Moral Dilemmas for Modern People

Teacher Background

In the 2004 United States Presidential election campaign and the Australian Federal election, the issue of the threat to "traditional morality" by forces in modern society became a focal issue for several widely disparate political and religious groups. What is of interest in both countries has been the interpretation of "traditional moral values". Conservative Christian groups and the political right saw the moral dilemmas for modern society centring around issues of sexual morality and medical bio-ethics. Thus, gay marriage, legal rights of homosexuals, abortion, pornography, stem cell research and euthanasia were held up as examples of the decline of moral values. Centre and left-wing political parties and more moderate Christian groups also sought a return to moral values. But they identified the frequent abandonment of the principle of telling the truth by government and business; the inability to admit error; illegal and immoral warfare and invasion of other countries; the increasing gap between rich and poor in two of the richest nations on earth; the erosion of access to justice and the legal system; the loss of individual freedom under the guise of the "politics of terror"; environmental destruction; a hardening of attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers; a growing sense of selfishness and material greed and increasing violence in everyday life as signs of a breakdown of individual and social morality.

In 1993, Pope John Paul II published the encyclical Veritatis Splendour (The Splendour of the Truth) in which he sought to reflect on the whole of the Church’s moral teaching, with the precise goal of recalling certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine which, in the present circumstances, risk being distorted or denied. The Pope felt it necessary to do this because of what he saw happening within the Christian community itself, namely:

the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural, religious and even properly theological nature, with regard to the Church’s moral teachings. It is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions. At the root of these presuppositions is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth. Thus the traditional doctrine regarding the natural law and the universality and the permanent validity of its precepts, is rejected; certain of the Church’s moral teachings are found simply unacceptable; and the Magisterium itself is considered capable of intervening in matters of morality only in order to "exhort consciences" and to "propose values", in the light of which each individual will independently make his or her decisions and life choices.

The crisis faced by modern Christians, according to the Pope, is not so much a range of new and previously unknown moral dilemmas, but rather a confusion about freedom, conscience and the law, a loss of confidence in the moral laws of the Church itself and the authority of the Church to set down guidelines, laws and directives in matters of morality.

In an age of individualism, with its emphasis on democratic rights and individual freedom, Christians living in the modern world are torn between the rights and freedoms they have as citizens of the world and the call to obedience to God’s laws and Church teaching by the hierarchy of the Church. The Pope identified the problem as:

The question is asked: do the commandments of God, which are written on the human heart and are part of the Covenant, really have the capacity to clarify the daily decisions of individuals and entire societies? Is it possible to obey God and thus love God and neighbour, without respecting these
commandments in all circumstances? Also, an opinion is frequently heard which questions the intrinsic and unbreakable bond between faith and morality, as if membership in the Church and her internal unity were to be decided on the basis of faith alone, while in the sphere of morality a pluralism of opinions and of kinds of behaviour could be tolerated, these being left to the judgment of the individual subjective conscience or to the diversity of social and cultural contexts.

The Pope offers the following solution for modern Christians faced with the moral dilemmas of this age: (Note: Out of respect for the equality of all people, gender-based pronouns have been replaced with inclusive language wherever possible).

- People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil.
- The statement that "There is only one who is good" thus brings us back to the "first tablet" of the commandments, which calls us to acknowledge God as the one Lord of all and to worship God alone for God’s infinite holiness (cf. Ex 20:2-11). The good is belonging to God, obeying God, walking humbly with God in doing justice and in loving kindness (cf. Mic 6:8).
- A close connection is made between eternal life and obedience to God’s commandments: God’s commandments show humans the path of life and they lead to it. From the very lips of Jesus, the new Moses, humanity is once again given the commandments of the Decalogue.

The commandments of which Jesus reminds the young man are meant to safeguard the good of the person, the image of God, by protecting that person’s goods. "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness" are moral rules formulated in terms of prohibitions. These negative precepts express with particular force the ever urgent need to protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage, private property, truthfulness and people’s good names.

The commandments thus represent the basic condition for love of neighbour; at the same time they are the proof of that love. They are the first necessary step on the journey towards freedom, its starting-point.

- Both the Old and the New Testaments explicitly affirm that without love of neighbour, made concrete in keeping the commandments, genuine love for God is not possible.
- The moral prescriptions which God imparted in the Old Covenant, and which attained their perfection in the New and Eternal Covenant in the very person of the Son of God made human, must be faithfully kept and continually put into practice in the various different cultures throughout the course of history.
- The human issues most frequently debated and differently resolved in contemporary moral reflection are all closely related, albeit in various ways, to a crucial issue: human freedom. Certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values.
- Revelation teaches that the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to humanity but to God alone. In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfilment precisely in the acceptance of that law. God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for humans, and by virtue of God’s very love proposes this good to humans in the commandments.
- Humanity is able to recognise good and evil thanks to that discernment of good from evil which they themselves carry out by their reason, in particular by their reason enlightened by Divine Revelation and by faith, through the law which God gave to the Chosen People, beginning with the commandments on Sinai.
In order to perfect themselves in his specific order, individuals must do good and avoid evil, be concerned for the transmission and preservation of life, refine and develop the riches of the material world, cultivate social life, seek truth, practise good and contemplate beauty.

(Regarding conscience) The importance of this interior dialogue of humans with themselves can never be adequately appreciated. But it is also a dialogue of humans with God, the author of the law, the primordial image and final end of humans.

Thus, for the Pope, the moral dilemmas faced by modern people are the same as faced by all people of all ages. And, as indicated by the Biblical record, the greatest challenge is for humans to acknowledge that God is the source of all wisdom and justice and it is in obedience to God’s laws, contained in the Decalogue and its fulfilment as preached by Jesus, that modern people will develop an informed conscience.

Humanity’s freedom lies in our capacity to choose or reject God’s dream for human existence and living, which is preserved in Revelation and Church teaching. Veritatis Splendor can be accessed at: www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor_en.html.