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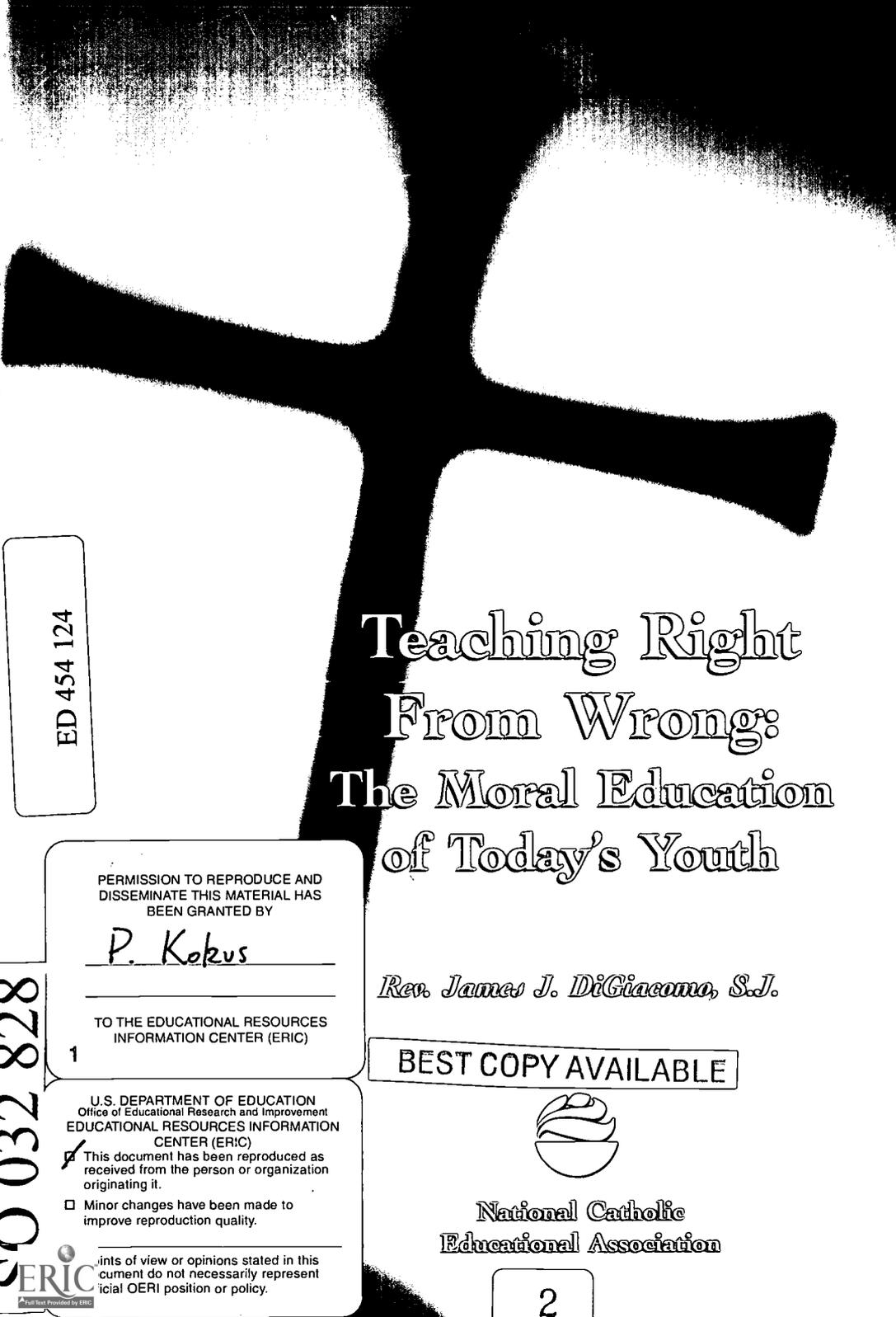
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## ABSTRACT

For moral education to be effective, it must take into account the cultural, philosophical, and religious factors that influence moral development. The way growing children think and feel about right and wrong depends to a great extent on society's dominant culture, as expressed through mass communication media. These media promote values, attitudes, and points of view that may affirm or negate what is taught at home, in church, or in school. Within the same society, there are underlying, implicit philosophies that structure moral discourse among old and young. For those who belong to churches, there are religious suppositions and perspectives that make their own contributions. These are highly developed within the Catholic community, providing their own resources and posing their own distinctive challenges. This book analyzes these factors, describes their impact on young people, and offers suggestions for instruction. Following a preface and an introduction, the book is divided into the following chapters: (1) "Cultural" ("Not Just Greed"; "A World View"; "The Marginalization of Religion"; "Feeling Like Outsiders"); (2) "Philosophical" ("The Authoritarian Shortcut"; "Formation of Conscience"); (3) "Theological" ("The Role of the Church"; "Conscience and Authority"; "A Modest Proposal"); and (4) "Medium and Message" ("Styles of Governance"; "What To Teach"; "Making Sense of Sex"; "Bad News and Good News"). (Contains 27 endnotes and a 20-item bibliography.) (BT)



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# Teaching Right From Wrong: The Moral Education of Today's Youth

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# Teaching Right from Wrong: The Moral Education of Today's Youth

*Rev. James J. DiGiacomo, S.J.*



National Catholic Educational Association

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## Preface



In the opening scene of the popular film *The Music Man*, several traveling salesmen are discussing the prospects of one of their number, new on the scene, who has gained a growing reputation as an effective seller. Some seem grudgingly ready to acknowledge his imagination and energy until older, presumably wiser heads prevail. With dogmatic certainty they dismiss the aspiring drummer with the ultimate putdown of their profession: "He doesn't know the territory!"

If you aspire to teach young people the difference between right and wrong, you have to know the territory. The first thing to note about moral education is that it is not an activity limited to schools. Education is more than schooling, and it is going on all the time. Young people learn implicit lessons on how to behave from adults and peers, parents and entertainers, television and radio, work and play. Although the focus of this publication is on the kinds of intentional learning activities that take place in classrooms, this book is addressed not only to teachers but also to parents, youth ministers, and all who care about the moral formation of the young. Before we can know how to speak effectively to them, we need to know what is going on in their lives. A variety of influences have an impact, for good or ill, on how they hear what we have to say about right and wrong.

Our basic thesis is that in order for moral education to be effective, it must take into account the cultural, philosophical, and religious factors that influence moral development. The way growing children think and feel about right and wrong depends to a great extent on society's dominant culture, as expressed through mass communication media. These promote values, attitudes, and points of view that may affirm or negate what is taught at home, in church, or in school. Within that same society, there are underlying, implicit philosophies that structure moral discourse among old and young. And for those who belong to churches, there are religious suppositions and perspectives that make their own contributions. These are highly

developed within the Catholic community, providing their own resources and posing their own distinctive challenges.

This book will analyze these factors, describe their impact on young people, and offer suggestions for instruction. But first, we must briefly consider a process that is going on within young people, their progress through successive stages of cognitive and affective development. For these will affect the way they react to all the influences that compete for their attention and commitment.

I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all those who contributed to this book. Special thanks goes to Sr. Mary Frances Taymans, S.N.D., Ed.D., Associate Executive Director of the NCEA Secondary Schools Department and to Brian Vaccaro for their assistance with and work on this publication.

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*December 8, 2000 Feast of the Immaculate Conception*

# Introduction



In order to teach the young and the not-so-young about anything, including right and wrong, people have to know what their words mean to those they are teaching. How are they processing the message? The way they grow and learn has a great deal to do with the way they assimilate these statements. Everyone has heard the story of the parent who, on being asked by his or her young son where he came from, launches into a halting discourse about birds and bees. The boy gets more and more confused and impatiently interrupts, "I thought we came from Chicago."

In talking with children, the more adult or abstract the realities dealt with, the more likely the chance that such misunderstandings will occur. Morality is one of those complex concepts that resonates differently even among adults of different backgrounds. Not surprisingly, it may lose much in the translation when adults try to pass it on to the young.

At an early age, children pass through an initial pre-moral or pre-conventional phase during which right and wrong are seen as arbitrary constructions by big people, or perceived in terms of reward and punishment. Four-year-old girls know that it is wrong to hit their little brothers because Mommy says so and has warned them what will happen when Daddy comes home. Later, they may understand exhortations to moral behavior as based on social considerations like the needs or expectations of the community. Eight-year-olds know that stealing is wrong because good boys and girls do not act that way, and fourteen-year-olds realize that "society" will not tolerate it and has made it illegal. This is called conventional morality. Many will remain at this level throughout their adult lives, while others will move on to a post-conventional level where ethical judgments and decisions are made on the basis of universal principles. It behooves the teacher of morality to be aware of these different stages of moral maturity and how they affect the receptivity of the hearers.

The discussion here is not of moral goodness but of maturity. Knowledge is not the same as virtue. But certain predictable developments in growing children make them capable of moral judgments at higher levels, whether or not they act on them. Among these are the ability to imagine how another person feels, to mentally put themselves in the place of another, or to see themselves through the eyes of others. These can broaden children's concern and encourage them to move beyond self-centeredness. Another crucial event in the child's growth is the ability to grasp abstract ideas. Until this happens, even the brightest child is limited to the world of the concrete. Talking about "courage" or "honesty" is vague until you describe a soldier in battle or young George Washington admitting his assault on the cherry tree. That is why anyone who talks to a young audience for any length of time had better have some good stories to tell. Obviously, a degree of comfort with abstract ideas is a prerequisite for the principled thinking characteristic of the morally mature adult.

Being alert to these laws of growth helps people to avoid mistakes and escape frustration. Consider some examples. A mother tells her very young child, "Mommy has a headache and is going to take a nap. Please play quietly with your toys and don't make noise." If, after a while, the child makes a noisy racket, that does not mean that the child is naughty. The child simply cannot put himself or herself in the place of his or her mother and relate to how she feels. Ask some teenagers what they would do if they found a wallet containing money and identification. "It would depend on whether I knew the owner," some will reply. This response is not surprising. A tribalistic reaction is due, at least in part, to an inchoate capacity for principled thinking.

Sensitivity to such developmental considerations gives teachers a kind of "third ear" as they engage students in moral discourse. They can hear not only what is being said but what underlies the students' part of the conversation. This will help them to be more patient and understanding, as well as more realistic, in their expectations. And it should reduce the frequency of breakdowns in communication.

Developmental theory can do even more. It paints the way toward strategies far promoting movement to more mature levels of moral decision-making. Although it is normal for a person's life to include movement from pre-moral to conventional to principled thinking, it does not happen to everyone. There are criminals, both blue- and white-collar, who never get beyond considerations of reward and punishment. There are law-abiding adults who can relate to conventional norms of behavior but never achieve the kind of critical thinking that accompanies judgments based

on universal principles. There are many experiences and influences at work here. It is not just a question of intelligence. The crucial factors may involve the affective more than the cognitive realm.

A teacher asked a class of high school freshman boys to imagine that they had just graduated from college. The best-paying job offer is from a tobacco company. Research shows that if young people do not start smoking before the age of 21, they will very likely never get hooked. The tobacco company offers a tempting salary to the new recruit to help plan an advertising campaign aimed at potential entry-level smokers in their teenage years. Would they take the job? One after another said they would not accept the position. Finally one boy blurted out, "I know it's wrong, but I would take it." Whether he was less idealistic than his classmates or just more honest is not known. But cases like this one make it clear that moral education involves more than the realm of the cognitive.

Within these limitations, there are some practical measures that can help youngsters move along when the time is right. The key is to structure learning situations that produce cognitive or affective dissonance. This happens when people are confronted with a situation, real or imagined, in which previously unquestioned ways of thinking are now perceived as inadequate. They may then look for more satisfying answers, and find themselves groping toward a more mature level of judgment. Ask some students if people should obey the law. If they say "yes," recall with them the case of Rosa Parks. Should she have given up her seat on the bus as the white man demanded and the law required? Why? Why not? Opening up the idea of civil disobedience may, depending on the students' age and level of literacy, lead to activities like reading Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter from the Birmingham jail, in which he responded to local religious leaders who professed sympathy with his goal of racial justice but rejected his methods, which included breaking the law.

People often need to re-examine premises, explore wider horizons, and be open to the possibility of modifying their beliefs. Norman Lear's classic television series, "All in the Family," abounds in situations where the main character is unwilling to do this. Archie Bunker is a man who is rigid in his beliefs and is unwilling to re-examine and possibly modify his view of the world. In one memorable episode, Archie Bunker is in Kelsey's Bar complaining to his friend, a retired professional football player, about homosexuals and the gay rights movement. Archie's rigid stereotyping becomes more and more eloquent with each beer until his drinking companion slyly and gently reveals that he himself is homosexual. To say that Archie experiences dissonance is putting it mildly. But will he change? Not likely. Maybe he

is too old. Students are not too old to re-examine premises and explore wider horizons. That is why it is worth trying to teach moral education in school situations. If people wait too long, it may be too late.

A young teacher, a few years after starting to teach, thanked a graduate school professor for a valuable course that had challenged some of his assumptions and changed his thinking. He told her that it was fortunate they had met early in his career, for it took no great humility to admit that he had been doing some things wrong for a couple of years. Could he have admitted it several years later? He doubted it.

Part of the skill required for this kind of teaching is knowing when students are ready. The process of creating learning situations that nudge the students toward more mature levels of judgment cannot be rushed. Children require time to function at certain stages and to master the operations proper to them. During and shortly after the Vietnam War, a teacher engaged high school juniors and seniors in discussing the plight of conscientious objectors who had fled the country, and how the nation should treat them. He succeeded in getting a good number of them to grasp the complexity of the issue and to appreciate a point of view they had previously rejected. Then, in a private conversation with a freshman, he tried the same Socratic approach. It failed completely. The younger boy was utterly baffled by questions that he most probably would have been able to handle two or three years later. Some things simply take time.

Before leaving this brief consideration of the developmental dimensions of moral growth, it is good to recall what psychologists report about teenagers. The core task of adolescence is the search for identity. In ways they could not before puberty, young people are seeking answers to certain basic questions. Who am I? What kind of person am I becoming? What kind of person do I want to be? How much do I have to adapt to others? What kind of world do I want to live in? Within the broader context of education, schooling assists in this search. Moral instruction is only a part of it, but a very important part. Teachers and other educators who understand from where teenagers have come, where they are, and where they are headed, can make a significant contribution to the work in progress. The following chapters deal with some of the influences, dangers, and challenges that face the young and those who teach them.

## CHAPTER 1

# Cultural



A congressman was asked to speak at the dedication of a new mall and delivered this inspiring message:

We are gathered here today not merely to dedicate a shopping mall, but to rededicate ourselves, mind and body, to the spirit of consumerism, and to seek an ever more deeply indebted relationship to the process of purchasing merchandise.<sup>1</sup>

He was not joking, and nobody laughed. This quintessentially American scene, which reflects the shallowness of much of our culture, has implications for moral sensitivity. Christianity teaches that human beings are created to love people and use things, but consumerism urges people to love things and use people. The boy who said he would sell cigarettes for a living, even though he knew it was wrong, was simply using the operative moral code of many: if it makes money, it is right; if it loses money, it is wrong.

Consumerism, America's dominant culture, defines the human person in terms of material things owned and consumed. Possessions, power, pleasure, and prestige are not mere adornments of the self but constitute the very self. As the Cadillac advertisement put it, "You are what you drive."

Consumerism stresses getting, owning, enjoying, producing, competing, and winning. These put a premium on aggressiveness, self-satisfaction, status, and security. There is nothing wrong with any of these things in and of themselves. As someone once said, "I've been rich and I've been poor, and believe me, rich is better." On the other hand, Christianity teaches that the worth of a person cannot be measured by the money or the things that he or she owns, that frugality is to be preferred to conspicuous consumption, that people are responsible for one another, and that justice and honesty are not to be compromised in the struggle for status and security.

One of the tasks of moral education is to make clear the tension, and sometimes the contradiction, between consumerism and Christian discipleship. Teachers must not give their students the mistaken impression that they are inculcating a kind of economic puritanism. There is no moral stigma

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attached to being affluent and enjoying the things that money can buy. It is only when all other values are subordinated to conspicuous consumption that an unconscious form of idolatry ensues, putting human dignity and human rights at risk.

Consider the reaction of a high school junior boy to the following two news items. The first was about a college professor who asked some high school freshmen the following two questions "If you were in the position of saving your business by selling

or delivering drugs, would you do it?" and "If you owned a chemical business, would you allow your toxic waste to be dumped into the sewer system, even if it meant many people would be harmed?" Several students answered yes to both questions. The second news item was about a national survey of college freshmen by the American Council on Education and by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, that reported that three-quarters of them considered being financially well-off "essential" or "very important." At the same time, the lowest proportion in twenty years, only 39 percent, put a great emphasis on developing a meaningful philosophy of life. In reaction to the two news items, the student commented:

I would have to agree with the responses of the teenagers. I would like to think that I would be strong enough to resist the temptation of money in the situations presented, but I probably would not. I would not go along with most of the college students in the survey because I do not believe that money is the most important thing in the world.

His ambivalence is reflected in the unawareness of the conflict between his two reactions. This is the kind of moment that invites analysis and reflection and could lead to enlightenment. Another student's reaction to the college freshmen survey is significant: "The way the world is, being well-off should be an important thing. A meaningful philosophy of life cannot help you in the real world." There it is—the real world. The world of ideals

or religion or morality is meaningless because it buys nothing.

This constricted notion of reality was strikingly expressed by a student's reaction to the case of Frank Serpico, the New York City detective who, at great risk to himself, exposed pervasive corruption in the department and helped bring about meaningful reform. (Al Pacino played Serpico in the film of the same name.) On being asked what made Serpico different from his fellow policemen, the student wrote:

When Serpico first entered the Academy, it seemed as though he was the only cadet there who had any humanistic motives for wanting to become a cop. All the other cadets were looking at the job in an economic perspective: good pay, good benefits, good pension. They thought nothing about helping their fellow man, even though it should have been their main reason for taking the job. But isn't this true of most of society? Most of us have one basic goal in life: to look good, eat good, and smell good. Take the students in this school. Don't believe them when they tell you they chose to come to this school because "I'll be better able to execute my role as a Christian," or some other pious statement. They chose to come here because it will get them into a good college, which in turn will get them into a high-paying job.

The apotheosis of ownership also has a deleterious effect on how young people treat one another. Wendy is a thirteen-year-old who lives in a mid-western trailer park with two working parents. She is constantly humiliated by the children of affluent families who attend the same school. One time a boy on the school bus yanked his thumb and demanded her seat saying "Move it, trailer girl." Her crime: she cannot afford the stylish clothes that bear labels like Nike and Tommy Hilfiger. "Do you know what it's like," asked her mother, "to have your daughter come home and say, 'Mom, the kids say my clothes are tacky,' and then walk off with her head hanging low?"<sup>2</sup> An adult commented on this scene: "There is nothing pitiable about Wendy. What is pitiable and inevitable is the turning of our historically money-crazed culture into today's grotesquerie, largely created by an unrelenting and nihilistic marketing and media technology."<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes the voracious appetite for ownership hurts the owner most of all. Several years ago, Jack Clark, a baseball player who had starred for the Giants, Cardinals, Yankees, and Padres and was in the second year of an \$8.7 million contract with the Boston Red Sox, filed for bankruptcy and listed \$6.7 million in debts. He was listed as having bought 18 automobiles,

including a Ferrari and three Mercedes Benz, and still owed money on 17 of them. "He had some expensive hobbies, and I think they got ahead of him," said his lawyer in a memorable understatement. This disease, which might be called "multiple vehicleitis," afflicted another athlete, Kenny Anderson of the National Basketball Association. During the 1998 lockout, he portrayed himself as a hardship case because he was unable to make payments on all eight of his cars. Singer Elton John had to sign over his past and future earnings to cover a loan. Among his extravagances were listed twenty cars.

### NOT JUST GREED

To understand consumerism and the impact it has on its uncritical adherents, one must get beyond the manifestations like those just described and analyze its underlying causes. A superficial commentary would diagnose these as simple cases of greed. But there is something more here, something that is peculiarly American. It is part of our history. Early in the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his sympathetic but perceptive study of United States culture, observed that he had seen some of the most enlightened and best educated people, "yet it seemed to me that a cloud hung habitually upon their brow, and I thought them serious and almost sad, even in their pleasures, brooding over what they do not yet possess." Decades later Chief Sitting Bull said of white people that "the love of possession is a disease with them." In the late twentieth century, the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia saw western industrialized societies like ours producing only in order to mindlessly consume. Any kind of consumption will do for such a society, which he likened to an earthworm which does nothing but ingest, digest, and excrete.<sup>4</sup>

One teacher poses this question to his students every year: "Suppose they put something in the water supply tonight, and everybody wakes up tomorrow no longer greedy but satisfied with a modest dose of prosperity and a simple lifestyle?" It does not take long for one of the students to point out that this would be disastrous for our economy, which depends for its health on a constantly expanding gross national product. It is predicated on supply and demand, and the greater the demand the better.

John Kavanaugh puts it this way:

What kinds of behavior are not "good news for business?" Let us suppose you are a married person with children. If you are relatively

happy with your life, if you enjoy spending time with your children, playing with them and talking with them, if you like nature, if you enjoy sitting in your yard or on your front steps, if your sexual life is relatively happy, if you have a peaceful sense of who you are and are stabilized in your relationships, if you like to pray in solitude, if you just like talking to people, visiting them, spending time in conversation with them, if you enjoy living simply, if you sense no need to compete with your friends and neighbors—what good are you economically in terms of our system? You haven't spent a nickel yet.

However, if you are unhappy or distressed, if you are living in anxiety and confusion, if you are unsure of yourself and your relationships, if you find no happiness in your family or sex life, if you can't bear being alone or living simply—you will crave much. You will want more. You will have the behaviors most suitable to a social system that is based upon continual economic growth.<sup>5</sup>

And that is why advertising is so important.

Jean Kilbourne calls advertising the propaganda of consumer culture. It tells people that their highest calling is to be consumers, that happiness can be bought, and that products can fulfill them and satisfy their deepest human needs. As one of the most powerful educational tools in society, advertisements influence attitudes, which in turn shape and determine behavior. They sell not only products but also values, images, and concepts of love, sex, romance, popularity, and normalcy. They tell people who they are and what they should be.<sup>6</sup> They frequently present objects as if they could provide people with identity, companionship, joy, and intimacy. The average child in America watches over five hours of television advertising a week. By high school graduation, they will have seen more than 350,000 commercials. Erich Fromm says that these commercials have an underlying theme: the general fear of not being loved, and then to be able, by some product, to be loved.

Like adults, most young people resist the implication that advertising has any effect on them. They are convinced that they see through advertisements and do not take them seriously. This is true of commercials taken singly, but the cumulative impact of thousands of hours can hardly fail to be considerable. What young viewers need is not argument but intentional, hands-on experience of watching advertisements, analyzing their methods, and bringing to consciousness the messages implicit in their presentation.

Television advertisers are highly sophisticated in the use of emotionally-charged symbols to sell products. With a little help, young people can become sophisticated in identifying the techniques of manipulation.

In order to persuade people to buy things they do not need, advertisers play on their fears of inadequacy in such areas of life as attractiveness, intimacy, and vitality. They can make people feel guilty for not buying more. A teacher of a high school class of sophomore girls used to lead the class through an interesting and revealing exercise. In one column, the students were to list the items they purchased for beauty and grooming each month and estimate their average expenditure. When these middle class girls added up the amounts, the total figures were sometimes quite high. In a second column, they stated how much they thought they should be spending. In nearly every case, the figure in the second column was higher. They had clearly internalized the message that the beauty industry works so hard to get across to women: "Your looks just will not do. You are not trying hard enough. Buy something!"

## A WORLD VIEW

Consumerism in the larger sense is not just about buying things. It is a whole world view, a way of perceiving and dealing with reality. James Fowler writes about what he calls the dominant myth of consumer culture: People should experience whatever they desire, own whatever they want, and relate intimately with whomever they wish.<sup>7</sup> A dominant myth is a generally accepted truth which is rarely, if ever, explicitly stated but rather taken for granted. As in the case of advertising, its power does not derive from overt statement. If it is stated out loud that people should experience whatever they desire, any thoughtful listener will reject the generalization as nonsense: The idea that people should own whatever they want does not seem so outrageous at first, but after some serious thought, most people would have some reservations about such a sweeping statement, even without considering the automobiles of Jack Clark, Kenny Anderson, and Elton John. The bald assertion that people should engage in intimate sexual behavior with anyone who meets their fancy would surely raise a red flag.

But that is the whole point: The dominant myth is never stated out loud in so many words, except in scholarly books by people like Fowler who reject it as dangerous and destructive. The myth and its implications live not in books but in the story lines of a hundred television sitcoms, the scripts of thousands of movies and plays, and countless lyrics of popular songs. In

all these media, innumerable situations are portrayed or imagined in which a man and a woman are passionately attracted to each other and are about to engage in or do in fact engage in sexual activity. More often than not, they are not husband and wife because such scenarios are almost never about married couples. Characters rarely step back and express hesitation because they are not married or because one or both of them is married to someone else. There are many people in real life who would do just that because they have misgivings on moral grounds. Why are such misgivings almost never expressed or implied in popular entertainment?

Several decades ago, before the sexual revolution of the 1960's, there was a film entitled *Brief Encounter*, which earned great applause from all segments of film criticism and the movie-going public. It was about an extramarital affair carried on between two mature adults, both of them thoughtful and sympathetic characters. There are secret assignations, narrow escapes from observation, and serious discussions of what the future might hold for them. Described this way, the film does not sound like much, but the reality was dramatic and absorbing. The film ends with the two of them breaking off the affair and returning to their spouses. There is sadness at the loss of their love, but conviction that they are going back to where they belong with the families to whom they have pledged their lives.

Such a film is not likely to be made today. Why? Because people do not want to see such films? Maybe. But a much better explanation can be found in the minds not of those who go to movies but of those who make them. Studies of the media elite, those who write the stories and sing the songs that are the staples of popular culture, invariably reveal that their cultural and moral attitudes are markedly different from those of the majority of Americans. Their opinions on such issues as abortion, adultery, and sexual responsibility are far to the left of the nation's statistical average. Not surprisingly, their dramatic treatment of controversial issues is quite skewed. As a result, they accurately reflect the values of one segment of the population and either ignore other viewpoints or distort them. Ask students why programs expressing other attitudes are not produced and they nearly always reply that people do not want to see them. How do they know this? Of course there is no way to tell, but they have been effectively brainwashed into taking it for granted that writers are simply responding to public demand. They naïvely assume that, if there is only one show in town, it is because people do not want any others.

## THE MARGINALIZATION OF RELIGION

Moral issues are not the only casualties of the cultural monopoly exercised by the media. Consider the treatment of religion on television. Except for the early Sunday morning programs, what do we see? Someone once observed that 90 percent of Americans believe in God and pray often, but that most of the serious observations made about this country are made by the other ten percent. As a result, the spiritual longings and expressions of religious people and institutions are often ignored, treated superficially, and erroneously portrayed or distorted, sometimes deliberately, often through ignorance.

The people who create television programs are, generally, non-religious people. They are not familiar or comfortable with serious religious themes. In the real world, asking about God is not ridiculous, but in the TV world it is usually ludicrous. In the real world, real families go to church, read spiritual books, pray, talk to their children about Jesus, Moses, or Mohammed, discuss their faith with friends, anguish over their moral choices, wonder about their heavenly future, and hope they can grow in God's love. TV families do not do these things.

In the late 1990's, this unspoken taboo on religious talk was relaxed somewhat when television shows like "Touched by an Angel" and "Seventh Heaven" signaled a new interest in spirituality. There is in people a hunger for the transcendent that seeks expression from time to time, and the media mavens are willing to oblige. But the most they can serve up is a rather harmless, doctrineless product that rarely gets below the surface of religious longing.

Why do television characters, who supposedly resemble real people, hardly ever go to church or pray or talk about God? When students are asked this, they predictably reply that people would object. How do they know this? Of course, they do not. They have uncritically accepted a cultural bias as normative.

Although this ignoring or trivializing of the religious dimension of life does not directly affect young people's moral sensibilities, the relationship cannot be ignored. Morality is theoretically distinct from religion but most people, including the young, correctly perceive them as intimately related. Thus, the marginalization of religion by television contributes to the moral illiteracy that pervades the world of television and gets passed on to unreflective viewers.

Sometimes when you talk seriously with young people, you get glimpses of how this whole culture of consumerism affects them. A writer was once chatting with some seniors from a suburban Catholic high school. They had been taping a show on contemporary issues, including the problem of

sexually active teenagers. In a relaxed, informal moment between takes, he asked a small group, "Why are you and your friends in such a hurry?" Their answers were immediate and arresting: "We're afraid of missing out." "We don't want to be left behind." They said nothing about love, passion, or even fun. They could have been talking about bikes, computers, or video games. They did not want to be the last kids to own ... what? Without realizing what they were saying, they were reducing their sex partners to objects.

So what kind of moral educating can we accomplish in the face of a dominant culture that threatens to undermine our efforts? There are several choices, all of which will probably be made by some people somewhere. We could ignore them, view them with alarm, or condemn them. These approaches usually do not work. The best thing adults can do for growing children is to give them information so they can see what is happening. Most children do not have a clue, which is the way the media elite want it. By information, however, we mean more than facts. What children need is what some forward-looking people in ministry call "media literacy." For the most part, this means being able to see beneath the surface of what passes for mass communication and entertainment. What are the unstated premises, the hidden agendas, and the implicit values contained in the images and stories that we encounter everyday?

What is being proposed here is a strategy aimed at producing discriminating viewers and listeners. Everyone knows what being "street smart" means. It is the opposite of naïveté. Street smart people are too shrewd to be taken advantage of. They see through the appearances and beneath the facades of those who would manipulate them. Why can children not be "culture smart?" They can learn how the world works. They can come to see, beneath the images and stories, the implicit values that are operative therein. They can then be less vulnerable to manipulation.

An example of this kind of enlightenment is found in a video called *The Thirty-Second Dream*. Fast-paced, amusing, with entertaining images, clever copy, and accompanied by upbeat music, it strings together a collection of commercials for well-known products. The overvoice points out that the motivational hooks are not the intrinsic qualifications of the products but the promise of fulfillment of four basic human needs: family, intimacy, vitality, and success. The advertisements themselves never explicitly claim a causal connection between the use of the product and fulfillment. But by portraying them together, they achieve an association of ideas and images that makes the pitch implicit but no less effective.

Usually the statement has to be implicit, or it does not work. For example, one advertisement for a soft drink features a warm, affectionate

family in a modest rural house joyously celebrating the homecoming of a young woman who has made it all the way from being a local gospel singer to a national success and celebrity. They are all drinking the cola as background singers extol its virtues. One teacher uses this advertisement to illustrate the subtle messages that are conveyed in advertising. The learning exercise is very simple. The students are asked to do what the advertisers do not want them to do—make explicit the commercial's message: "Drink this cola and you will be a successful musical performer and make your family proud." This idea is ridiculous, of course. Unfortunately, it works.

In another advertisement, a daredevil skier somersaults down a mountain and comes swiftly to a graceful stop at a refreshment stand which is selling a certain brand of beer. The audience is in for a surprise because when the skier removes the goggles and helmet, the audience sees a beautiful, athletic, young woman with flowing blonde hair standing there getting ready to drink the beer. When the advertisement's implicit message is spelled out, it comes off not only as a non sequitur but an actual contradiction: "Drink this beer and you will be at least athletic and maybe even beautiful or handsome." As the students immediately point out, beer does not make people more physically fit. If anything, it makes them less fit.

Exposing the fallacies and misleading tactics of advertisers is a start in the process of debunking popular culture. More important is the task of exposing its underlying assumptions. These amount to a world in which:

1. There is nothing important that money cannot buy.
2. Products can satisfy the deepest human longings.
3. Religion is about nothing significant, and taken too seriously, it will impoverish people.
4. All appetites, even the basest, can and should be indulged without fear or guilt.

## FEELING LIKE OUTSIDERS

Kavanaugh observes that when adult Christians see clearly through consumer culture, they may feel like outsiders in their own land. In fact, he says, if they **do not** feel that way, something is wrong. He assures them that there is no shame in feeling different, even disjointed and out of place, in a society that makes idols out of things.

Madison Avenueland, television, rock radio, and advertising will trigger constant reminders of our almost displaced existence. We will

feel like strangers. The fact that life is cheapened...that familial consent and commitment seem alien...that fidelity in marriage seems strange are thus not so dumbfounding as they might first appear.

I have heard Christian couples ask quizzically if they were the “weird” ones, so little does anything in this culture seem to agree with their deepest beliefs. They should not be distraught. They have simply come into contact with their faith as a lived, historical option.<sup>8</sup>

Kavanaugh is talking about adults. What about young people? Asking them to think of themselves as outsiders is playing a dangerous game. There are religious groups who have gone this route all the way by creating a ghetto and deliberately raising and educating their children apart from mainstream society. This is not the Christian way. Christians try at least to avoid the worst features of a shallow culture and at most to contribute to making it better. Young people can see this as a viable way of preserving their ideals while sharing what is best in American life. And they should be reminded that they are not alone. Vast numbers of their fellow citizens march to very different drummers than the shallow, make-believe characters often featured in mass entertainment. They have at least as good a chance, if not better, of leading happy, productive lives.

Does analysis and demystification of consumer culture and its various expressions guarantee that young people will reject them as a way of life? Of course not. Like the student who said, “It’s wrong, but I would take the job,” many will settle for a chance to “look good, eat good, and smell good.” They are free to choose to be those kinds of people in that kind of world, no matter what family, church, or school may tell them.

The best tone to take with adolescents is not one of condemnation but of challenge. One veteran teacher of older teenagers likes to remind them, from time to time, that they will soon be out from under their parents’ supervision. Then, no one can make them eat their vegetables or go to church or put limits on their sexual activities. Later, they can make their money in any way that is not against the law and spend it on whatever they wish. They can choose a life of self-indulgence and conspicuous consumption limited only by the size of their bank accounts or they can choose a life of moderation. It is a free country. The question is: “Is that what you really want? Is that the kind of person you are becoming? Is that the kind of person you want to be? Is that the kind of world in which you want to live?” The choice is theirs. How will they choose, and why?

One last reminder is necessary. Not all people really choose their lives.

Many just try to live up to the expectations of others. Those of maturity and character act out of conviction and stand by their ideals and commitments. They can even resist the pressures of the consumer culture to settle for mediocrity as human beings. They are the ones who are truly free.

## CHAPTER 2

# Philosophical



A high school teacher was engaging a student in the discussion of a hypothetical moral dilemma:

TEACHER: ...So those are the choices open to her. What should she do?

STUDENT: It is up to her.

TEACHER: Yes, I know it is up to her. So what should she do?

STUDENT: It is her choice.

TEACHER: [Taking a deep breath to avoid losing his temper]  
Yes, we know it is her choice. But how should she choose?  
And on what grounds?

STUDENT: It is her choice.<sup>9</sup>

This kind of non-conversation will be familiar to teachers and others who minister to young people. The latter have a way of saying out loud what adults think and act on but seldom state in such baldly explicit terms. Relativism pervades the discourse of young and old in our society and often reduces the moral quest to an exercise in radical subjectivity.

To the moral relativist, “right” and “wrong” are purely subjective notions with no firm foundation in reality. They exist only in the eye of the beholder. “If you think it’s right, it’s right for you” is one of the slogans popular with people of this mentality. In their landmark study of the American character, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah and his associates conducted probing, in-depth interviews with people who talked about their moral convictions. When pressed to say why they considered some actions to be right and other actions to be wrong, the subjects were nearly always reluctant to base their stands on any grounds other than personal feeling. If their feelings changed, so did the nature of the good. Uncomfortable with the language of universals or

absolutes, they preferred to appeal to concepts like "values" or "priorities." But these became more and more elusive.

On what grounds are the choices of values based? For many, there is no objectifiable criterion for choosing one value or one course of action over another. One's own idiosyncratic preferences are his or her own justification...The right act is simply the one that yields the agent the most exciting challenge or the best feeling about himself or herself.

Now if selves are defined by their preferences, but those preferences are arbitrary, then each self constitutes its own moral universe, and there is finally no way to resolve conflicting claims about what is good in itself...

In the absence of any objectifiable criteria of right and wrong, good or evil, the self and its feelings become our only moral guide.

(But) if the individual self must be its own source of moral guidance, then each individual must always know what he or she wants and desires or intuit what he or she feels. He or she must act so as to produce the greatest satisfaction of his or her wants or to express the fullest range of his or her impulses...

Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority. "Being good" becomes "feeling good."<sup>10</sup>

The phrase "feeling good" reminds people of Ernest Hemingway's no-nonsense moral philosophy. "Right," he used to say, "is what you feel good after doing; 'wrong' is what you feel bad after doing." There is a certain down-to-earth wisdom in this saying so long as you apply it only to persons of good character. On the other hand, when bank robbers make their escape and split up the loot, they feel pretty good.

Moral relativism affects teachers as well as students. When William Bennett was U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, he visited schools around the country to see how sex education was being taught. He sat in classrooms where teachers conducted discussions on how to prevent or deal with unwanted pregnancies. Students would express varying and opposing opinions, and after a while the teacher would move on, without attempting to resolve the disputes. He found that curriculum guides had

suggestions like: "Where strong differences of opinion exist on what is right or wrong sexual behavior, objective, informed, and dignified discussion of both sides of such questions should be encouraged." They offered devices to help students "explore options," "identify alternative actions," and "examine their own values," but that was all that was offered.

What's wrong with this kind of teaching? First, it is a very odd kind of teaching—very odd because it does not teach. It does not teach because, while speaking to a very important aspect of human life, it displays a conscious aversion to making moral distinctions. Indeed, it insists on holding them in abeyance. The words of a rational, mature morality seem to have been banished from this sort of sex education.

It is ironic that, in the part of our children's lives where they most need adult guidance, and where indeed I believe they most want it, too often the young find instead the abdication of responsible moral authority.<sup>11</sup>

Some may object to calling these teachers moral relativists. After all, we know nothing of their personal philosophies. They may only be trying to avoid controversy. Objecting to certain actions on moral grounds might make them vulnerable to charges of "imposing their morality on their students." This is precisely what it is. So they decide to avoid trouble and take no stand against behaviors that are dangerous and harmful to the students themselves and to others. Whatever their personal views, they are in fact part of a widespread abdication of responsibility.

Many in the public education establishment honestly feel, that in a society like ours that is so fragmented and lacking in shared values, peace is maintained only by refraining from anything that sounds like ideology. So they make a desert and call it peace. Louis Rath, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney Simon describe how this questionable wisdom came to be accepted. "If someone was for something, someone else was against it; and to avoid controversy, schools began to stand for nothing. Teachers turned toward 'teaching the facts.' In communities of strangers—people with many different backgrounds—it became easier to have schools which themselves represented an absence of consensus. Moral, aesthetic values were quietly abandoned as integral parts of the curriculum."<sup>12</sup>

Fortunately, Catholic schools are not under such restraints. Yet, one wonders if some in the school unreflectively share this preference for

value-free education and unconsciously pass it on. But even if all the adults in a school are on the same page and are committed to genuine moral leadership, they must deal with the reality that many students are still affected by attitudes and prejudices operative in the wider society. There is a great deal of evidence for this, as shown in the following statements made by different students in Catholic school settings:

- I do believe in abortion. Everything goes back to the word “choice.” As an individual, you have the “choice” of how you want to do things in life. I think that God made everyone different, meaning everyone has a mind of his or her own to make decisions for himself or herself.
- Abortion is something that needs to be taken seriously but if a woman chooses to use abortion I don’t think she should be looked down upon because I think that would be contradicting the saying that America is a place where people are free to choose. This does not reflect my personal feelings about abortion, but I think that a judgment should not be passed if abortion is chosen.
- Why doesn’t the Church believe in having the person who is having the baby make her own choice on what she wants to do with the child?
- Don’t think I’m a rebel anarchist or something because I’m not. I am a devout Christian who never misses Sunday Mass...When the priest uses the time for the homily to speak out on abortion, I think he’s wrong. Priests are not politicians and have never had to worry about getting an abortion. They should not be passing judgment on their neighbors. I believe the Bible mentions that somewhere.
- I do not think it is up to the Church to put the label “wrong” on something as personal as sex. The Catholic Church is not to impose its views, as it does, on anyone. God can be the only judge—and he forgives everyone—doesn’t he?
- The Church shouldn’t tell us what to do. It is a person’s own decision.
- The Church can guide us, not tell us to say no, because the ultimate decision is ours alone.
- Not all people who really do love each other want to get married, let alone have children. The Church should not have a say in who’s ready and who’s not.
- Your stand on giving contraceptives to teenagers is really a personal opinion. If parents would allow contraceptives, teenagers might agree with their parents because of the willingness of parents to

allow freedom of choice. A good family discussion on sex, its true value, contraceptives, and love would give teenagers freedom to make their own decisions without being pressured by parents. This is only my opinion, much like, I believe, yours is. You seem to be forcing your opinion on people and that puts a negative tone on things.

Do all teenagers think this way? By no means. Many are moral realists who, whether they can express it or not, believe in an objective morality. In simple terms, they realize that some things are right and some things are wrong, no matter how people feel about them. They do not need convincing. But listening to their peers quoted above leaves no doubt that relativism is alive and well.

Note the recurring rationalization offered by those who shy away from any categorical moral statements. Living in a society where pluralism reigns and few convictions are shared, they feel that peace demands tolerance toward those who think differently. One of them vaguely remembers Jesus telling people not to judge, lest they be judged. In a world where, it seems, no one really knows anything for sure, the best thing to do is to leave one another alone. Passing judgment on people is considered very bad form. It is called "imposing your morality on others." This is a very revealing term used by those who consider morality to be a matter not of truth but of taste.

A key word in what passes for moral discourse in society is "choice." Everyone is free to choose. The pursuit of happiness knows no rules or boundaries. People should experience whatever they desire, and no one has the right to criticize them and their choices. The very fact that people choose to act in a certain way makes them right. The abortion controversy encouraged this kind of thinking. Instead of making arguments for its legitimacy, pro-abortion advocates took refuge in an effective slogan: "We're not for abortion, we're just for freedom of choice." A clever bit of rhetoric. What is more dear to Americans than freedom? Who wants to be against it? Once the slogan "pro-choice" took hold, the possibility of a rational debate about abortion disappeared, as did the likelihood of a genuine moral argument on other issues.

If this sounds like moral anarchy, it is but only in theory. In the real world, relativists make all kinds of exceptions. When bank robbers are caught, they go to prison. Their freedom of choice is not respected. The same goes for muggers, rapists, and drug dealers. Some choices are out of bounds. When moral relativism, so attractive to so many, is carried to its logical conclusion, it is exposed as absurd. Pointing this out to young people helps

some to think their way out of a dead end. But others still need convincing. Robbing banks, mugging, raping, and drug dealing, after all, are against the law. Maybe that is why they are wrong.

Meeting this objection is easy enough and presents an opportunity for the teacher and student to do some history together. Did slavery become wrong only after the Emancipation Proclamation? Helping black slaves to escape via the underground railway was illegal but was it wrong? Interning Japanese-American citizens on the Pacific coast in 1942 was legal but was it right? Was denying women the right to vote wrong only after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment? Such conversations can be very enlightening for young people who may have heard about those events but never thought about them this way.

What about Jesus telling us not to judge? Was he a closet relativist? Of course not. He meant that people never know everything that is going on inside another person. Only God can read hearts. Sometimes people do things that must be condemned, but for which they should not be blamed. Nineteenth century Americans who owned slaves were involved in a profoundly immoral activity, the buying and selling of human beings. Today, looking back on that time, anyone with an ounce of moral sensitivity must pass judgment on that despicable traffic of human lives. But there were slave owners who went to church and said their prayers and did not consider themselves hypocrites. Were they too close to a way of life to be able to see it for what it was? Did they think that by treating their slaves kindly they were fulfilling God's law of love of neighbor? Was their ignorance culpable? These are potent questions.

People follow Jesus' teaching when they judge not the person but the act. In the technical language of moral theology, Jesus wants people to make judgments about objective morality not about subjective responsibility.

Let the following true story serve as a conclusion to this treatment of the problem of moral relativism. Greg, a high school senior, wrote:

I have faith in my own beliefs; I am searching for more truth to build up the truth I have already. Whether my beliefs are right or wrong is definitely irrelevant; by the mere fact that I *believe* that I am right, I AM RIGHT. I will never need an established religion, or a church, to help me lead my life to the fullest. I will be happy and make others happy with the beliefs I now hold.

The teacher ran this passionate statement past another group of seniors asking for their comments. Bill was enthusiastic in his approval. The teacher waited until the next test, took off ten points out of a hundred, and gave Bill

a mark of 70%. Bill showed him the discrepancy and waited to have the grade changed to 90%. The teacher refused. When Bill protested, the teacher explained that Bill had no cause for complaint because he, the teacher, was just making his own truth, using the method endorsed by Greg and Bill. Bill gave him a long stare, then broke down and grinned. "You win," he said, like a good sport.

## THE AUTHORITARIAN SHORTCUT

There is another way of making judgments about right and wrong, shared by many. These people are at the other end of the spectrum from moral relativists. They are mostly realists who believe in objective morality and want to find not just any answer but the right answer. Aware of how difficult moral judgments can sometimes be, and conscious of their own limitations, they look to some authority figure who can be counted on to lift from them the burden of choice.

This is the way young children view their parents whom they consider infallible. Men and women in the armed forces pledge unconditional obedience to commanding officers in lawful matters. Religious men and women take vows of obedience to God through their superiors. This is how many Catholics regard their bishops, especially the bishop of Rome, the Pope. There are shades of difference among members of these groups, but what they broadly have in common is a conviction that authority is the source of truth.

On the practical level, there is much to recommend this approach to moral decision-making. Some issues are too complex for untrained persons, and these do well to acknowledge their limitations and look to others for guidance. In this way, they often avoid mistakes that might do harm to themselves or others. The more enlightened and qualified the authority, the more likely their subjects are to do the right and avoid the wrong.

But, of course, there are some real problems with this approach. The second half of the twentieth century saw events and developments that exposed the possibilities for problems inherent in unquestioning obedience. At the Nurnberg trials after World War II, people tried to justify their roles in unspeakable genocidal acts by saying they were following the orders of legitimate authority. During the Vietnam war, the Mylai massacre of hundreds of innocent people by American troops, carried out under blind obedience, made thoughtful citizens consider the limits of loyalty in ways they had not done before. Members of cults often engage in disturbing behavior

at the behest of leaders perceived as infallible. The most sensational was the mass suicide of 900 cult members in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978.<sup>13</sup>

Events like these gave impetus to movements like civil disobedience during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and conscientious objection during the Vietnam War. Addressing these historical events should be part of any serious attempt at moral education. They help to clarify issues and to develop skills of moral analysis. Once children move into adolescence, they should be capable of this kind of investigation. Consideration of concepts like responsibility and its relation to obedience and loyalty is not beyond them. They can begin to evaluate shibboleths like "Ours not to reason why" and "Love it or leave it." If this kind of conversation engages teachers and students, the next generation will be better equipped than their grandparents were to deal with moral issues like those experienced during the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War.

When today's teenagers grow up, they will face many full-blown issues that are either just now on the horizon or have thus far been ignored. The problem of balancing concern for the environment with the need for development will probably reach crisis proportions. The ability to produce made-to-order human beings through genetic engineering and cloning will force them to decide whether people should do things just because they can. They are going to have to resolve the tension between the need to protect society and the commitment to individual freedoms. And the next war may revive questions left over from the Vietnam War that were never really dealt with: Are there limits to loyalty? Can people respect the moral convictions of dissenters and still defend the nation?

## FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

If relativism is too far to the left and authoritarianism is too far to the right, what does the middle ground look like? All who care about the moral development of young people hope to assist in the formation of young women and men who are sensitive to the dignity, the welfare, and the rights of all others without exception. People want their children to grow up honest, generous, law-abiding, and with a basic core of integrity. Moral instruction is but one of many experiences and influences that go into the process. It can have a significant and positive impact by critiquing the dominant culture, exposing the shallowness of relativism, and distinguishing between a healthy and an unhealthy respect for authority. It can help develop skills in analyzing moral issues and acting in accord with right reason.

In a word, the issue is conscience. The term is used in many different ways by writers on the subject, so a clear definition of terms is in order. As used here, **conscience is strictly an act of the mind making a judgment about the rightness or wrongness of a way of acting.** The judgment may be correct or incorrect. When the leaders of the NATO nations in 1999 engaged in selective bombing of Kosovo targets in order to compel the government to allow the return of forcibly expelled ethnic Albanians, they were convinced that they were acting justly. It was a difficult decision because it involved widespread destruction and occasional unintended injuries and deaths known as collateral damage. Many people in this country and around the world approved of the policy while many did not. This was a classic case of moral judgment where good and intelligent people could and did disagree. But what is incontrovertible is that the NATO leaders were following their consciences; they were convinced, correctly or incorrectly, that what they were doing was right.

Students should be taught that, in making difficult moral decisions, they should follow their consciences, i.e., they should do what they think is right and refrain from what they think is wrong. Recall, however, what was said about relativism. Just because you think something is right, does not make it right. The following playlet, dramatized simply with the participation of a group, can help make this clear.

SCENE ONE: A local street. A teacher picks up a wallet from the ground. It contains a roll of dollar bills and the owner's name, address, and phone number.

*Teacher:* Wow, that's a lot of money. I sure could use it. But...no, it wouldn't be right. It's not my money. I'd better call up the owner. (Makes phone call). Hello, Mr. Jones? I found your wallet. Here's my address; you can pick it up any time. Hey, don't mention it. I'm glad to help. (Hangs up).

*Teacher to Class:* Did I follow my conscience?

*Class:* (Answer).

*Teacher:* Did I do the right thing?

*Class:* (Answer).

*Teacher:* Why?

*Class:* (Answer).

SCENE TWO: Another street scene, same routine. The teacher decides that he will call the owner later on in the day. On his way home, he passes by a Radio Shack store with a big window full of expensive, state-of-the-art electronic equipment. He blacks out. When he comes to, finds himself on

the sidewalk with two big shopping bags full of electronic equipment. The wallet is empty.

*Teacher to Class:* Did I follow my conscience?

*Class:* (Answer).

*Teacher:* Did I do the right thing?

*Class:* (Answer).

*Teacher:* Why?

*Class:* (Answer).

SCENE THREE: Same street scene. The teacher picks up wallet, counts the roll of dollar bills, and looks for the owner's identification.

*Teacher:* So this is the owner. What a jerk! He should be more careful. And look at that address...right in the middle of Yuppieland. With his kind of rent, this money is a drop in the bucket. I need it a lot more than he does. Anyway, it's his own fault. What's that old saying? "Finders, keepers." Yeah, maybe this will teach him a lesson. (Keeps the money.)

*Teacher to Class:* Did I follow my conscience?

*Class:* (Answer).

*Teacher:* Did I do the right thing?

*Class:* (Answer).

*Teacher:* Why?

*Class:* (Answer).

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To form one's conscience is to investigate and try to figure out what is right.

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The students' lines are not programmed but are fairly predictable. In scene one, the finder followed his conscience and did the right thing. In scene two, he did not follow his conscience and did the wrong thing. The third scene is the most important. The finder, through various rationalizations, convinced himself that he had a right to the money. So in keeping it, he followed his conscience; i.e., he did what he thought was right. But, of course, what

he did was wrong. The conclusion should be drawn from the students and hammered home: you can follow your conscience and do the wrong thing! Thus, moral relativism takes a big hit where it counts, in the minds of the students.

So where did the finder in scene three go wrong? In following his conscience? No, the error occurred while he was forming his conscience. This is the heart of the lesson. To form one's conscience is to investigate and try to figure out what is right. How does one do that? Not the relativists'

way because they presume their own infallibility. Not the authoritarians' way because they pass the responsibility on to some other, presumably infallible, person or institution. The proper way to form one's conscience is to ask: What am I doing? Who and what is involved? Will this action affect people's dignity, welfare, or rights? If an authority or a law is involved, has that authority or law taken into account the rights and welfare of those affected?

To many, this is all so evident and seems to be just common sense that it seems to belabor the obvious. But in the present climate of moral illiteracy and confusion, many things that should be obvious are not. Young people need to be told not only the answers to serious moral questions, but more importantly, they need to be shown how to ask the questions and how to find the answers.

Consider how such skills could be used in dealing with some of the issues presented earlier. Does Rosa Parks have a right to the bus seat? Why? Why is the discriminatory law unjust? Why should teenagers not have premarital sex? Who is endangered, and who is harmed? How? Why is it wrong to make a living selling cigarettes to children and teens? When people consider aborting an unwanted child, they need to get beyond the word "choice." What is happening in an abortion? Who is harmed? Are anyone's rights being violated? Whose? Which? How?

Some of these questions are harder than others. People, including students, will not always agree. But the very effort to learn how to form an enlightened conscience is worthwhile. And it is truly needed.

## CHAPTER 3

# Theological



**T**wo Catholic high school junior girls explain why they reject the Church's teaching on premarital sex and abortion:

- God gave us life and told us He would not stand in the way and would let us make our own decisions. Individuals should be the ones to dictate to themselves what their opinion of premarital sex is.
- I see that God forgives you for your sins, so why is there such a big argument over abortion being wrong?

These girls are saying some very interesting things about God and morality and the connection between them. They remind us how important it is for moral educators to have the connection clear in their own minds, so that they may pass it on effectively to others. Before spelling it out, it is good to remember that religious people are not the only ones who care about right and wrong. Not all moral discourse needs to involve "God talk." One does not have to believe in God to realize that people should treat one another with honesty and respect, and that rape, robbery, and racism are wrong. Some of the most idealistic and morally sensitive people are agnostics and atheists. But for people who have grown up in the Catholic tradition, moral awareness and discourse are more than an exercise in enlightened secular humanism. They are intimately bound up with images of God and Jesus and notions of what they expect of us.

The first girl has a notion of God that is peculiarly contemporary. She begins with some statements that are perfectly orthodox. God is the One who brings people into existence and endows them with the gift of freedom. He respects that freedom, letting them make and carry out their own decisions. But then she clearly implies that God does not care what decisions people make. Whatever people do is all right with God as long as they do it freely. The second girl spells this out explicitly. No matter what sins people commit,

God forgives them. No questions asked, no repentance required. What "sin" means to her is obscure, but it does not matter. It surely does not involve guilt, since God gives us a blank check.

This easy-going deity bears a strong resemblance to the God of deism. He creates the world, sets it in motion, and loses interest and involvement. This is the Creator of whom our Declaration of Independence speaks, the One who endows us with inalienable rights. The founding fathers of this country were deists who believed not in the passionately involved God of the Bible but in a Prime Mover who served as the last piece in the puzzle of how this world came into being. They rejected atheism on intellectual grounds but stopped far short of the God of Moses and Jesus.

In the world of deism, both the eighteenth and twentieth century varieties, there is no place for accountability except perhaps to one's self. "Individuals should be the ones to dictate to themselves." This is very much in keeping with the individualism characteristic of so much American religiosity. During the 1980s, William McCready of the National Opinion Research Center described a nation for whom religion was a very important part of their lives. But because they have been imbued with the values of freedom and conscience, "Americans don't respond to moral imperatives. They increasingly behave any way they want to. They've been told to trust their consciences, and that's what they're doing."<sup>14</sup>

The deistic God fits well with a neo-paganism that tolerates no restraint but retains the trappings and after images of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Remember McCready's observation that "Americans do not respond to moral imperatives." An uncaring God is made to order for a culture whose dominant myth assures people that they should experience whatever they desire. H. Richard Niebuhr has a memorable description of this relaxed form of Christianity: "A God without wrath brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."<sup>15</sup>

In our own time, a particular spin has been put on this transition from a God of judgment to a God who wants whatever His people want. It has become commonplace to speak of an Old Testament God, who ruled by fear, giving way to a New Testament God, who rules by love. According to this shaky brand of exegesis, fear and guilt have no more place in the Christian dispensation. Since Jesus came, love reigns, and all the warnings and denunciations can be dispensed with and filed away under "fire and brimstone." The implications for moral awareness and sensitivity are inescapable, and show up in some of the above students' statements. But even as Scripture analysis, this false dichotomy between an Old Testament God of

fear and a New Testament God of love does not hold up.

The prophet Hosea writes, "God said to me, give your love to a woman, just as God gives his love to the children of Israel" (Hos. 3:1). Jeremiah (chapters 2-3), Ezekiel (chapter 16), Isaiah (Is. 62:1-5) and the love poem Song of Songs (*passim*) develop what scholars call the Nuptial Theme, that God loves His people not only the way a rich person loves a poor person, not only the way a holy person loves a sinner, but the way a husband loves his wife. Expressions of great tenderness mingle with themes of rejection and disappointment. The New Testament, far from striking out on a different path, continues with these themes. John the Baptist calls himself the friend of the bridegroom (Jn. 3:28-29), Jesus, Who in turn speaks of a marriage feast arranged by His Father for Him and His spouse, the Church (Mt. 22:2). Paul tells his converts at Ephesus to love their spouses as Christ loved the Church (Eph. 5:25), and he tells those at Corinth that he has arranged for them to marry Christ (2 Cor. 11:2). Far from being an invitation to complacency, the New Testament's predominant message of God's love for His people is complemented by a pervasive note of urgency. Over and over again, Jesus exhorts His followers not to throw away the great gift that His Father offers without force. He urges them to build on rock, not on sand, lest they be swept away (Lk. 6:46-49). The weeds that grow up along with the wheat will be burned at the harvest (Mt. 13:28-30). They should fear not men but God who can cast into Hell (Lk. 12:4-5). The rich man who ignored the beggar at his gate suffers eternal torments (Lk. 16:19-31). At the Last Judgment, those who turned their backs on the needy will be rejected forever (Mt. 25:41-46). Attention to these neglected elements in Scripture can correct some misleading popular images of God and Jesus that sometimes underlie moral complacency. In religious instruction, children and young people should not only meet the kind and gentle Jesus who affirms them and assures them that God does not make junk, but they should also encounter the Jesus who challenges His disciples not to make junk of their lives.

He is a man who calls to decision. He reveals people to themselves, helps them to see who they are and where they're going. He cuts through rationalization and self-deception. He breaks down the defenses that people throw up against self-discovery and the demands of reality... He is unwavering in his determination to tell it like it is, no matter what the cost. If this uncompromising honesty leaves Him with few or even no disciples, then so be it. He is organizing a trip through a narrow gate, and crowds need not apply. If the rich young man cannot stand the idea of not being poor, let him stay home

and count his money. If the young fishermen aren't ready to leave their nets, they're not ready to follow Him. If Peter doesn't want to hear about the Cross, he can stay in Caesarea Philippi, but the first team is going to Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup>

This Jesus is a well-kept secret. If young people meet Him, they may escape the religious sentimentality that obscures a healthy sense of sin and unwittingly endorses the exercise of autonomy in a vacuum.

### THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Some of the young people's comments above have had odd notions not only about God's role in their moral lives but also about the role of the Church. One girl wondered why the Church does not let people make their own decisions. One boy objected to priests passing judgment on their neighbors. Another girl said it is not up to the Church to put the label "wrong" on any sexual activity. Greg, who thinks being sincere guarantees him being right, insisted that he needed no established religion or church to help him lead his life. Here are several others:

- A girl talking about sex: "The Church believes in suffering for one's God, because we love Him so much—and how it makes young men and women suffer! The guilt they place on those who even consider premarital sex is enough to inhibit them for the rest of their lives! The Catholic Church is not to impose its views as it does, on anyone."
- Another girl talking about sex: "The Church can guide us, not tell us to say no, because the ultimate decision is ours alone."
- A boy talking about abortion: "I still don't follow along with this Church junk like the others do. Sometimes the Church sounds like a totalitarian state where it issues the orders and we are expected to follow them with no 'ifs', 'ands', or 'buts.' Well, I don't go for it. I really don't think people who have given up their sex life should be telling those of us who haven't what we can and can't do. This is a free country. I believe that the Church should be like a counselor who offers advice, and that's it. The government runs this country, not the Church."

On one level, it is very easy to answer these complaints. The Church cannot make anyone do anything. Religious leaders of any stripe cannot, strictly speaking, impose morality. Only the state can impose behavior on its citizens because it has the power to punish offenders. No church or synagogue has any such power. So to what are these students objecting? The same thing pro-abortion adults object to when their fellow citizens presume to tell them they are behaving in a way they should not.

There is a prickly sensitivity at work here. What is behind it? Guilt? Maybe. Rationalization? Perhaps. In any case, it marks something distinctive about these times. In the past, people have always disagreed on moral issues and engaged in both civil and uncivil debates about the merits of their respective positions. But with the close of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century, the divisions were and are different. This society does not argue about right and wrong; it insists that there is nothing about which to argue.

When young people grow up in such a milieu, they may uncritically accept its views as normative. What, then, do they expect of the Church? Some of the students who have commented earlier talk vaguely about the Church being a guide, which merely makes suggestions. As long as they are done without conviction, things are fine. Anything more is resented. Some actually appeal to God against the Church, but their god is a weak sort of deity who will go along with whatever they want.

All this has serious implications for the Church's self-understanding. The prophetic dimension of Christianity is called into question. Before it was even called Christianity, very early in the life of the Church, it was called The Way. The following of Christ went beyond doctrine to the affirmation of a distinctive way of life. Before they were admitted to baptism, adult catechumens in ancient Rome had to show that they understood that it was not enough just to be a good Roman. In this, they were authentic heirs to the Jewish prophetic tradition that rejected worship without action, words without deeds.

Well, then, what do these adherents of a non-judgmental religion expect of their Church? Affirmation. They want to be assured of their goodness in the sight of God. This is a strong current not only in Catholic communities but also in other Christian, as well as non-Christian, religious communities. Churchgoers attend services hoping to find inspiration, comfort, encouragement, community, and a sense of personal significance. These hopes are on target, and the Church, which provides them, is carrying on the work of Jesus Christ. The Word was made flesh to make visible the invisible God and to assure each person of His loving care.

The young are much like their elders in these expectations. Those who minister to them within the Church try to respond to their religious aspirations. They offer friendship within a nurturing community of faith, proclaim the good news of God's saving love, and encourage participation in the

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Church's sacramental life. They pay particular attention to one special need, that of a positive, healthy self-image. Jesus tells people to love their neighbor as they love themselves, but this presumes that people love themselves, and that is not always easy. Adolescence is for many a time when they look good to everyone but themselves. They need help to see their own goodness, their own inherent worth. The most important sources of self-esteem are their parents. When children grow up perceiving themselves as unconditionally loved, they know their parents love them not only for their achievements, their popu-

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When teenagers are introduced to a God who also loves them this way, religion becomes a positive force and a meaningful part of their lives. Those who tell young people that they are unconditionally loved by God are saying, "No matter what you do, no matter how badly you mess up, God never stops loving and never gives up on you." This is a powerful and authentically Christian message.

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larity, or any other good qualities, but just for being themselves. They do not have to earn love, it is already there. And it can be counted on no matter how they disappoint their parents.

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There are several things people can do to head off or correct this kind of misapprehension besides exposing the relativistic mentality that underlies it. Youngsters can reflect on their own parents who sometimes have to

correct or punish them, even severely, without ceasing to love them. What kind of parents would they be if they did not care what their children did? Do they know any parents like that? What do they think of them? How do they themselves plan to act some day toward their own children? Why?

The Church's historical record as a moral teacher is well worth considering. There is plenty of good news and bad news, and much to learn from both. When did the Church speak out against slavery and when did it fail to? Why was it slow to denounce racial segregation and to integrate its own institutions? What part did Church people play in the civil rights movement of the 1960s? Did any Church leaders speak out against the internment of American citizens on the Pacific coast after Pearl Harbor? Should they have? What did the Church contribute to the long struggle of women in this country to gain the right to vote? Such considerations can lead students to see for themselves the link between faith and justice, to reject religious formalism, and maybe even aspire to be active members of a prophetic Church.

One last point must be made concerning the roles of God and the Church in a Catholic person's moral life. Some of the students encountered thus far have been so unreceptive to moral imperatives that they seemed to look on them as completely arbitrary. Not to be dismissed too easily is the boy who saw the Church as a "totalitarian state" that permitted "no 'ifs,' 'ands,' or 'buts.'" One wonders if anyone ever tried to explain to him the reasons behind the Church's teachings. Maybe someone did, but he was not listening.

When John F. Kennedy was president, people were always trying to get close to him to express opinions, offer advice, or promote a cause or a policy. His habitual first response was to ask, "Why do you say that?" Hearing the reasons usually made it easier to dismiss or to look further into the proposition. Growing children should be encouraged to ask why, to seek reasons for what they are told or forbidden to do. Sometimes their questions are not meant seriously, especially in the case of younger children. But as they mature, they have the right to know. "Ours not to reason why" is a sentiment that appeals to fewer and fewer, and rightly so. Certainly, those who promote moral education in the name of the Church should be able to give intelligible reasons for what they teach.

This principle can be applied not only when the Church teaches but also when God commands. Things are right not because God commands them; God commands things because they are right, i.e., good for His people. Things are wrong not because God forbids them; God forbids things because they are bad for His people.

Strictly speaking, God does not command; what we call a commandment is based upon the fact of God's existence and our relationship

to him; it would be better described as a demand for rational human conduct...Consequently, nothing ought to be imposed, in the name of God, that cannot be justified from the viewpoint of man; but everything that is demanded by the logic of human relations is, precisely on that account, a commandment of God.<sup>17</sup>

There is an instructive parallel in the case of civil law. Stealing is wrong not because there is a law against it; rather, there is a law against stealing because it is wrong. People have a right to their property, so the law protects that right against those who would violate it. This is quite elementary and obvious to all except professional thieves. Sometimes the state makes laws forbidding certain actions out of a mistaken conviction that the activity is wrong, e.g., interracial marriage. When people come to know better, they direct the government to repeal the law.

Many teenagers wonder why the Church has such a strict sexual code. They need to know that it is based not only on revelation but also on right reason. When people ask themselves some important questions about what constitutes responsible sexual behavior, they look for the answer in their own and other people's experience, and in the thought of intelligent and competent men and women. They do so in the conviction that when they find what is required by right reason and enlightened concern for themselves and others, they uncover the will of God.

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## CONSCIENCE AND AUTHORITY

Thus far, the Church has been described in its role as a moral teacher as if it speaks with one voice. But of course that is not always true. There is general agreement among Catholics and many other Christians on broad moral principles, but on particular issues there is a good deal of disagreement and it sometimes becomes quite strident. Abortion, homosexuality, birth control, capital punishment, extramarital sex, women's roles in the Church, and new methods of human reproduction are some of the neuralgic disputes present in the Church. How are young people to be taught about these issues?

First of all, they need to have presented to them accurate information about those topics on which adults disagree. The underlying premises and the logical argumentation of each side should be clearly and fairly described. These are the elements that should go into the presentation of any moral issue. The problem arises when authoritative Church teachings clash with the convictions of Church members who have made a serious effort at

conscience formation. This is the problem of conscience and authority in the Church. It underlies most of the disputes that cause divisions in the Catholic community, and it has implications for the moral education of young Church members.

For some Catholics, the solution is fairly simple. Pass on to youngsters the authoritative answers of the magisterium as final and treat all others as deviations. A few well-known examples illustrate this approach. All use of contraceptives by married couples is morally wrong. Women should not aspire to the ordained priesthood. All genital intimacy between homosexuals is sinful. Artificial means of conception by married couples, who otherwise cannot conceive, is never permitted. Although many adults, clerical and lay, dissent from these teachings, their opinions carry no weight and should not be allowed to confuse the young.

On the other hand, many Catholics are uncomfortable with such an approach. Some who respectfully dissent from these pronouncements would find it difficult to present them to students as absolutes beyond contention. Any discrepancy between what they believe and what they teach raises a question of integrity. But here is where the difficulty lies. Even when the teacher carefully and moderately expresses his or her reservations, some will hear (and welcome) an outright denial. "Last year our teacher said it was okay."

Before trying to resolve this dilemma and deciding how to teach children, it is important to understand why adults have a problem agreeing on the proper interplay between conscience and authority. A good starting point is St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching that each Christian should always follow his or her conscience, i.e., act in accordance with his or her deepest personal moral convictions. This is the bedrock basis of integrity. Of course, he assumes that they have made honest, serious efforts to form their consciences, i.e., to ascertain what is right and wrong. The individual conscience is not infallible. The most earnest, conscientious people can and sometimes do make mistakes and thus arrive at an erroneous conscience. Fortunately, God does not require that people always find and do the right thing, only that they do their best.

"Doing one's best" includes using all the available resources of wisdom and guidance. For Catholics, these include the teachings of the magisterium. Although all baptized believers have a prophetic responsibility to announce the good news of Christ, those who have the authority to teach officially share in the Church's magisterium. This magisterial authority belongs to the whole college of bishops and the individual bishops united in hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome.<sup>18</sup>

How should the individual use this resource? Here is where opinions diverge. For some, a clear statement by the magisterium on a moral issue effectively brings to a close the search for truth.

- For a true believer, the fact that his or her conscience counsels what the magisterium says is intrinsically wrong, is enough to tell him or her that his or her conscience is wrong.

– William Marra, *Catholics United for the Faith*

- If one is a Catholic, one is a papist. One cannot say “Rome has spoken, but the cause goes on.” One must say, “Rome has spoken, the cause is finished.”

– Germain Grisez, Mt. St. Mary's College

- Every person must follow his or her conscience, but a Catholic accepts the teaching of the Church as an obligatory way of forming his or her conscience.

– Msgr. Austin Vaughan, American Theological Society<sup>19</sup>

These thinkers find support for their position in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

Bishops, teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to divine and Catholic truth. In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul. This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*. That is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will.

– Constitution on the Church, n.25<sup>20</sup>

Others have difficulty with this method of resolving differences between conscience and authority. They insist that the magisterium can assist but should not replace conscience. While acknowledging the role of authority in the formation of conscience, they feel that it cannot always lift from the individual the burden of choice, which is an integral part of adult responsibility.

While insisting on the essential, positive role of the official teachers in the Church, we must, however, keep the magisterium in a proper perspective. The Pope and the bishops alone do not constitute the Church...There is a proper dissent in the Church. Conscience sometimes demands that we go against official statements of the leadership. Dissent from *Humanae Vitae* (the papal encyclical on birth control) by bishops, theologians, and married couples is a clear example of individuals following their consciences instead of slavishly adhering to an official pronouncement. Church laws promulgated by the hierarchy are not absolutes but guidelines and directives facilitating Christian behavior.<sup>21</sup>

Theologians and married couples who are convinced, after careful study, that conclusions other than those drawn by the Pope are possible for them are not only free to follow their consciences, they must do so. No one can account to God for his or her talents simply by pleading that he or she acted as an agent of Peter. The abdication of personal moral responsibility has never been a doctrine of the Church.<sup>22</sup>

This viewpoint also finds support in the documents of Vatican II.

Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths...Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness...God has willed that man be left "in the hands of his own counsel" (Sir. 15:14) so that he can seek His Creator spontaneously...Hence man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice. Such a choice is personally motivated and prompted from within. It does not result from blind internal impulse nor from mere external pressure.<sup>23</sup>

The Gospel has a sacred reverence for the dignity of conscience and its freedom of choice constantly advises that all human talents be employed in God's service and men's, and, finally, commends all to the charity of all.<sup>24</sup>

This stalemate between groups of Catholics is not surprising. The Second Vatican Council featured a dramatic struggle between conservative and progressive Church officials as each tried to capture the soul of the Church.

Since the progressive bishops won so many of the battles, those who sided with them presumed that they had won the war. At the Council's close, they emerged flushed with optimism that a second spring was in the offing. But within a very few years, the renewal was stalled, recriminations abounded, and polarization set in.

In the ensuing struggle, which is still going on, both groups became adept at citing Council documents that reflected their views. After a while, it became evident that those documents were compromise statements that cut both ways. This was no accident. When the progressives were winning the procedural battles, Pope Paul VI was determined not to preside over a council of winners and losers. "*Pas vaincus, mais convaincus*" (not defeated, but won over) was the hoped-for outcome toward which he used his considerable influence. As a result, almost four decades later, the Battle of Citations goes on. No one will admit defeat, and hardly anyone is won over. The argument over conscience and authority is only one of many issues that the Council left unresolved.

Many young and some adult Catholics would find it hard to relate to this whole discussion because of their misunderstanding of the doctrine of papal infallibility. How, they wonder, could dissent from papal teaching be justified when the Pope is infallible? They have a simplistic understanding of a doctrine that calls for very careful distinctions. The First Vatican Council asserts that when the Pope, speaking as the head of the universal Church, solemnly defines a doctrine of faith or morals to be held as a matter of faith by the whole Church, the Holy Spirit will preserve him from error. Only a few such *ex cathedra* definitions have been made, none of them about morality. So, thus far, no dissent from papal teaching has had any relevance to the doctrine of infallibility.

When Monsignor Ferdinando Lambruschini, at a press conference in 1968, announced the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, the first thing he said was that it was not intended as an infallible pronouncement. This did not mean that it was not to be obeyed, but that it did not have the same force as an *ex cathedra* statement. It admits of development and therefore is not immune to argument.

Some have implied that certain firm papal pronouncements in recent years, like Pope John Paul II's insistence that priestly ordination is closed to women, are on the level of immutable dogmas and may not be called into question. Most theologians, however, describe these contentions as "creeping infallibility" and reject such an evaluation. In discussing the theological dimensions of moral education, teachers would be well advised to admit that sometime in the future, a pope may define a moral teaching, but that as of

now, there are no such pronouncements. Therefore, infallibility is currently irrelevant to the moral debate within the Church.

### A MODEST PROPOSAL

So what can be done? In the years following the publication of *Humanae Vitae* and the polarization it provoked, several national episcopal bodies took steps to advise their flocks on how to deal with the controversy. In their own way, each tried to take a pastoral approach that would support the papal teaching without bringing on the schism that threatened. The bishops of Canada spelled out an interesting position that went beyond the birth control question and confronted the larger issue of conscience and authority within the Church. What follows is a summary of their teaching, which may help resolve the impasse for some and could be helpful to those engaged in moral education.

For Catholics faced with difficult moral problems, the cornerstone of conscience formation is the teaching of the magisterium. An attitude of receptivity is to be presumed. If, after careful consideration, they find the teaching unconvincing and creating problems of conscience, they should pray for the light of the Spirit, study Scripture and Tradition, and maintain a dialogue with the whole Church. If these do not resolve their doubts, they must follow their conscience.

The bishops add an important footnote. Opposition to official Church teaching should not be the normal stance of Catholics. Dissent should be the exception rather than the rule. If people find themselves consistently at odds with the Church, perhaps they should seek God in some other religious community or tradition. It is not a matter of rejecting dissenters. The teaching of Vatican II recognizes the presence of God in other religious faiths. If membership in the Catholic Church becomes a constant obstacle to personal religious development, the search for God takes precedence.

If young Catholics were taught in this spirit, what might they look like as adults? Here is one description:

They acknowledge the duty of Church leaders to teach in the name of Christ, and they listen attentively and reverently to what they have to say. They find that most, if not all, of the time these Church teachings coincide with their own best instincts. Even when the teaching makes them uncomfortable because it challenges them to pursue a higher ideal, they appreciate this kind of leadership and

guidance. Their attitude is one of docility and receptivity, expecting good advice from their spiritual leaders and ready to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Occasionally, however, they have difficulty with the official decisions of Church authorities on particular issues. The pronouncement may fail to reflect their own or others' experience. The reasoning behind the decision may be unclear or seem inadequate. Perhaps others in the Church community, such as respected theologians who are experts on the matter in question, have found the explanation unconvincing. It may seem like a case where the teaching of Christ in the New Testament has not been accurately applied to one of today's problems. When this happens, they listen carefully to the voice of conscience, as well as to that of authority, as they try to find the truth.

Realizing that they themselves are subject to error, they pray for the light of the Holy Spirit. They study the Bible as well as they are able, especially the words of Christ in the New Testament, to find guidance. They consider the teaching of the Church in past history as it relates to the issue in question. Finally, they listen to other voices in today's Church, not only of those in positions of leadership and of reputable theologians, but of laymen and lay women who take their faith seriously and try to live in a way that is consistent with it.

Only after they have done all these things do they draw their conclusions and make their decision. If they reach a judgment contrary to that of the teaching Church, they do so reluctantly. But they realize that as Christians they are obliged in conscience to follow their deepest personal convictions. As long as the teaching is not a solemnly defined, infallible doctrine, they can remain in disagreement on this question and still be loyal members of the Church in good standing. Meanwhile, they should be open to further enlightenment from prayer and study and other members of the community, and be willing to change their opinion in the light of new understanding.<sup>25</sup>

This approach will not satisfy everyone. But it may help adult Catholics not only in their own spiritual struggles but also in their efforts at moral education of the young.

## CHAPTER 4

# Medium and Message



Now that the psychological, cultural, philosophical, and religious factors that influence moral development have been examined, the problem of content can be addressed. What topics should be taught? Before laying out the broad outlines of a curriculum, spirit and tone need to be discussed.

The divisions among Catholics described in the last chapter create questions about how to treat issues that are controverted within the Church community. Teachers who come down on one side of a dispute run the risk of passing on divisions from one generation to the next, especially when moral issues are up for discussion. How should they speak of matters that threaten the peace?

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, during his last illness, launched a project he called *Common Ground* in the hope that it would reduce tensions and promote harmony within the Church. In the spirit of the project, dialogue and mutual respect replace debate and recrimination. Those who have conflicting viewpoints need not cover up their differences or deny their existence. But those differences should not be given greater weight than they deserve.

The issues that divide Catholics today do not touch the essentials of the Faith. When they recite the Creed together and share Holy Communion, the problems do not come up. This is not to say that they are unimportant. Women's roles, sexual responsibility, reproductive interventions, abortion, and capital punishment call for serious, urgent consideration, but they should be kept in perspective. No one holding either side of any of these disputes is denying the lordship of Jesus Christ.

The first step toward peace is to stop reading one's adversaries out of the Church. The second is to admit the sincerity of those with whom one disagrees. Even when an opinion seems so objectionable as to arouse righteous anger, Jesus reminds us that people are not to judge what is going on

in the human heart. If people can hate the sin and love the sinner, then they can hate the thought and love the thinker. If people observe these basic rules, they may not eliminate disagreements but they will reduce the kind of

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scandalous denunciation that goes on between members of the Mystical Body. If they go a step further and make honest efforts to understand from where the other person is coming, a degree of reconciliation is possible.

John Courtney Murray, whose views on Church-state relations were vindicated by Vatican II's declaration on religious liberty, offered a formula for constructive conflict in a democracy. Applying it to Church realities, it would read, "The life of the faith community is enhanced when believers are locked together in argument and are passionately engaged in reasonable discussion of the ways of expressing and practicing the Faith."

The *Common Ground* project addresses conflicts among adults, not among adolescents or children.

Young people do not go in for theological mud wrestling. But there are important implications for the way adults teach the young about the Church, its doctrines, traditions, and values. In encouraging participation in its life, why not admit, early on, that it is made up of sometimes contentious, quarrelsome people who care enough to fight for their beliefs? This would be telling it like it is. Children are not shocked when their elders disagree; it often makes them more interesting. An easy but useful thing to do is to help growing children understand why those adults disagree, what values they are defending, and what concerns bring on their disputes. There are many different ways of being authentically Catholic. Students have a right to know the variety of options available within the boundaries of sound teaching. If, for example, some are more comfortable with a conservative or authoritarian approach, their choice should be respected by those of different persuasions. But they should also be encouraged to show the same

bearance toward others.

This does not mean that all opinions are equally good, or that all expressions of Catholic Christianity are equally valid. People should stand up for their ideals and criticize religious expressions that they see as falling short of the ideal or doing harm. Families that argue among themselves are not, by that very fact, dysfunctional. It may well be the other way around. A bishop speaking at one of the semi-annual meetings of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops compared the American episcopacy to a dysfunctional family precisely because its members were unable to discuss their differences frankly and honestly in open meetings. His criticism was validated when no one replied. No, there is nothing wrong with conflict so long as it is civil, refrains from demonizing, and tries to build up the Body of Christ. There is a traditional formula that applies here: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials freedom, in all things charity."

The chances of achieving this kind of civil discourse within the body of the faithful will be improved if all parties are aware of some important ongoing developments in the Church. What follows is not specifically about moral instruction of the young and may strike some as rather far afield. But teachers who can see further than today's lesson plan and even beyond the teaching enterprise itself will bring much more to their ministry if they situate it within a broader religious context.

## STYLES OF GOVERNANCE

Within the last two decades, two very different styles of governance have grown up side by side in the Church. They are best illustrated by four true stories concerning a pastor, a Vatican commission, a conference of bishops, and a pope.

### PASTOR

A fast-growing parish in Florida was divided in two. The pastor and the parish council of the newly created parish had to make some far-reaching decisions including how and what to build. The pastor thought that, instead of building a church along traditional lines, they should invest in a multi-purpose building which would serve as a center for various activities including worship. Most of the council members preferred to build a church. Although the pastor had the right to implement his own plan, he deferred to the wishes of the council as representatives of the people whom he was pledged to serve. Against his better judgment but as a matter of principle, he concurred. The church was built.

#### VATICAN COMMISSION

The explosion of reproductive technologies in the 1980s produced test tube babies, artificial insemination, sperm banks, surrogate mothers, and even the idea of cloning alarmed many people. A Vatican commission of like-minded theologians was convened and issued a 1987 instruction, *Donum Vitae*. This declared all means of human reproduction immoral except physical intercourse between husband and wife. The document received favorable reviews within the Catholic community except for its condemnation of artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization by married couples. The problem was that some world-class Catholic theologians had not been invited to participate. This assured unanimity but also precluded universal acceptance because many felt that important voices had not been heard.

#### BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

In the early 1980s, amid growing worldwide fears of possible nuclear war, the bishops of the United States undertook to offer moral guidance concerning the possession and use of nuclear weapons. In a long and deliberate process, they sent the first draft of a pastoral letter to numerous Catholic groups, inviting constructive criticism. They listened to experts like the National Security Advisor and armaments experts from the Pentagon. They studied, prayed over, and discussed the many responses to the first draft, then composed and sent out a second draft. The process was repeated and a final version of the letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, was voted on, passed, and published. It condemned the use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances and reluctantly gave approval to their possession on condition that sincere efforts be made toward arms reduction and eventual disarmament. The letter received broad acceptance by Catholics and others in this country.

#### POPE

As the twentieth century drew to a close, numerous and strong voices were heard urging a change in the Church's long-standing tradition of excluding women from priestly ordination. Many others were uncertain but felt that the proposal should receive serious consideration in the form of dialogue and debate, in the hope that some consensus might emerge regarding its acceptance or rejection. Pope John Paul II responded by issuing an encyclical, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, stating that the tradition of an all-male priesthood is irreformable and not subject to discussion.

From these four cases, two basic forms of Church governance emerge. To settle questions, the Vatican commission and the Pope employed unilat-

eral authoritative decrees. This seemed to them to be the most appropriate way to exercise decisive leadership. The pastor and the bishops, on the other hand, were clearly working from a different model of governance, one which used broad consultation and valued feedback as a necessary component of deliberation. These two very different styles of governance, reflecting different concepts of leadership and accountability, are also found in families, schools, and other institutions.

The variation in styles of governance does not immediately touch the problems of moral judgments and decisions. But those who do moral instruction of the young within the Church should consider those styles when confronting moral issues about which Church authorities have spoken. If in some sense the medium is the message, then authoritative statements on moral and dogmatic issues will encounter varying levels of acceptance among the faithful. Teachers who are aware of this development may find it easier to sort out issues in their own minds as they decide how and what to teach the young.

## WHAT TO TEACH

What areas of moral concern are appropriate topics for formal instruction? There is, of course, room for plenty of variation. One guideline would be this: students should be dealing with personal, age-related, day-to-day aspects of their lives, as well as with larger social issues that have an impact on society as a whole. Stealing, lying, bullying others, harassing peers, treating others with disrespect, vandalism, and cheating are among the down-to-earth activities that are relevant both to younger children and to adolescents. If discussions of right and wrong do not address these kinds of behavior, they will amount to nothing. On the other hand, children should learn from an early age that morality is grown-up stuff and that it has a lot to do with the kind of world in which we live. As students engage in formal moral education, they should have a growing sense of mastery and of developing skills in judgment and decision.

What are some issues in the wider, adult world that older children can profitably address? One is the morality of war. In this matter, the Catholic Church has a centuries-old tradition that periodically comes into play as our country deals with problems of global violence and military intervention. Teenagers are both capable of and interested in exploring this topic. Having engaged in a critical study of militarism, the Just War Theory, and pacifism, they can bring something better than knee-jerk jingoism to

contemporary crises.

Some topics are not of immediate relevance to adolescents but are of interest now and of probable practical concern later on. Older teenagers are capable of addressing several of the controversial topics arising from progress in the life sciences including euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, birth-defective infants, and reproductive innovations like in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, surrogate wombs, sperm banks, and cloning. There is very little consensus among adults in these matters, and boys and girls approaching young adulthood can, with help, begin to find their way through societal confusion and consider the demand of human dignity and responsibility.

Capital punishment is another issue that taxes the moral sensibilities of all citizens. The great majority of those in positions of Church leadership, from bishops to other members of the clergy to members of religious congregations, are united in their opposition to capital punishment. Many lay Catholics share this conviction, but this is a case where the clergy and religious as a group are out in front of the laity. This is not hard to understand for it is quite natural for people to react to vicious crimes with the desire to extract an eye for an eye. Consideration of the strong arguments against capital punishment—the risk of executing innocent persons, the failure to deter criminals, the fact that revenge is often the motive rather than justice, and the brutalization of the public—may not change many minds. But the challenge itself is worth the effort. The value of moral education lies not only in the convincing of young minds but also in the experience of analysis and reflection.

## MAKING SENSE OF SEX

If there is one area of moral concern that spans the personal and the social spectrum, it is sexuality. For many young people, school may be the only place where they can receive a certain kind of help in the task of becoming a woman or a man. Much of the culture is misleading or confused, and parents are often out of the loop.

There are many effective ways of teaching about sex, and many adults have mastered them. Programs that work and adults who reach teenagers share a few common characteristics. They come across as being not just against bad sex but even more in favor of good sex. They offer not just warnings and prohibitions but also positive ideals. The Church's teaching about sexual intimacy should never be interpreted as some kind of puritanism. It aims at helping men and women realize their full possibilities for

happiness and fulfillment.

With these positive goals always in sight, sex educators can then point out the pitfalls and the dangers of premature intimacy—not just unwanted pregnancy and disease, but also the stunted capacity for meaningful relationships. There is an unchallenged myth that young people can engage in fun sex for a while, move on to more serious but temporary relationships, and then expect to emerge from all these adventures ready to give one person all they have, with no reservations, for better or worse, until they die.<sup>26</sup>

Sex education should speak up for the institution of the family. To the extent possible, when they speak of sexual activity, courses should speak of it in the context of the institution of marriage. We should speak of the fidelity, commitment, and maturity of successful marriages as something for which our students should strive.

To the girls, teachers need to talk about the readiness for motherhood...and they must not be afraid to teach lessons other girls have learned from bitter experience...

In discussing these matters, teachers should not forget to talk to the boys. They should tell the boys what it is to be a father, what the responsibilities of being a father are. And they should tell them how the readiness and responsibility of being a father should precede or at least accompany the acts which might make them fathers.<sup>27</sup>

Somewhere along the line, educators will have to admit that there is a good deal of adult hypocrisy. Adolescents see that their elders accept the dominant culture's myths without question, live by them in their own lives, and then slap their children's hands when they reach for a share of the forbidden fruit. They must be reminded that not all adults live this way, that people can and often do better. The idealism of young people should not be underestimated. The positive side of sex education can appeal to their most generous instincts and encourage them to do better than many of those who have gone before them.

One of the factors that works against the sex educator is the adolescent myth of invincibility. A high school junior boy writes:

A famous American once said, "No guts, no glory." When one doesn't know what lies ahead, he should try to find out. Like advancing on a hill in battle or starting a business, one can make estimates

about sexual intercourse, but cannot really know what it is like until he tries.

Protection of man's inalienable right to pursue happiness has made this country great. You can say that "teenagers are not ready for sexual intercourse because they are not ready for its psychological, emotional, spiritual, and biological consequences," but there will always be teenagers who can prove you wrong.

Like many young people, he cannot imagine bad things happening to him. Bad things only happen to other kids who are not as smart, careful, or lucky as he is.

Another factor is adolescents' difficulty in telling the difference between love and infatuation. Sometimes they experience very good relationships marked by genuine warmth and affection, and they think they are really in love. One boy complained, "Parents of today have no concept of how truly close two young people can be. Parents just don't think that it's possible for a guy and a girl to be deeply committed to each other." Teenagers need to see the difference for themselves, lest they invest more in a fragile relationship than it can bear. They also need a reality check when they start throwing around that much abused word, "commitment." The first to misuse it are the "unmarried marrieds," who rationalize their behavior by saying they are "committed" to each other. The dictionary defines commitment as a promise, but there are no promises being made there. What live-in lovers really mean but never say out loud is, "I like you a lot and I wouldn't want you to get hurt, and I'll be with you as long as I feel this way." Adolescents who ape their elders are less to be blamed but more at risk, like the teenage girl who wrote, "Just because two people aren't married does not mean that they are not committed to each other forever."

## BAD NEWS AND GOOD NEWS

Even the teenagers who are on the side of the angels are pessimistic about adults' chances of turning things around. One boy writes:

The society in which we live is centered around two ideals: sex and money. The two work hand in hand. Sex is used to make money, and money is used to get sex. These values are so instilled in our mind today that I don't believe that mere imposition of the counter-argument

will deter teenagers from having sex. I find it unfortunate that the world is as it is, but we should try to correct the problem (by giving out condoms), not run from it with an idea of great moral values.

The task is a daunting one, but far from impossible. There is a large store of adolescent good sense, even wisdom, waiting to be tapped, as these students' observations indicate:

A boy: "I have had experience with abortion, not my child but still it happened to someone very close to me. My friend had seemed to be a victim of society and I was mad. But I came to realize that I am part of the solution. Only by the actions of teens like me will we be able to direct teens to a greater understanding of teen sexuality. Only then will the maturity level be seen—with this is a realization that no teen is emotionally, physically, or psychologically ready for sex. We may think we are but even when we practice it safely, the repercussions are enormous."

A girl: "If two people love each other that much, why don't they get married? If they are too young, they are too young to handle such a big responsibility. A girl must ask herself these questions: Does he love me? Is this a one-night stand? Is he forcing me? If two people love each other, they won't mind waiting until they are married. I know I will not engage in premarital sex. When I get married that is going to be one thing that I give my husband, something that no one else has and can take away."

A boy: "Teenage love is an infatuation. Teenagers experience deep emotional, social, and psychological stress during these years. When viewed with hindsight, what is love to them one day can be the result of a massive hormone influx. Teenagers still have a long way to go before they are ready for real love."

A boy: "In our society, which seems to condone premarital sex and attacks unwed mothers, there is a lot of pressure put on teenagers. Both you and your girlfriend are under pressure. I don't feel it is right for you to pressure each other even more. People are not toys; you cannot play with them and put them away. It takes courage to stand up against peer pressure, but I think we should try. Your friends are as confused as you are."

Many young people feel this way. Their voices should be heard by their peers.



A look back over this book reveals an imposing list of demands confronting those who would teach today's young people right from wrong. They must try to convince the young people that consumerism is a shallow way of life, that God not only loves them but makes demands, that some of their moral choices may be wrong, that Jesus is more than a friend, that premarital sex is not a right, and that each person is called to measure up to what God wants, not the other way around. The list is challenging indeed, but it is worth the best efforts of those who care about and minister to today's youth.

## Endnotes



1. Margaret Betz, *Making Life Choices* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 60.
2. Dirk Johnson, "When Money is Everything, Except Hers," *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 1998, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, Oct. 18, 1998, p. 1.
4. Betz, *op.cit.*, pp. 58-60.
5. John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (New York, Orbis Books, 1981), pp. 46-47.
6. "Still Killing Us Softly," Cambridge Documentary films, Cambridge, MA, 1987.
7. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 20.
8. Kavanaugh, *op.cit.*, p. 100.
9. James DiGiacomo, "Ministering to the Young," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol. 23, n. 2, (1991), p. 1.
10. Robert Neelly Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 75-76.
11. William Bennett, "Sex and the Education of Our Children," *America*, (Feb. 14, 1987), pp. 5-6.
12. Louis Raths, Merrill Harmin, Sidney Simon, *Values and Teaching: Working with Values in the Classroom* (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publ. Co., 1966), p. 20.
13. After the Mylai revelations, some remembered a regulation in the code of courts-martial that stated that if a soldier is given an order which any sane person would know is illegal, not only is he forbidden to carry out the order, but he can be prosecuted if he does. Observing this rule is,

admittedly, sometimes very difficult in the midst of war. But it is striking evidence that even the military acknowledges a need for personal responsibility instead of blind obedience. Students are surprised by the disclosure of this well-kept secret.

14. Briggs, K., "Religious Feeling Seen Strong in U.S.," *New York Times*, (Dec. 9, 1984), p. 30.

15. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, (New York: Harper Torchbook, Harper & How, 1959), p. 93.

16. James DiGiacomo, "Telling the Jesus Story," *Today's Catholic Teacher* (Nov.-Dec. 1981), pp. 22-23.

17. Henri Bouillard, *The Logic of the Faith*, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), p. 49.

18. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 344.

19. James DiGiacomo, *Conscience and Authority*, (New York: Holt Rinehart Winston, 1969), p. 37.

20. Walter Abbot, *The Documents of Vatican II*, (New York: America Press, 1966), pp. 47-48.

21. James Bacik, *Tensions in the Church*, (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1993), pp. 34-35.

22. "An Editorial Statement on 'Human Life,'" *America*, (Aug. 17, 1968), p. 94.

23. Abbot, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-214.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

25. James DiGiacomo, *Do the Right Thing*, (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1991), pp. 80-81.

26. In ancient times, this was called "sowing your wild oats."

27. Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

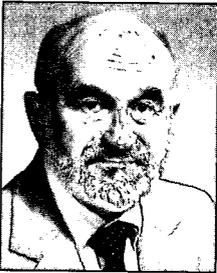
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## About the Author



**H**arry Truman was President and living a few blocks away when Rev. James J. DiGiacomo, S.J., began his teaching career. During his more than forty years of high school teaching, he has been a prolific writer of books and articles about and for young people and their parents, teachers, and youth ministers. *We Were Never Their Age*, *Understanding Teenagers*, the *Conscience and Concern* and *Encounter* series, *Do the Right Thing*, and *Morality and Youth* are among his more notable titles. In addition to serving as an adjunct professor of religious education at Fordham University for many years, he has lectured widely and worked as a consultant to educational groups throughout the United States and in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, and Micronesia. Presently, he teaches theology at Regis High School in New York City, NY.

“Anyone interested in young people interiorizing motives for moral behavior rather than achieving merely grudging conformity could profit from this brief, down-to-earth, savvy book. It undercuts the appealingly corrosive ‘values’ of popular culture that kids swallow as easily as soft drinks and offers practical steps to subvert moral relativism on the one hand and blind obedience on the other. It is filled with wise advice from a seasoned professional.”

*Rev. William J. O'Malley, S.J.  
Teacher  
Fordham Preparatory School  
Bronx, NY*

“Fr. DiGiacomo clearly ‘knows the territory.’ This is a comprehensive, straightforward, and clear treatment, which will be of enormous help to educators and pastors.”

*Most Rev. Gordon D. Bennett, S.J.  
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