keeping ourselves from offending God's laws, but living in a continuous relationship with God and being docile to the Holy Spirit so that He can be our Guide, our Protector, and our Strength in all our thoughts and actions.

2021 Sherman Kuek. Distribution of this work in its original form is freely permitted for all catechetical work but not for profit purposes. No modifications to the original form of this work are permitted except with the consent of the original author. Where modifications have been consented in any form, legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict the use of this work in ways that the licence permits may not be applied. For further enquiries, contact admin@splendourproject.com.