Church Moral Teaching

Teacher Background

Catholic Moral Theology
It is not easy to summarise accurately the complex history and different models of the Christian moral life currently represented under the broad heading of Catholic moral theology. Moral theology, like other theology is never static: faith seeking understanding of the human condition continues to do so in response to every age with its accompanying moral challenges. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, (Society of St Paul, Homebush NSW, 1994), Part 3 contains the current official moral teaching of the Church.

The following simplified summary from McBrien, R.P., Catholicism, (North Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove, 1994) is helpful for the lay reader. At times it has had to be significantly simplified. For more detail, or if clarification is needed, the text itself should be consulted.

A Brief History of Moral Theology

- Began with the Fathers of the Church discussing specific pastoral moral issues. St Augustine (d. 430) developed this most. The moral disposition of the heart is decisive.
- Developed in the formation of the “penitential books” of the 6th-11th centuries- so priests could give specific penances for particular sins. Christian life became one of avoiding sin. Emphasis was placed increasingly on the nature of the individual moral act, apart from the larger context of one’s whole existence.
- Became systematised in the writings of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, using Aristotle’s virtues and God as the centre of existence.
- In the 14th and 15th centuries, individualism and ethical legalism emerged. A moral minimalism emerged - “What am I absolutely required to do, as a bare moral minimum?” Faith and love became secondary to stating precisely the demands of justice.
- Moral theology came into existence as a separate discipline at the end of the 16th century, again for use in confessional situations. The Council of Trent decreed that Catholics must receive the sacrament of penance once a year. Always, the concern of the manuals was to determine if the penitent had sinned.
- The 17th to 20th centuries saw the emergence of manuals of moral theology with a heavy emphasis on casuistry- an act-centred approach. Stress was placed on obedience to law: divine law, natural law and human law. The “good” is what law commands. (Deontological approach)

- Vatican II (1962-5) saw the development of:
  - a life-centred approach, with the person not only as a moral agent, but as a subject;
  - a strong dependence on scripture and all theology;
  - an emphasis on the total Christian life;
  - a move from classicism to historical consciousness;
  - ecumenism with other Christian denominations and religions;
  - a critical openness to dialogue with contemporary philosophical ethics;
  - a more positive appreciation of the human and empirical sciences; and
  - a strong emphasis on the social mission of the church.

Catholic Moral Theology:

- Is divided into general moral theology and special moral theology with particular areas of concern- e.g. sexual morality, bioethical morality, social justice, eco-justice.
Finds wisdom in scripture, tradition, hierarchical Church teaching and human reason. The latter two constitute distinctive Catholic emphases.

Looks to the magisterium to interpret the teaching of Jesus for and to guide members of the Church in moral and religious matters.

Rejects any notion of the function or scope of the authority of the magisterium as being to make decisions for others. Every person has the duty and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious, in order that they may with prudence form for themselves right and true judgements of conscience, with the use of all suitable means. (Vatican II)

Has not been the subject of any ex cathedra statements by the Pope.

Acknowledges that (i) there can be no rules which will cover every situation and (ii) there are no answers which will resolve all moral dilemmas.

Acknowledges that each individual is and must be free to decide moral matters according to his or her own conscience.

Views the “right” of freedom of conscience as a “duty” as well - the individual Catholic must have an informed conscience - with the use of all suitable means.

Draws its uniqueness from an intentionality and motivation to love as Jesus loved.

Since medieval times, has insisted on the evaluation of three sources: the object, the end and the circumstances.

The final sign of a good decision of conscience is peace of mind.

**Natural Law**

The Catholic Church teaches that the church and individual Christians derive their moral wisdom and knowledge from a number of sources. The presence and will of God are available in three created realities - sacramentality, mediation and communion. The second Vatican Council insists that faith, grace and the gospel must decisively affect and shape our daily lives, but it also affirms the existence of another source of moral guidance - human reason. The church teaches that human reason, reflecting on human nature and human experience, can arrive at a true moral wisdom and knowledge that holds not only for Christians but for all people (mediation). The term given to this approach is natural law. It is an approach, Catholics contend, that is biblically grounded in the testimony of St Paul (Romans 2:14-16). According to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, we discover the natural law in the depths of our conscience. It is a law which we do not impose on ourselves, yet it holds us to obedience. It summons us to love the good and avoid what is evil. It is written in the human heart by God.

**Catholic Moral Decision Making**

The greatest assistance for one’s conscience is the gift of discernment. It presupposes the following qualities:

- Knowledge of moral principles
- Experience and the ability to profit from it
- An ability to learn from others
- An ability to make rational inferences
- Inventiveness and creativity, vision & foresight
- An ability to see and weigh circumstances
- An ability to anticipate and weigh circumstances
- An ability to anticipate obstacles and plan to surmount them
An ability to decide in the light of the preceding.

**Virtues and Sin**

The Seven “Heavenly Virtues” consist of the three Theological Virtues and four Cardinal Virtues.

**The Theological Virtues: (Faith, Hope, and Charity)**

1. Faith is concerned about things *revealed* by God which exceed the ability of human reason to grasp. Faith is a gift, a supernatural virtue that people cannot acquire naturally on their own initiative.
2. The supernatural virtue of hope (a gift as well) looks expectantly to the future. Through the virtue of hope, a person awaits the fulfilment of the promises of God.
3. The most important of the virtues and the one most important for the development of the human person, is the virtue of charity. Charity is the love of God *under the aspect of friendship*. That is why human friendship is the best way of explaining humanity's relationship to God brought about through charity.

**The Cardinal Virtues**

The four cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.

1. **Prudence**
   Prudence makes it possible for people to choose that act which *here and now* best helps them to move in the direction of their final end. The parts of prudence include reasoning, understanding, circumspection, foresight, docility, caution, and memory. But the entire process of prudence has its source in understanding. Without understanding human nature and the fundamental precepts of natural law, prudence is not possible.

2. **Justice**
   Justice is the virtue that perfects the will. Unless all people are by nature equal before God, there is no natural requirement on humanity’s part to be just. Justice regulates the voluntary actions whereby one person is brought into contact with another. Justice is divided into distributive, commutative (particular) and legal (general) justice.

3. **Fortitude**
   Fortitude is a general virtue in that it implies a certain firmness of mind, which is necessary for the practice of any of the virtues. Fortitude is the virtue that enables us to curb our fears and to moderate our daring. It is the virtue that binds the will to the good of reason in the face of the greatest evils.

4. **Temperance**
   Temperance is principally, but not solely, concerned with the pleasures of food and drink and about sexual pleasures - those pleasures connected with the preservation of human life. The use of such pleasurable things must be judged according to the needs of this life. This calls for prudence, above all.

**The Seven Deadly Sins**

1. Pride is excessive belief in one’s own abilities that interferes with the individual’s recognition of the grace of God. It has been called the sin from which all others arise. Pride is also known as Vanity.
2. Envy is the desire for others' traits, status, abilities, or situation.
3. Gluttony is an inordinate desire to consume more than that which one requires.
4. Lust is an inordinate craving for the pleasures of the body.
5. Anger is manifested in the individual who spurns love and opts instead for fury. It is also known as Wrath.
6. Covetousness is the desire for material wealth or gain, ignoring the realm of the spiritual. It is also called Greed.
7. Slothfulness is the avoidance of physical or spiritual work.

Models of the Christian Moral Life
There are currently three different models of the Christian moral life: the deontological (concerned with laws and obligations); the teleological (concerned with ends); and the relational (concerned with relationships with God, neighbour, world and self).

The following models of Christian Moral decision-making are used to a greater or lesser extent in Christian communities all over the world. Many local and cultural factors influence which models dominate Christian moral thinking in any given community. While this is also true for the Catholic tradition, some models are emphasised over others at different times, by different Popes and by different traditions within the Church.

1. **Teleological Model**
   This is a “What’s best in the end for most people” model. It views Christian moral life in terms of the goal or end (telos) to be achieved—namely, eternal union with God. Something is good if it leads to the achievement of the goal; evil if it prevents one from achieving it. However, in the complexity of human, historical existence, one must distinguish the ultimate goal from intermediate and subordinate goals. Thomas Aquinas is a classic exponent of this theory. It comes from Aristotle’s world-view and uses the Natural Law theory. Much of the thinking used in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* would be influenced by this model.

2. **Deontological Model**
   This is a “Stick to the letter of the law” model. This model views Christian moral life primarily in terms of duty (deon), law or obligation. The philosopher Immanuel Kant was its greatest exponent. This is the basis of popular Christian piety, which makes the Ten Commandments the basis of Christian life. Popular manuals of moral theology used this model, stressing law and conscience. It is most associated with pre-Vatican II Moral thinking. (See [http://ethics.sandiego.edu/theories/kant](http://ethics.sandiego.edu/theories/kant) for further information.)

3. **Relational Model**
   This is a “Weighing up all the relationships and factors” model. It views the Christian moral life primarily in terms of the Christian’s multiple relations with God, neighbour, world and self. Law is covenant, a relationship. Confession of the deontological approach becomes reconciliation in the relational model. The relational model relies on a moral approach called Proportionalism. Proportionalism is an attempt to find a middle ground between situational ethics and the legalistic, deontological approach. It uses proportionate reason to determine concretely and objectively the rightness or wrongness of acts and the various exceptions to the norms. It began as a response to a revision of the principle of double effect and the doctrine of intrinsic moral evil. (The *principle of double effect* is engaged when two effects follow an essentially good, or at least morally neutral act—one good and one evil. This model argues that no moral judgement can be made without consideration of all the circumstances. Because the human act is a structural unity, all aspects of the act have to be considered together, not in isolation from the others. This model is promoted by Catholic revisionist theologians. It has been criticised by more traditional theologians, including Pope John Paul II, but theologians advocating proportionalism claim that criticism of proportionalism is based on a misunderstanding of its theory.)

Conscience
Conscience serves different purposes according to the different models of moral reasoning.
- In the deontological model conscience keeps before us the demands of God’s law.
- In the teleological model conscience keeps before us our ultimate end.
In the relational model, conscience keeps before us our relationships with God, neighbour, world and self.