

Catholic Moral Teaching

For the last sixty years or so, there has been a controversy among Catholic moral theologians as to whether or not there is a distinctive Christian ethic. The Catholic moral tradition has long held that there is a common, universal morality known as natural law, that all people of goodwill can know through the use of human reason alone, independent of any religious faith.

The question is: Does religious faith based on revelation add anything to the moral insights available through a natural law approach? Obviously, the answers vary.

Some Catholic theologians argue, for example, that no amount of human reasoning would lead us to the moral imperative “you must love your enemies” as revealed to us by Jesus. They do not deny the existence of a universal moral order accessible through a natural law approach, but argue that the revelation we receive through faith in Jesus, adds a unique moral insight not available through human reason. Thus, there is a distinctive Christian Ethic.

Other Catholic theologians would say that since God created the cosmos and all that is in it, a reasoned study of creation and especially of human nature, would answer the questions about how humans ought to act to fulfill their human destiny by observing “what works” for individuals and society. For example, we do not necessarily need a divine revelation of the Ten Commandments to inform us that murder, theft and lying are immoral. Furthermore, the difficult questions regarding cloning, genetic manipulation, nuclear war, etc. cannot be derived from any of our revealed texts.

Certainly we cannot solve the controversy. For our purposes, we will look at some aspects of morality that are contained in our revealed texts - Old Testament and New Testament - and then take a brief look at how the natural law tradition is understood. Finally, we shall take a brief look at the notion of conscience and the formation of conscience in the Catholic tradition.

Faith and Morality

From a faith perspective we believe that God our Creator gives life meaning and purpose. We believe that He has a creative purpose for each of us as individuals, for society and for the material world in which we live. Our task is to respond to God’s creative purposes (God’s will) and this response we call morality. What indeed are these specific “creative purposes”? We need to know so that we can respond to God properly.

Coming from a “faith perspective” of morality, we believe that some of God’s creative purposes for us have been revealed and are contained in the Scriptures, the OT and NT. Our task is to discover what these are. This task is not simple, because revelation is progressive and therefore the moral insights of the OT people were often defective when seen in the light of the teachings of Jesus, e.g., the endorsement of slavery. On

examination, some of the sayings of Jesus are obviously not to be taken literally, for example: “if your eye scandalizes you, pluck it out”, while others may only apply to a few “sell all you have and follow me”. Furthermore, it is only over time that Christians have come to know the fuller implications of Jesus’ moral teachings and their possible application to the new moral challenges that every new century brings.

Morality and the Old Testament -- While the OT gave us the Ten Commandments which can still be applied to modern moral issues, it also placed its moral approval on human acts that we now rightly consider to be sinful. Here are two examples: 1) Deuteronomy 21:18-21 directs that a stubborn and rebellious son who is a glutton and a drunkard and who refuses to heed his parents is to be stoned to death by the men of the city. Certainly no one today would allow this as commanded by God and thus permissible in Christian or secular practice.

2) The Ten Commandments are found in Ex. 20 and immediately following in Ex. 21:7, there is this “ordinance” from the Lord: “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do”. The “go out” refers to the ordinance that male slaves would be released in seven years. Is God giving directions for the proper conduct of the slave trade and discriminating against women at the same time? Of course not.

However, besides the Ten Commandments, OT thought does provide us with a number of important theological and moral insights that can help today in understanding God’s creative purposes for our lives. We shall look briefly at examples from Genesis, Leviticus and the prophets Isaiah and Amos.

A Theology of Creation - Genesis -- We begin in the first chapter of Genesis. While Genesis appears first in the OT writings, it was one of the later books to be written and contains some quite sophisticated theological insights. There are two classic creation accounts contained in the first chapter of Genesis. In the second account, Gen. 1:1 to 2:4a, the man, Adam, is first on the scene, but he is lonely and only finds a true partner in woman, Eve, who is of his own flesh. Adam and Eve now enjoy a condition of *peace*.

The biblical notion of peace (*shalom*) is that of a harmonious relationship: Adam and Eve are each at peace with: 1) themselves as individuals, symbolized by their unashamed nakedness; 2) others, Adam is incomplete without Eve, together they are happy and complete; 3) the world of nature, no work and perfect harmony with the animals; and finally, 4) at peace with God.

This peace exists on a personal level, therefore it is established by love - love of self, love of others, love of the world and love of God. The theological message of Genesis is that this is how God created us to be, this is how we *ought* to live -- in peace. It is God’s creative purpose that we live in peace. Why do we not have peace? The answer in Genesis is that humans have turned away from God’s creative purposes for them (they have sinned) and thus the condition of peace willed by God has been broken.

Thus, our ultimate good (our salvation) is to be found in uniting ourselves with the creative purposes of God so that we may, with God’s help, work toward establishing

peace in our lives by loving self, others and the world. Thus, whenever peace - right relationships - is established this is freedom from the destructive effects of sin, it is indeed an experience of salvation.

Leviticus - When we think of the law in the OT we first think of the Ten Commandments. However, the Ten Commandments, fundamental as they are, represent only a tiny segment of the entire Hebrew law code, which includes 613 laws. The Hebrews saw their God as a God of justice, unlike the pagans whose gods represented power. The Hebrews sought to imitate their God, and thus if God is just, they too must be just.

If Genesis teaches that we are to love ourselves and others, what does this look like in ordinary life? The following is an example of how the ancient Hebrews tried to answer this in the context of ownership of property. This was and continues to be a major social and moral issue.

The Hebrew law developed over the centuries to accommodate the situation of a landed people after their “entrance” into the Promised Land. They settled in the land of Canaan sometime in the 12th century BC and, according to tradition, each tribe and each family within the tribe received a share of the land - land owned by God and given to them for their use.

For more than a century they resisted the notion that they should be ruled by a king. Later they accepted the office of king and became a nation, but they knew in their hearts, that becoming a nation under a king could create the social inequities that would divide them as a people - some with wealth and power and some with none.

They understood that in their culture land was the source of wealth, security and individual identity. Once some in the community acquired the land of others in the community either by purchase or loan default, this was the beginning of the gap between the rich and the poor.

In an attempt to address this problem, they held in faith and expressed in their law the religious intuition that the land was a gift to them from God. It was to be used for their own good, however, God owned the land. The inequities that would inevitably arise when land changed hands were addressed in the law by the concept of the Jubilee Year as expressed in Leviticus:

This fiftieth year you shall make sacred by proclaiming liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when every one of you shall return to his own property, every one to this own family estate (Lev. 25:10).

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the country you possess, you shall grant a redemption of the land.

If your brother becomes poor, and sells part of his property, then his next of kin shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. If a man has no one to redeem it, and then himself become prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, let him reckon the years since he sold it and pay back the overpayment to the man to whom he sold it; and he shall return to his property. But if he has not sufficient means to get it back for himself, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of him who bought it until the year of jubilee, in the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property (Lev. 25:23-28).

And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him; as a stranger and a sojourner he shall live with you. take no interest from him or increase, but fear your God; that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

When, then, your countryman becomes so impoverished beside you that he sells you his services, do not make him work as a slave. Rather, let him be like a hired servant or like your tenant, working with you until the jubilee year, when he, together with his children, shall be released from your service and return to his kindred and to the property of his ancestors. (Lev. 25:35-41).

No matter what misfortune or failure had occurred in their lives, in the jubilee year they were to be restored to full members of the community and their ancestral property restored.

While scholars doubt that this kind of restoration of the jubilee ever took place in actual fact, nevertheless it was contained in the law and it defined the kind of justice that was at the heart of the definition of the People of God. The concept of the Jubilee Year expressed the care and concern that God had for all of his people. It also expressed the religious insight that all the earth belongs to God and that human beings are the stewards of creation, not its owners.

In a community committed to the will of God, those dispossessed of their land and/or without adequate means of support could never be taken for granted. All in the community had a right to life and the means to sustain it, especially the widows, orphans and strangers in their midst. The justice of God demanded it. To this day, Catholic social teaching declares that no one has an absolute right to property -- the right of an individual to own property must always be balanced with the common good.

The Prophets - It was the role of the prophets to ensure that the Hebrews did not forget their responsibilities under the Law. For Isaiah and Amos, a true religious response to God did not consist in empty religious rituals, but in a life of justice and a concern for all

the people of God. As the prophet Isaiah said:

Is this the manner of fasting I wish,
of keeping a day of penance;
That a man bow his head like a reed,
and lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Do you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
This, rather, is the fasting that I wish:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke;
Setting free the oppressed,
breaking every yoke;
Sharing your bread with the hungry,
sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;
Clothing the naked when you see them,
and not turning your back on your own.

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly be healed;
Your vindication shall go before you,
and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer,
you shall cry for help, and he will say: Here I am! (Isaiah 58:5-9)

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your
solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings
and cereal offerings, I will not accept them,
and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an everflowing stream (Amos 5:21-24).

For the prophets, there is no true religion without justice. Unlike the pagan gods, the Hebrew God did not have to be appeased with sacrifices, the Hebrew God was to be imitated. The Hebrew God was a God of justice. If religious practices did not transform their lives into an imitation of the just God, these practices were in vain.

Morality and the New Testament

The Teachings of Jesus - Jesus did not speak of performing correct religious rituals and

like Isaiah and Joel He criticized those of the Pharisees whose lives were focused on religious rituals, but not on justice. He healed the sick and invited sinners and outcasts into his presence at table - thus establishing peace (right relationships) with those on the margins of society

The Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus. An ideal community living the love of God is what Jesus spoke of in announcing the Kingdom of God. It envisioned a community totally given over to the will of God and thus transformed by God into a truly human community living in peace, as intended by Him from creation.

The Kingdom was like the ideal state of existence as expressed in the Genesis story where mankind and all creation lived in peace -- in right relationship with one another. The vision of the Kingdom was a vision of what the world would be like if God sat on the throne as emperor of the world.

The God of the Hebrews created mankind to live in peace, but human sin would not allow this peaceful state to exist. Jesus gave hope that by the power of God the Kingdom could come, sin would be overcome and peace would be restored. Those who would be invited into this Kingdom were not those who simply performed certain religious rituals, but those who responded to the needs of the poor and the outcast with whom Jesus identified Himself. And those who rejected the needy, rejected Jesus and thus were rejected from the Kingdom.

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep on his right hand, but the goats at the left.

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me'.

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?'

And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' (Mt. 25:31-40)

Time and time again, Jesus warned the rich that if they could not share their wealth, they would not enter the Kingdom. He also told his disciples that if they were to be his

followers, they must be servants of one another. Like the old prophets, Jesus called for a kingdom of justice, established by the power of a just God through the transformation of the lives of people. To follow Jesus was and is to promote justice.

A Final Note

In our next section we will speak of the rights and duties of human beings toward themselves and others based on natural law through the use of human reason. The basis of these rights and duties is the assumption that each and every human being has equal dignity - a dignity that cannot be given up or taken away. However, on what basis do we make that assumption? Here our faith in God makes a fundamental contribution. In the theistic perspective, human dignity is grounded in the belief that all human beings are created in the image of God (*imago dei*). It is in this creative act that all human receive their dignity.

It has been convincingly argued (see Michael J. Perry *Human Rights*) that there is no “secular equivalent” on which to ground human dignity. Thus the natural law assumption of the dignity of all human beings ultimately has a religious or theistic basis.

Reason and Morality

Natural Law Theory - Since the time of St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, Catholic moral teaching has relied heavily on the theory of natural law. Coming from the Greeks, through the Romans and the comments of St. Paul, natural law theory is based on the presumption that human nature is in some sense normative for human action.

The natural laws of human nature are understood as knowable to the unassisted human mind, that is, to the human mind which does not necessarily reference divine revelation as its source of moral wisdom. Thus, natural law theory offers two secular components which can serve as adequate tools in the search for an objective, universal human morality. These components are: 1) human nature and 2) human reason.

Those committed to a natural law tradition assume the possibility that reasonable people can discover together what it means to be human and what moral principles need to be adopted by individuals and society so that human life can flourish. This assumes that we share a common human nature and that through a rational process we can discover what constitutes our nature and what are some of the necessary social circumstances, (ethical consensus and laws), that will enable our natures to grow and flower.

The natural law is not envisioned as some kind of ethical code existing above and beyond human experience and imposed on humans and their societies from the outside. It is not an extrinsic set of laws or ethical principles.

Natural law is not a theoretical knowledge of propositions; ...Our discovery of the natural law occurs by way of reflection upon our natures

and then by discovery of the necessary means for achieving or constituting the goods of our natures. (*Narrative of the Natural Law* - Pamela Hall p.37)

That the natural law must be discovered implies that the employment of the natural law in moral discourse is a *rational process*. *Rational* establishes that the ground for discussion is human reason, something human beings share in common. *Process* means that there is an element of discovery in understanding the natural law. *It is not simply a process of referencing a set of immutable principles, but a discovery of "what works" for human beings in the particular circumstances of their individual and social lives*

And so, in the Catholic tradition, to go against the natural law is to act against the universal human good. It is important to note that this type of morality is viewed as intrinsic, not extrinsic. It pertains to internal laws of our nature and not to laws imposed from the outside by either divine or human authority. So it is considered possible that through a rational examination of human nature, we can come to understand what is good for us, what works for us, so that we can in turn determine what social structures (including laws) will help us attain our individual and collective human good.

Moral Acts - The Consequences - If natural law is intrinsic to each individual and to society as a whole, what are the consequences not following the natural law? In general, the consequences of human moral acts are of two kinds - objective and subjective or external and internal.

Objective (external) Moral Consequences

For example, suppose someone chooses to steal fifty dollars from the next door neighbor. First, there is the objective fact that the neighbor is out fifty dollars. Objectively or externally this neighbor has been harmed and in a lesser, but real sense, the human community has also been injured. Because of this act of stealing the human community is a little less perfect. We all know that human communities work best when citizens can trust that other citizens will respect their property. Stealing breeds fear and mistrust thereby weakening the ties that enable communities to live in peace and security - arguably an ideal condition for the development of authentic humanity.

Admittedly, it is difficult to get a feel for the fact that the human community could be injured by one act of theft. In the same way it is difficult see how one vote makes any difference in a national election, (especially if you are a Democrat in Kansas). However, elections are in fact determined one vote at a time. Similarly, every act of kindness makes the world a better place and every act of cruelty or injustice diminishes the entire human community. It has been rightly observed that when the human rights of a single individual are violated by unjust laws, the rights of all individuals are put in jeopardy.

In our example above, it is also true that the objective damage done to individuals and the human community is significant and cannot be healed simply by restoring the fifty dollars which was stolen. It takes time to restore trust. Furthermore, good and evil ripple

out into the human community and individuals lose the ability to control their effects.

Subjective (internal) Moral Consequences

In the above example, when someone steals fifty dollars, in addition to the objective, external consequences noted above, there is also a major subjective consequence: one has become a thief. This is a serious, often overlooked subjective consequence.

We are all in the process of becoming - becoming someone. Our actions reflect our moral choices and our moral choices play a significant role in determining what kind of a person we will become. In the first act of theft a person is on their way to becoming a thief. If you have ever stolen something you may remember that this "first time" was somewhat traumatic - what if I get caught, etc. Through repeated acts of theft, however, one can become fairly nonchalant about the matter. For some high school students ripping off the convenience store is more of an art than a vice. Finally, some people reach the stage where they have no remorse and we can truly say that a person has lost his or her conscience.

The obvious point is that through our ethical choices we either become more or less authentically human. To repeat, it is not simply that someone committed an act of theft - that is important - but it is equally important that by that act of theft *a person has become a thief*. A strong case can certainly be made that we are not at our best (not authentically human) when thievery has become our way of life. Indeed, we become what we do.

Conscience

The Formation of Conscience

If it is true that we must follow our conscience, even an erroneous conscience, then it is important that we form our consciences correctly. To make bad decisions, even with a good intention, will by definition bring harm to ourselves, others, and the world. Bad decisions lead to death, not life. Therefore we need to understand what we mean by conscience and explore how to form a good conscience.

1) What is the nature of conscience?

Conscience is not a "small voice" which is evoked by some mysterious in-built mechanism that indicates what actions are right or wrong. It is not our "super-ego" as Freud proposed. Conscience is a *judgment* based on information we have gathered in attempt to evaluate which actions are right or wrong. Conscience is a function of our intelligence, not simply our feelings. While the *data* upon which our judgments are made may indeed be in large part the unconscious or conscious value judgments which we inherit from our family or culture, the *act of judgment* is not.

A judgment of conscience can only be made by the person who owns and utters it. It is a

personal act of judgment. Thus, no one can claim possession of another's conscience. There is no "third agent" or Jiminy Cricket who tells us what to do. No state or church can hold dominion over an individual's conscience. Only my own moral judgment is my conscience.

So does that mean that we can do whatever we please as long as we have good intentions? Certainly not, because with or without good intentions the evil we do will surely destroy us and others. Therefore, we all have a profound, life or death, obligation to inform our conscience from the best sources available. We need to discern God's creative will for us as it applies to our daily lives.

2) What sources are available to help form our conscience?

Perhaps we can define the formation of conscience as: a life-long search to find God's creative purposes for us in the concrete situations of our everyday life. This is no easy task. There are many instances when there are no immediate, clear cut answers to our moral questions. For example: Is it time to put my mother into a nursing home? Should I separate from my abusive husband? Should I enlist in the army? Should I tell my patient she is dying? Should I put my out-of-wedlock child up for adoption? What are my obligations to the poor? What is a just wage for my employees? How should I vote?

Because of the unique circumstances of each human life, many important moral decisions must be made without any clear direction. However, we must do the best that we can to do good and avoid evil in all circumstances. But what does this mean? It means that insofar as is possible we must consult all the sources we have available to help us make good moral decisions. There is a great deal at stake, because our lives and the lives of others are often profoundly affected by our moral decisions.

What, then, are specific sources that we can consult to help form our conscience? First of all, we do not come into any situation with a blank slate. We already have some set of values. We have been raised in a community - family, friends, church - and most communities have some sort of "moral tradition" and this tradition has transmitted, directly or indirectly, some of its values to us in the process of growing up.

Given this "training" in many of the daily moral decisions we make, we do so instinctively. For example, if a clerk at a store gives us too much change, we "automatically" give it back. If we see someone injured in an accident, without a second thought we run to their aid. We do not cheat on our income taxes. We do not lie. However, in difficult cases like the ones cited above where many conflicting and complex values are involved, we need help. Where can we find help? Here are some sources:

Our own sense of right and wrong - This is our first and sometimes our best source because it includes not only the values of our "moral community" and our own moral wisdom, but also our unique understanding of the special circumstances in which we must make this particular moral judgment. However, in times of crisis we must be

careful, because our good moral sense can be clouded or distorted by fear, ignorance, propaganda, addiction, psychological distress, or the universal tendency we have to “rationalize” our actions as opposed to facing the truth. We often hear it said: “I knew better, but I did it anyway.”

A good listener - friend or counselor - Whether this person be a relative, good friend, our priest or professional counselor, a good listener can help us sort out some of the possible distortions of our decision making, which we just mentioned. It is not so much that we need someone to tell us what to do, we need someone to lead us in a process of making a good decision.

The Scriptures - This is not simply consulting the Old Testament for a list of the Ten Commandments or reviewing the command of Jesus to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. This we already know. Nor it is reasonable to expect to find concrete answers to specific questions in the Scriptures. But in reading the New Testament we can get a “sense” of how Jesus lived and what he taught by word and example. We can begin to take on the “mind” of Jesus as St. Paul spoke about. This is not something that can be accomplished by simply rushing to the Scriptures in times of need, but rather it is a life long process making the reading of Scripture a part of our life.

The Church - Certainly the collective wisdom of the Church provides an invaluable guide. It is part of the mission of the Church through its bishops and moral theologians to examine the moral issues that face us which are often not directly addressed by the Scriptures - paying a just wage, participation in a war, issues of death and dying, our responsibilities as citizens, the death penalty, etc..

The official teaching authority in the Church express its moral teaching in a variety of ways including papal encyclicals, council documents, and in other formal formats such as speeches from the pope and various moral directives and teachings from bishops’ conferences. There are also official Catechisms. In addition, we have a vast collection of books and articles from prominent Catholic moral theologians on every moral topic imaginable.

Consulting “good people” - This is different from consulting a good listener or a counselor. There are certain people we know who seem to make good judgments in their lives. They have been successful as human beings and have raised their children well. They are the “wise men and women” in our midst. They have proven to be people of sound judgment and we feel that we can trust them to give us good advice.

Personal prayer - When we are faced with difficult moral decisions, making time for personal prayer and meditation can give the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work within us. All the baptized are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. We cannot expect some “voice from heaven” or a personal revelation, but by placing ourselves in the presence of the Spirit, we can allow the Spirit to work within us so that we might make the best decisions possible.

Conscience - Must it be followed?

In a word - yes. While we are certainly under grave obligation to inform our conscience by searching as best we can for the moral truth about decisions facing us, in the end it is left to us as individuals to decide. What if, objectively speaking, we have done our best, but still, unknown to us, we have an erroneous conscience? Answer: we must follow it. St. Thomas pointed out that if in good conscience we judge that we must leave the Catholic Church, then leave it we must.

Conscience represents our best judgment about a moral matter in our lives. We may be wrong, but we can only do our best. The Constitution on the Church refers to conscience as a person's "most secret core and sanctuary" where one is "alone with God". For us as individuals, conscience is our final conviction about what is true and we must live by it lest we betray ourselves. No one, not the Church or God can force us to act contrary to our conscience. Not to follow our conscience would be itself sinful, because it would violate our most basic moral principle - to do good and avoid evil. Morally, we must follow our conscience.

For those raised in the Catholic tradition such a statements might sound a bit odd. What about the official positions of the Church? What if we disagree with official positions on moral issues? Is not the Church, directed by the Holy Spirit, our unfailing guide? As faithful Catholics, are we not obligated to form our consciences according to the teachings of the Church?

Certainly, in the case of an infallible moral pronouncement, full consent must be given, however it seems that the Church has never spoken infallibly on the matter of morals. But what of non-infallible teachings? Certainly, we must take them very seriously. In most cases we can assume the Spirit of truth guiding the Church in such statements. However, it is important to note what the Fathers of Vatican II said about this matter.

In the first draft of the *Declaration of Religious Freedom*, in paragraph 14, the text read: "In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought to form their consciences *according to* the teaching of the church". However, the bishops of the Council rejected the phrase "according to" and changed the text to read: "*ought carefully to attend to* the sacred and certain doctrine of the church" The phrase "according to" was rejected as being too restrictive.

In making this change the Council affirmed the primacy of individual conscience. While Catholics must pay careful and reverent attention to the teachings of the Church, these teachings are not the only source available for moral wisdom nor can they be expected to encompass every possible set of circumstance and thus settle every concrete moral issue . In the final analysis, Catholics are asked to give "presumptive authority" to official moral teachings, but in certain moral decisions these teaching *alone* may not settle the case.

Richard Gula S.S., in his excellent book *Reason Informed by Faith* sums up the current position in this way:

The strong preference for the magisterial teaching guards against following cultural trends or special interest groups. It favors relying on the accumulated wisdom which the magisterium is able to articulate by drawing upon the expertise of a broad base of experience.

Although no external authority can ever replace conscience, conscience cannot be properly formed without the help of authority. The tension between conscience and authority will always be with us. Because we know how easy it is to deceive ourselves, and because we give at least a presumption in favor of authority, we sometimes take for granted that the authority is automatically right and any contrary opinion is automatically wrong. This need not be so. Both authority and conscience are complementary aspects of the search for what is morally true, right, and good. (p.161)