

No.6

30th April 2020

Dear Friends,

This week we turn our attention to the way in which we conduct our lives as Catholic/Christians. Living a moral life is more than just putting a tick against a list of rules. It is about relationships with God and each other - as Jesus said : "Love God and love your neighbour." But how do we know what is right and wrong. In our main piece this week this question is explored.

For Lectio we are invited to read from the the First Book of Kings in the Old Testament and learn from the experience of the prophet Elijah. My thanks to John Kimberley for this reflection on Elijah.

In this unusual time we have ample opportunity to think about those matters we often find difficult to find time for. The parish website has many ideas for prayer and spiritual reading.

I hope you are all keeping safe and well,

God bless

John de Waal

Morality and Natural Law.

I remember reading an article on abortion in the national press about thirty years ago. The author likened public debate on the issue to a tennis match in which the two opponents were playing on different courts. One served a ball but it was never returned. No one was on the other side to receive it.

Much of public debate on many moral questions can be described in the same fashion. The sad fact is that we do not speak a common language when it comes to moral issues.

Most people would claim to be moral - to seek what is good - but many would be hard pressed to give reasons for their moral outlook. Many would look to civil law to provide a standard by which to live. Civil law becomes “normative”. What can be wrong when the law of the land says it is right? Probably the vast majority of people today follow some form of “Situation Ethics” - it all depends on ‘the situation’ - a subjective approach to right and wrong. The trouble here is that there is no clear guide as to morality - it comes down to a matter of opinion, fashion perhaps?

Traditionally for centuries the moral code has been set by Judaeo-Christian values and these have followed what is known as Natural Law Morality - which also reflects Revealed Law from God through scripture. Natural Law Morality has a long history - recognised as long ago as ancient Greece by the great philosopher Aristotle and taken up by Christian thinkers such as St Thomas Aquinas. So what is Natural Law and what is its importance?

What is Natural Law Morality?

Natural Law can be described as follows : firstly, we must not confuse it with “laws of nature” such as gravity, thermodynamics and so on. Natural Moral Law is based on the idea that everything created has a purpose. This purpose may be found by reason through a study of science or common sense experience. To act morally with regard to anyone or thing you must respect the natural purpose of the act in question. For example, food is for sustaining us and keeping us healthy. We all recognise the existence of eating too much - we call it gluttony. If we abuse food we can become obese and unhealthy.

When we look at a more contentious area of human behaviour, such as sex, we can also apply the principles of the Natural Moral Law. What is the purpose of sex? Seen from a biological perspective it can be agreed that sex is for bringing new life into the world, for procreation, it is life-giving. Taking into account a wider view of anthropology and the psychological and emotional needs of human beings we can see the purpose of sex as being an expression of love. Thus we can say, in short, that sex can be life-giving and love-giving. But it is not always used for either of these good, natural “ends”. Increasingly in our modern world sex is used for recreation. It can also be used for even more sinister ends such as imposing control by force over women by men. Such acts can be described as immoral because they abuse the natural purposes of sex. It is with such principles in mind that such issues as contraception, IVF and so on are affected.

The Natural Moral Law necessarily implies “universality” - that is, it is for all people, not just a particular culture or time in history. This challenges many modern forms of behaviour where some would argue that moral precepts are “human constructs”, made by people for certain eras and not to be followed at all times. Such a view fits in well with Situation Ethics whereby there is no universal or objective morality. Natural Law challenges this view.

This leads us to the consideration that - under Natural Law - some acts are always right or wrong. This sounds rather black and white. Where does the God of compassion come into it? Are we set up to fail? In his encyclical : Veritatis Splendor (1993) Pope St John Paul deals with this. Reason attests, he states, that some acts are incapable of being ordered to God (ie. in keeping with the God-given natural purpose of an act) and are thus immoral in themselves. Again this sounds very harsh but there is more. The act itself may be immoral but it is recognised that circumstances and intentions can mitigate the culpability of the person involved. To put it another way, some things are always objectively wrong but subjectively a person’s culpability/responsibility can be diminished by circumstance and intention. God sees into the heart of the individual - which is why we should never judge a person, but we can judge acts.

“If acts are intrinsically immoral a good intention or particular circumstances can diminish their immoral character but cannot remove it.” This refers to the nature of the act - not the individual’s culpability. You cannot make a bad act good in itself but your responsibility can be lessened.

Catholic moral teaching also places great emphasis on Conscience. **The very word comes from “con-science” which means “with knowledge”.** The whole idea of conscience is developed in Veritatis Splendor. It is linked with the concept of Freedom (and Free Will) and the notion of individual responsibility for our actions. It says :*“This heightened sense of the dignity of the human person and uniqueness, and the respect due to conscience certainly represents one of the positive achievements of modern culture.”* And yet, as John Henry Newman says :*“Conscience has rights because it has duties.”* It is not permissive.

And so the Church has always emphasised the importance of having an **informed conscience**. It is not simply a matter of opinion. Conscience does not simply allow you to do something. It is imperative. You must do it. *“The judgement of conscience does not establish the law, rather it bears witness to*

the authority of the Natural Law.” “Conscience is the application of the law to a particular case.”

“Certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute which would then be the source of values.” Veritatis Splendor argues that ...“the human person cannot be reduced to a freedom which is self-designing.” If we are all our own fount of morality then there is no objective morality - ie. no morality worth speaking of. There is no freedom unless it is founded on Truth. Our Reason and the Natural Law guide us into the Truth. For believers God is the source of all Truth. As Jesus said of himself :*“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life...”* (St John’s Gospel).

Love and Morality.

St Augustine once said :“Love God and do what you want.” This begs the question : “What does loving God entail?” Veritatis Splendor tells us further :*“Both the Old and New Testaments explicitly affirm that without love of neighbour, made concrete in keeping the commandments, genuine love of God is not possible.”* It goes further still :*“This involves not just hearing and accepting a body of teaching ... more radically it involves holding fast to the very person of Jesus.”* Life, however, as we know, can be ‘messy’. Veritatis Splendor tackles the situation in which some people may not live up to the high standards of the Gospel and yet try to do their best : *“by trying to live a good life, motivated by love that individual could continue to be morally good, persevere in God’s grace and attain salvation even if certain of his specific acts were deliberately and gravely contrary to God’s commandments as set forth by the Church.”* What is not accepted is the claim made by some that this makes certain acts moral. The objective teaching cannot be changed. The individual responsibility, however, can be subject to circumstances.

“Appropriate allowance is made both for God’s mercy towards the sin of a man who experiences conversion and for the understanding of human weakness.” “Having come not to judge the world but to save it, Jesus was uncompromisingly stern towards sin, but patient and rich in mercy towards sinners.” As Catholics we always have recourse to God’s mercy in the sacrament of Confession.

The Magisterium.

How should we inform our conscience? As well as trying to understand our actions from secular or worldly sources such as science and history and plain common sense, we also have the Church as our source of Authority

("Magisterium" means the teaching authority of the Church as embodied in the Pope and Bishops of the Catholic Church). It makes no sense to think that Jesus would not have left such a teaching authority. Human nature being what it is there was always bound to be disagreements and different points of view - as we see in the earliest days of the new Church in the Acts of the Apostles.

The following passage from St Paul's 2nd Letter to Timothy is given in the encyclical :

"I charge you ... convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching ... For the time will come when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths."

The Natural Moral Law is within reach of understanding by everyone. If so, then public debate on moral issues can take place - perhaps based on a common language?

Food for thought :

"Freedom consists not in doing what we like but in having the right to do what we ought." Pope John Paul II

Lectio.

Reading : 1 Kings 19 : 1 - 8

(‘Horeb’ is to be identified as Sinai - where Moses received the 10 Commandments and where the Covenant agreement between God and His chosen people was created).

Points for reflection.

It would seem that the whole of this reading, which concerns a few hours in Elijah’s life, is about the renewal of spirit and trust in God.

Elijah is in fear for his life and, in the depths of despair, he runs away to hide from those sent by Jezebel to kill him.

Elijah considers dying and asks God to take his life, as he thought himself to be ‘no better than his ancestors’ - that is dead and of no use at all.

In the desert Elijah is fed by God, and experiences for himself God’s care for him as a person, and in this he realises God’s purpose for his life.

Elijah’s despair and fear are transformed and he is renewed in his faith.

With a new strength Elijah leaves for Mount Horeb where, like Moses before him, he will create with God a new and lasting relationship, and move on to continue his work and ministry.

Prayer.

Father in Heaven,
sustain us as You sustained Elijah in his time of need.
When we experience despair or doubt,
or perceive a lack of purpose in our lives,
we ask You to send Your Spirit into our hearts,
and so feed us with the knowledge of Your truth.
All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

