

CATHOLIC TEACHING ON THE HUMAN PERSON AND SEXUAL ETHICS

Rev. Robert M. Friday, S.T.D.

Monday, July 26, 2004

9:00 – 11:00 a.m.

Objective of this session: Present the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of Catholic moral teaching in general and in relationship to human sexual behavior in particular. The centrality of the Church’s appreciation for the dignity of the human person is the key for understanding its social and personal moral teachings.

I. The Dignity of the Human Person (*Gaudium et Spes*, Chpts. I & II)¹

- ? “Believers and unbelievers agree almost unanimously that all things on earth should be ordained to mankind as to their center and summit.” Why? “For sacred scripture teaches that man was created ‘to the image of God,’ as able to know and love his creator, and as set by him over all earthly creatures that he might rule them, and make use of them, while glorifying God.” (12)
- ? “God did not create man a solitary being. From the beginning ‘male and female he created them.’ (Gen. 1:27).” (12) [We are created to be social, communitarian creatures.]
- ? The unfortunate reality of sin: “...he has broken the right order that should reign within himself as well as between himself and other humans and all creatures.” (13) [More on sin and some necessary distinctions later!]
- ? Comprised of “body” and “soul,” we remain nonetheless a unity. Important: we are “obliged to regard [our] body as good and to hold it in honor since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day.” (14)
- ? “Man, as sharing in the light of the divine mind, rightfully affirms that by his intellect he surpasses the world of mere things.” (15) [Seek truth and pursue wisdom!]
- ? “Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. [Natural Law? – more on this later.] Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: “do this, shun that.” For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.” (16) [More on conscience later!]

¹ The English translation of the Council documents does not use inclusive language. My apologies!

- ? The excellence of freedom! “It is only in freedom that man can turn himself toward the good.” (17) John Paul II: “Authentic freedom is never freedom ‘from’ the truth but always freedom ‘in’ the truth (*Veritatis splendor*, 64).” Again: “Detached from the truth about the human person, freedom deteriorates into license in the lives of individuals, and in political life it becomes the caprice of the most powerful and the arrogance of power. Far from being a limitation upon freedom or a threat to it, reference to the truth about the human person – a truth universally knowable through the moral law written on the hearts of all – is, in fact, the guarantor of freedom’s future.” (Address to the UN General Assembly, 1995)
- ? Modern atheism: insists on man’s desire for autonomy and a rejection of any dependence on God. “Those who profess this kind of atheism maintain that freedom consists in this, that man is an end to himself, and the sole maker, with supreme control, of his own history. ... The sense of power which modern technical progress begets in man may encourage this outlook.” (20)
- ? Chapter II. The communitarian or social nature of the human vocation as God’s design for us. Here one locates the rationale for the Church’s teachings on social justice and basic human rights which constitute “the common good.” Human persons should have “access to all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life: for example, food, clothing, housing, the right freely to choose [their] state of life and set up a family, the right to education, work, to [their] good name, to respect, to proper knowledge, the right to act according to the dictates of conscience and to safeguard [their] privacy, and rightful freedom even in matters of religion.” (26)
 [This area will be addressed in greater detail in tomorrow morning’s session.]

II. Key Elements of Catholic Moral Teaching

- A. The nature of Christian morality: Keeping rules or "responding appropriately in and to a love relationship"???
- B. Sources of moral teachings: Sacred Scripture & Human Reason
 - 1) Sacred Scripture: How is scripture used in Catholic moral teaching?
 - a) Fundamentalist/literalist method
 - b) Historical critical method ("holistic")
 - 2) Human reason (Natural Law theory): contrasting views:

- a) Classical world-view of what it means to be human.
- b) Historically conscious world-view of what it means to be human.

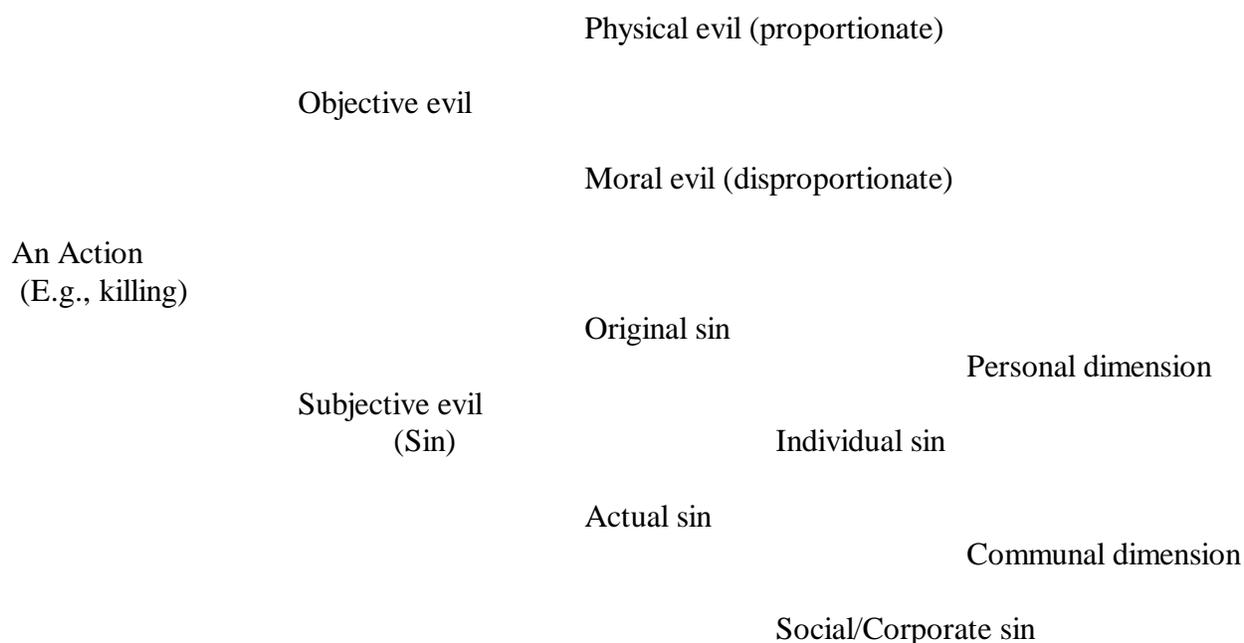
C. The nature of personal sin

- ? Traditional: "any willful thought, word, deed, desire, or omission forbidden by the law of God." Baltimore Catechism III, Ls. 6, q. 64.
- ? Contemporary: "...failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods." Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1849.

OR

"alienation" and "broken relationship"

The following diagram may help to clarify some important distinctions:



D. Personal conscience

1. Nature of personal conscience: "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of the human person. There he/she is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his/her depths." (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16)

Conscience\1: open to and seeks "values"

Conscience\2: receives, sorts, and prioritizes values.

Conscience\3: judges and decides; helps to define one's moral character.

2. The Role of Conscience is to discern a course of action or non-action by sorting through the values and disvalues in a human moral dilemma. All moral decisions involve values in conflict. Human decisions inevitably include some objective good and some objective evil. (Distinguish "conscience" from "superego.")
3. The Formation of Conscience begins at birth (at least) and continues through life as values are learned, reviewed, challenged, rearranged, etc.
4. The Authority of Personal Conscience:

"On his part, man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God, for whom he was created. 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 Freedom

III. Understanding Catholic Sexual Ethics

- A. Why does the Church involve itself in matters of sexuality and sexual expression? (Rationale for a sexual ethic)
 - Morality has to do with appropriate response in and to a love relationship
 - Sexual expression involves response in a relationship
- B. Seven steps on the way toward a Christian perspective on human sexuality and sexual morality:
 1. Sex is good, not evil or questionable!
 2. Sexuality is a "whole person" phenomenon.
 3. Sexuality serves us in achieving our goals (a means, not an end)
 4. Balancing the homo-/hetero- dimension of sexuality.
 5. Relationships differ in kind and intensity.
 6. The relationship signals the nature of the appropriate response.
 7. Morality has to do with "appropriateness" rather than with conformity to rules.
- C. How does the Church determine what is appropriate sexual response in a love relationship? What sources are used for moral guidelines?
 - a. Sacred Scripture:

i. What scripture says and doesn't say.

ii. A scripturally derived and governing principle: **"When sexuality is expressed in its fullest sense, i.e., including genital expression, the physical act must remain open to love-giving and the act's life-giving potential."**

b. Human Reason & Experience - Natural Law theory holds "things should act or be used according to their nature." [Two conflicting applications of this approach in Catholic theology.]

D. Living with the teachings and the issues on the campus of a Catholic university.

Questions and Discussion

