

# MY FATHER'S HOUSE

P.O. Box 22, North Moodus Road, Moodus, CT. 06469 860-873-1581 FAX 860-873 -2357

## Gospel Morality

Fr. Bill McCarthy, MSA

Jesus tells His followers to imitate Him – to think as He thinks, to love as He loves, to act as He acts. He sent us His Spirit at Pentecost to transform our lives into His – to grant to us His wisdom, His love and His power.

### **Christ Our Norm**

Jesus, even as to His human nature, learned obedience through suffering (cf Heb 5:8). He always did the will of His Father. Jesus said, “With all of the earnestness I possess, the Son does only what He sees the Father doing” (Jn 5:19).

### **Christ: The Universal Ethical Norm**

The perfect obedience of Jesus to His Father is the valid and applicable norm for all ethical situations. This becomes clear when one reflects upon the saving link between Christ and sinners. By the Paschal mystery we all ‘abide’ in Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. “The Crucified Christ reveals the authentic meaning of freedom; He lives it fully in the total gift of himself” for us (*Veritatis Splendor*, no 85). We share in His freedom through faith.

This “for us” is to be taken seriously, that is, not metaphorically. It means that Jesus did not simply act in our favor, in solidarity with our sufferings. Rather for us God made Him to be sin (2 Cor 5:21) and Jesus became a curse for us (Gal 3:13), that is, “in our stead” in the sense of representation. In what Balthasar calls “a breakthrough formula,” St. Paul teaches that Jesus gives Himself for us to the extent of “exchanging place” with us. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

In virtue of the Cross, the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon all flesh (Acts 2:17). Through the Paschal Mystery the Holy Spirit of God universalizes the form of Christ in every believer making it available and applicable to every moral situation. The Church, especially through the Eucharist, is the privileged place in which the Holy Spirit of freedom leads the individual Christian freely into the Father’s kingdom.

### **God’s Standards With God’s Power**

To allow Christ to live His life in and through us can be accomplished only by the power of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit we receive by faith, surrender, prayer, and the sacraments. Mother Teresa summed it up very simply when she said, “It is not possible to engage in the Christian life nor in the active apostolate without becoming a soul of prayer. We must be aware of oneness with Christ as He was aware of oneness with His Father. We must allow Christ to work in us and through us with His wisdom, love and power.” Not only is Christ the norm for our holiness, He IS our very holiness. It is the power of His Spirit within us that enables us to think, love and act like Him.

### **Christ: The Supreme, Concrete Norm for Ethics**

The supreme norm for Christian ethics is Christ. His obedience to the Father’s will is the starting

point for moral development. This is the teaching of the encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*. “Consequently the decisive answer to every one of man’s questions, his moral and religious questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, or rather is Jesus Christ himself” (no. 2). And later, “Each day the Church looks to Christ with unfailing love, fully aware that the answer to the problem of morality lies in Him alone” (no. 85).

Jesus Christ is the concrete, absolute, unqualified norm of all ethical actions. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms this by asserting that He is the unique measure and the archetype of divine love and the response to it. “The first and last point of reference of this catechesis will always be Jesus Christ himself, who is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life.’ It is by looking to Him in faith that Christ’s faithful can hope that He Himself fulfills His promises in them, and that, by loving Him with the same love with which he has loved them, they may perform works in keeping with their dignity” (no. 1698).

The ethical actions of Christian must mirror the reality that they live with Christ in the final times. By His death and resurrection, Christ carried creation to its eschatological fulfillment. Moral perfection is the goal of Christian reflection on ethics. “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). Our perfection consists in taking part in a mission, the origin of which is within the Trinity of Divine Persons and which becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ.

### **Supernatural And Natural**

Immediately, we see that Gospel morality is revealed morality. This does not exclude the natural law, since much of what God has revealed is also knowable by reason. But precisely because God revealed His will to the human race, we know what He expects of us far beyond what reason alone could ever attain. We might, therefore, say that Gospel morality is a synthesis of two levels of oral teaching, that of natural law attainable by reason and revealed law that could only be known by a special supernatural communication from God. From still another angle, Gospel morality is a composite of all the Divine commands laid upon mankind, whether natural because available by the light of man’s natural intelligence, or supernatural because it had to be infused by Divine illumination.

### **The Four Gospels**

The source of our knowledge of Gospel morality is primarily the four Gospels, but not the gospels alone. The word “Gospel” in this context refers to the whole new testament, that is, all the books in Sacred Scripture beyond what we commonly call the Old Testament.

### **The Whole of Revelation**

Moreover, Gospel morality includes the whole of Divine revelation, whether Scripture or Tradition, that we may legitimately call the New Testament. This means that the scope of Gospel morality is the whole body of revealed truths that built on the Old Law as expressed by St. Paul, “God, who at sundry times and in diverse manner spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all in these days has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:1-2). The subject matter of our reflecting, then, is what the Son of God has spoken to us about how we should behave on earth in order to attain happiness in the world to come.

### **The Ten Commandments – A Starting Point**

Surprisingly, the matter we shall cover will be the Ten commandments or the Decalogue. But where the Decalogue was originally given only to the Jews, Gospel morality is intended for the whole human race, or more accurately, to that part of mankind which has accepted Christ as the son

of God and His moral teaching as the Commandments of God to be observed by those who call themselves Christians. More than once the Savior emphasized that He did not come to destroy the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. Our purpose will be to see what this means in practical terms of everyday life.

### **More Than Meets The Eye**

There is more implied here than meets the eye. It is not only that Christ fulfilled the predictions made about Him by David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other Messianic prophets. When he came into the world, Christ not only brought to pass what had been foretold, He brought to fruition what had only been sown before, or to change the metaphor, He actually completed what had been promised and gave the world a reality that until His time had only been foreshadowed.

### **More Than Moses Here**

What we hope to see in our study of Gospel morality is something of this reality as lived out in the Person of Christ and, for our purpose, especially as intended to be lived out by His followers. Gospel morality may therefore be contrasted with Mosaic morality, since it is God's will that the moral conduct of the disciples of Christ should tower above the behavior of the ancient Jews as much as the New Testament towers above the old.

### **Five Reasons To Study Gospel Morality**

1. **To Know Essentials.** Why study Gospel morality? In order to know that all the essentials of Christ in the moral order are found in that public revelation which we believe was completed with the apostolic age. No doubt the Church has interpreted this deposit of faith, explained and developed it. But she did not create it. It was entrusted to her by the Son of God to be kept undefiled until the end of time.
2. **It Is Absolute.** Why study Gospel morality? We need this in order to know that Christian morality is absolute. What Christ revealed for His followers to do is to remain constant in its essentials in every period of history and among all cultures of mankind. In other words, Christian morality is not relative, as though it were subject to human whim or caprice.
3. **It Is Mandatory.** Why should we study Gospel morality? We do so in order to become convinced that Christ's teaching about human behavior is binding and mandatory. It is not merely recommended or proposed as an impossible ideal.
4. **His Morality Is Difficult.** Why should we study Gospel morality? We do so in order to protect us from the illusion of thinking that the following of Christ and obedience to His precepts are not demanding. Certainly Christ told us that "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:30), but He recognized that doing His will is a yoke on the human mind and a burden on the will. We are not naturally prone to practice the difficult virtues that the Savior preached. It is only by His grace that His commandments can become light or following in His footsteps is called easy. As we come to understand what Gospel morality means, we discern that it is not a morality of convenience; that it means carrying our daily cross in imitation of Jesus who, having joy set before Him, chose the Cross.
5. **Gospel Morality Partakes Of Mystery.** Why study Gospel morality? In order to find out that the commandments of Christ partake of mystery twice over. They are mysterious because, while not unreasonable, they are not rationally comprehensible; we can understand them only so far and no further; they are to be lived out on faith. Moreover, the commandments of Christ

partake of mystery because they are, in their way, humanly impossible. As we put them into practice and live out what we believe, Christ who commands us becomes the Christ who strengthens us. The more faithful we are in our fidelity to His will, the more grace He confers on our wills to grow ever more faithful even to heroic sanctity.

Among the errors of those who are hostile to Christianity, none is more devastating than the claim that Christians are told to suffer in this life so they can be happy in the life to come. This is not true. Of course we must carry the cross here on earth. But we dare not say that we are to be unhappy until we reach eternity. God provides us with a prelude of heaven in this valley of tears. He wants us to anticipate our destiny by having a foretaste of the glory that awaits us in the everlasting future.

### **Qualities of Gospel Morality**

Having seen something of the meaning of Gospel morality and reasons for studying it, we may briefly identify its qualities in contrast with the moral code before Christ came into the world. We have said that the new Testament is a fulfillment of the Old. This is true both of Christ's teaching of what we are to believe and of Christ's telling us how we are to behave. Our emphasis, of course, is on Christian behavior which among the followers of Christ is to be more perfect than was ever the conduct even of the Chosen People under the law of Moses.

How is Christian behavior as the practice of Gospel morality to be more perfect than what God expected of His people before the Incarnation? It is to be more perfect in being more interior, more loving, more generous, more Christlike; and more inspired. And it should be all of these because it is meant to be redemptive and sanctifying, and correspondingly more pleasing to God.

**1. More Interior.** The inwardness or interiority of Christian behavior is spelled out by the Savior through most of His Sermon on the Mount. He brings out the stark contrast between the laws that were given to Moses as compared with the conduct of His own followers. True morality is never merely external. It either has interior motivation or it is not worthy of the name. Yet, as the Master points out, the children of Abraham were to practice numerous external prescriptions as a witness of their fidelity to Yahweh. The hundreds of precise prescriptions in the book of Deuteronomy alone are evidence of how exacting the Mosaic law could be. Days and seasons, amount and kind, gender and age, length and quantity, were specified in the extreme. All of this was part of God's will for His people to keep them united to Himself and united among themselves as the Chosen race.

Compare this with the moral teachings of the Savior. He does not exclude external practice because He knows that man has a body, that he is a social being, and that if he is faithful to the precepts of the Gospel his actions will be sensibly perceptible and to that extent, external. However, through His preaching, and especially in the gospel of Matthew, the morality prescribed by Christ emphasizes the interior. Intentions and motives, the mind and heart, in a word the spirit with which we perform what Christ commands is what he mainly is looking for. This is so true that a case could be made out for Christian morality being the opposite of Pharisaic morality. Where the Pharisees stressed external behavior and were often in conflict with Christ, they were actually indifferent to the law of Moses. Christ taught almost the opposite. What God is mainly looking for in our conduct is not only what we do but also, and with emphasis, why we do it.

**2. More Loving.** Love, like interiority, can never be completely absent from anything good that a person does. Even the most reluctant action that someone does has at least a tinge of affection in the motive for doing it, otherwise it would not qualify as human conduct. Consequently, it is simply not true that Old Testament morality was simply the morality of fear. The Jews were told to

fear God, indeed, but also to love Him, and they were likewise told to love their neighbor. Nevertheless, there is a true sense in which Gospel morality is founded on love far more than Torah morality which without extending love, concentrated on the fear of God. The implication of this difference are a study all by itself. For the present, it is enough to note that the Incarnation makes a world of difference in the hidden wellsprings of human conduct. Once a person believes that God, who is Love, became man to prove how much he loves us, his conduct will be deeply affected. He will want to show his love for God in return, and this in turn will draw on his affections in a way that people before the Incarnation could not be inspired to behave.

**3. More Generous.** Generosity is a fluid term. It means kindness and benevolence, friendship and liberality. But when applied to Gospel morality it is especially self-giving. Not until God became man in the Person of Christ did the world even conceive the kind of generosity that Christ revealed in His life and revealed perfectly on the Cross.

**4. More Christ-like.** This leads us to a quality of Gospel morality that cannot be exaggerated. It is Christ-centered morality. Unlike the Mosaic law with its inevitable stress on minute regulations, multiplied to cover every aspect of personal and social living, the morality of the gospels is founded on Christ, inspired by Christ, made possible only through the grace of Christ, and leading to the possession of Christ in eternal life in His company. Too often too many Christians look upon the moral teachings of the Church as just a later stage of the moral code of the pre-Christian Jews. No wonder so many of them react negatively to the Church's prescriptions because they forget that the heart of the new Law is a Person, and that Person is the Son of God who became man in order to inspire our imitation and by His grace, give us the strength to follow in His footsteps.

#### **6. More Inspired Or Charismatic**

Gospel morality is more inspired. In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God worked from without – downward and inward through the law, the patriarchs, the prophets and the kings. Beginning with Pentecost, however, the Holy Spirit of Jesus now works from within. Inwardly enlightening our minds with the very thoughts of Christ and inflaming our hearts with His very love. Christ's Spirit can lead us right into the very manifest presence of God. The author of Hebrews says, "Now we can walk right into the very holy of holies where God is because of the blood of Jesus. This is the fresh, new, life-giving way which Christ has opened up for us by tearing the veil – His human body – to let us into the holy presence of God" (cf Heb 10:19). We can become *co-natural* with Christ, to use a Thomistic term. We can enter into the unitive way. We can listen to, discern and obey God's Word more and more.

#### **In God's Providence**

In Providence Rhode Island, a small group of Catholic charismatics led by Fr. John Randall, gathered in prayer. They received a clear word from the Lord. "Seek wisdom," God said. So they began to study the Scriptures and noticed how many times in the Bible God personally spoke to people and discovered that it was more than 20,000 times. So they began to trust that the Lord was powerfully and personally speaking to them. And so they shared the meditations that they had received from the Scriptures and realized that God was leading them to the very inspirations that were coming to them. After they thought they had mastered this, they again sought the Lord and received the same word from Him. "Seek wisdom." So they began to ask the Lord for a prophetic word. And because they had asked, they received prophecy after prophecy. The Lord was confirming what He said to one through what He said to another. Coming back to the Lord a third time, they asked, "What is next?" "Seek wisdom," the Lord said again. Realizing that they had missed the heart of the matter, they asked the Lord to clarify His statement. Clearly the Lord said to them,

“Ask me everything. Take nothing for granted. I want to be Lord of all.”

### **Listen, Discern And Obey**

So the Lord is willing to lead us step by step and moment by moment. He wants to tell us where to go and where not to go, what to do and what not to do. He wants to tell us everything. “I do not call you to be slaves,” He says to us, “but my friends. I wish to teach you everything that the Father has taught me. I wish to guide your every step. And my promise is that every time you ask, you will receive. Every time you seek me, you will find me. Every time you knock, I will open the door. I do not wish you to do anything without me. I will open the floodgates of heaven before you if only you continue to ask, seek and knock.”

### **The Heart Of The Matter**

This is the heart of Christian morality, to do only the will of the Father. But we cannot do His will unless He reveals it to us. He cannot reveal it to us unless we learn to listen to His voice and to discern what His voice sounds like.

### **Christ Speaks All The Time**

Christ speaks to us all the time through creation, the Church, the new Catechism, the Bible, wise counsel, through parable and paradox, even through pain and sufferings. Inwardly, He speaks through our own thoughts and deepest intuitions. The Spirit of God is moving each one of us to think as Jesus thinks, to love as Jesus loves, and to act as Jesus acts. Christ is urging us to always do the will of His Father. This is the heart of Gospel morality – to think as Jesus inspires us to think, to love as He inflames our hearts to love, and to act as He empowers our lives to act.

### **Church Is Pillar And Standard Of Truth**

Catholic morality adds still another most important dimension. Jesus founded His new covenanted people upon Peter as a rock. He built His house upon a rock (cf Mt 7:24). He gave Peter and his successors a prophetic anointing, not only in dogmatic truths but even in moral truths. He would speak in and through Peter and His Church. What He wished them to bind, they would bind. Thus when Peter and the Magisterium say no to adultery, sodomy, artificial birth control, premarital sex, gambling, pornography, stealing, and now the death penalty, they are speaking in the name of Christ. “He who hears you hears me.”