CATHOLIC MORAL TEACHING

A BASIC THUMBNAIL SKETCH OF WHAT CATHOLICS SAY IS MORAL AND WHY STARTS WITH THE BOTTOM LINE OF:

1. Every person has value because they are made by God.
2. The larger community has a responsibility to the vulnerable.

THE SOURCES OF CATHOLIC BELIEFS ABOUT WHAT IS MORAL:

1. THE BIBLE
   - For Catholics, the Bible is considered to be “inspired by the Holy Spirit” and “without error.”
   - Catholics would say that all of the canonical Scriptures have come from God in a way that is distinctive from the fact that all things have been created by God or that gifted poets are said to be “inspired.”
   - Catholics would say that the Scriptures are without error, in a different way than some Fundamentalist Christian churches might. For a Catholic, the “inerrancy” of scripture would apply to the religious truths in the scriptures for the sake of our salvation, not every single detail. So, if the Bible said that Creation happened in 6 days, a Catholic could be open to the idea that “a day” for God might be much longer than 24 hours, etc. But the religious truths would not be questioned (that God did create everything.)
   - WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES THAT AFFECTS CATHOLIC MORALITY:
     - Every person is “made in the image of God” and so worthy of love and respect. So too, all creation is to be treated as a gift and respected.
     - The Bible tells us to avoid certain sins (Ten commandments of Ex 20:1-17.)
     - And the Bible also says that we NEED TO HELP OTHERS WHO ARE IN TROUBLE. So, the Bible tells us to “Protect widows and orphans” (or the weak) – Ez 22:22.
     - Christians model their lives on what Christ did and said. So reading the Bible is central to having a CHRISTIAN MORALITY. Jesus said for us to love God and neighbor (Luke 10:27); and Christ promised us that the Holy Spirit would help us to love God and neighbor. (Jn 14:26).

2. TRADITION (TEACHING OF THE CHURCH)
   - Catholics would say that the Holy Spirit has never stopped working in our midst, so we would see that the Holy Spirit can speak through the Church.
   - Catholics would say that Jesus did not spell out every answer to every moral problem, but in the tradition of the Church, his teaching can be approached in a living and vital way precisely because Jesus is with the believing community in Spirit (Mt 28:20.) And Jesus:
     1. Chose the first leaders of the Church,
     2. Promised the Holy Spirit would be with his Church for all time (and saying that the gates of hell would never prevail against his Church)
     3. And sent the Holy Spirit to all the believers when they were gathered in one place at Pentecost,
     4. Emphasized the importance of the community of faith/the church in many aspects of his ministry and message.
     5. The Catholic Church, therefore, is not a community that bases all of its beliefs only on the Bible. For Catholics, Tradition and the Bible go together.
     6. A document from the Second Vatican Council (1958-1965) called “The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” says: Sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of
the Church.... are all so linked and joined together that one cannot stand up without the others”. (no.10)

7. There are different levels of importance to different Church teachings:
   1. The most important teachings are those from the Church Councils. There have been many councils in the history of the Church. The first is recorded in the Bible: The Council of Jerusalem.
   2. The teaching of the Holy Father: The Pope has a special role in being a symbol of unity in the Catholic Church.
      1. Papal Infallibility: Promulgated at the First Vatican Council (1869-70). This teaching says that the Pope may issue teachings that are considered infallible. But, the Pope may not issue any infallible teaching that is not already believed by the people of the Church. to in belief by the faithful of the Church. So, in the one time since the 1870’s that the has declared something “infallibly,” in 1950, that Mary body went to heaven, the pope first sent out letters to all the bishops in the world asking if the Catholics in their dioceses already believed this teaching.
   3. The Magisterium: The teaching offices of the Church. There are many persons who work in Rome and head offices which deal with different issues involving liturgy, modern moral questions (like cloning), etc. These offices produced The Catechism of the Catholic Church.
   4. The “Catechism” was the effort by the Church to produce a book that would outline Church teaching for all in the Universal Church.
   5. Theologians and scholars: there are many important thinkers in the history of the Church who have contributed to what is actually decided at the Councils of the Church, etc. There are issues that are dealt with over time and involve ongoing discussion. Sometimes these discussions take a while to resolve. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, whose writings are now considered to be the very important to the Church, once had his works banned by the Church during his lifetime.
   6. Everybody: You and I are called to bring our own prayers and ideas into the life of the Church. The Church is not only a matter of the Holy Spirit telling the leaders of our Church what to do. Indeed, the history of the Church is filled with initiatives and reforms that have come from regular individuals like you and me. There have been many examples of the Holy Spirit working through the People of God (that’s you and me) through the centuries. Indeed, as was written in the Vatican II documents, in “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (“Lumen Gentium”) #37:
      By reason of the knowledge, competence or pre-eminence which they have the laity are empowered – indeed sometimes obliged – to manifest their opinion on those things which pertain to the good of the Church....

3. NATURAL LAW
   • Catholics look at God’s Creation to tell us of God’s intentions.

MAKING A MORAL DECISION AS A CATHOLIC:

PERSONAL CONSCIENCE: Using the guides of Scripture, Tradition and Natural Law, Catholics are then called to have a “formed and informed conscience” as they make their moral decisions.
   • A “formed and informed” conscience would be one where the Catholic truly struggled to understand what the Church was teaching and why, over time.
   • But there is, for Catholics, an element of the personal in making a moral decision: St. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest Moral theologian of the Middle Ages, said that the personal
conscience is central to the moral decision-making of Christians. But this must be a “formed and informed” conscience: That is, we need to really understand and reflect upon what our faith is telling us. We can’t just dismiss the Bible, Church, etc. but take them seriously, and not only take seriously the mores of our own generation and time.

- But every Catholic struggles with at least one issue of Catholic moral teaching. If that happens, we do try to not just “dismiss” the Church, but, on the other hand, we may disagree and that doesn’t mean we should leave the Church or are bad people. BUT, Catholics always try to stay OPEN to what the Church teaches on each issue.

This means that we try to learn what the Church teaches and to better understand and accept why the Church teaches: To give assent to the teachings of the Church in that we keep trying to better understand/struggle with those teachings in our lives, never dismissing them 100%.

**Examples:**

**DEATH PENALTY:**

The Church’s position is this: That unless we are in a “Wild West” situation where there is no chance for organized government to contain or incarcerate a dangerous person, then the government doesn’t kill people.

But what if you’re a Catholic and you strongly disagree? What if you work at the “death row” jail and help to execute people? What is a Catholic to do? Could you still go to communion and be a full member of the Church?

*But a person in disagreement with Church teaching would not flaunt their opposition (by, for instance, holding a sign against Church teaching at church while in line for communion.)*

**SOLDIERS OVERSEAS:** Cynthia and Bob are both working for the military overseas and they wonder about some of the activities their jobs lead them into versus their Christian faith.

The Church would hold any military action to the scrutiny of “The Just War Theory”. Here are some criteria of this theory, developed by the Church over the centuries: 1. War must be winnable. 2. War must be preceded by every effort to attain same objectives peacefully. 3. All precautions must be taken to avoid the killing of innocent human life. 4. War should not be out of proportion to the situation being responded to through conflict.

**END OF LIFE ISSUE:** George is very, very sick. He is also in great pain. His family wants to give him all the pain medication he wants even if his life is shortened as a result. Is this okay?

Yes. This situation helps us to illustrate the Catholic idea that if a good is being accomplished by an action, then sometimes another result (shortened life) is acceptable.

Catechism, 2279: …The use of painkillers to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if death is not willed as either an end or a means….

Tony is on life support. His family want to discontinue the machine that keeps him breathing. Once it is turned off he will immediately die. Is this okay?

*OR, Lucy is very, very sick and is dying. She is in great discomfort and pain. In the middle of this, she gets a common cold and this threatens her precarious hold on life. The family wonder whether they need to strenuously fight this cold with medications, or just to let her be….*

Catechism, 2278: Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of “over-zealous” treatment. Here one does not will to cause death, one’s inability to impede it is merely accepted.

Angie’s mom has lost all clear idea of who and where she is. Her mom is not able to make decisions for herself. Her mom can no longer swallow food and she has been asked to put a tube in her mom’s stomach so that she can survive. Does she need to do this?

Pope John Paul II wrote, during the last stages of his own illness with Parkinsons, against withholding food or drink to those who were unable to swallow food. But he also opposed the necessity of “artificial” means to keep men and women alive: That is to insert tubes, etc. is artificial. This is something being debated right now. The issue seems to
be one the Church is afraid could be abused such that the economics of taking care of the “confused” or those without full use of their mental capacities would affect who is allowed to live and who is not.

**ABORTION:** TRUE CASE: Sandy is a devout Catholic and has been told that the condition of the child in her womb is such that her own life is seriously endangered. The doctors have told her that there is a very high chance she will die if she tries to keep the child.

There is a moral principle in the Church called “The Principle of Double Effect” first formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas. This principle aims to provide specific guidelines for determining when it is morally permissible to perform a bad action in pursuit of a good end in full knowledge that the action will also bring about bad results.

**TUBAL PROCEDURE:** Sandy is in her child-bearing years. Giving birth to their one child almost killed Sandy, literally. She is considering having an operation that will insure she does not get pregnant in the future.

Such procedures are not supported by Catholic teaching, but this would also be a situation where personal conscience would have to be included in the eventual decision. But could the “Principle of Double Effect” apply here?

**BEING REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT VERSUS BEING CATHOLIC: TWO CASES –**

- **IMMIGRATION OR UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE:** Don opposes the U.S. Bishops’ position on immigration and universal health care. He thinks his local parish has no right to support this issue. That it’s a political issue, not a religious one.

- **ABORTION:** Sheila opposes abortion but chooses to vote for a Democratic candidate who supports laws permitting abortion.

**BEING REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT – CHURCH STATEMENT --** In 2004 Pope Benedict wrote: "A Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate’s permissive stand on abortion and/or euthanasia. When a Catholic does not share a candidate’s stand in favour of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons."

**HOMOSEXUALITY**

Now, this is a tough issue today because so many people we know are gay.

*In fact, one homosexual person I know is my sister.*

*My sister went through many years where she just was withdrawn and not happy. Now she is out in Colorado.*

*And it took her a long time to accept herself the way she is and to come to terms with that.*

*I would never dream of rejecting her in any way because of her life. I can’t decide she is no longer my sister.*

But at the same time, society at large (or we) might need to also be tolerant of the fact that we, the Catholic community, have a long history to deal with and Scripture to deal with on this issue, so that it is complex.

The following is from a letter by John Garvey in the Oct. 10, 2003 issue of the Catholic magazine “Commonweal”. Mr. Garvey is a well-known Eastern Orthodox writer.

*The fact is that there is an ancient tradition, biblical and ecclesial, which insists that the only sexual activity the church can bless is between a man and a woman (in marriage). It says that everyone else, gay or straight, divorced, widowed or single, should be celibate. It is not a celebrated teaching these days, but there it is. This presents a particular difficulty for homosexual Christians, because it appears to mandate lifelong celibacy, while others may at least hope that their situation will allow them some day to marry.*

*While what Christians may consider moral may change – slavery was once considered acceptable – the problem is that homosexual acts were canonically forbidden, in both the Eastern and Western Churches. To go from this situation to blessing a gay marriage is quite a stretch, and the burden of proof, where an ancient tradition is concerned, is on those who want the change made. They need to look for serious historical precedents, where the church went from one moral or doctrinal place to quite another, and engage them seriously.*
In terms of what “tradition” Mr. Garvey is talking about, in the Bible, there are statements in the Book of Leviticus and in Paul’s Letter to the Romans about homosexual activity, and, again, there has been a long history in the 2,000 years of the Church regarding this teaching.

Having said all this, in our modern era, this is a tough issue, and one has to be sensitive to how tough, exactly, it is for young person, who is gay, to be told that the Catholic position is that they should practice life-long celibacy. This is a tough thing to hear. And we need to ALWAYS BE LOVING.

Indeed, in a recent document called “Always our Children” the U.S. Bishops called for acceptance and love for people who have a homosexual orientation, and that having a homosexual orientation is not wrong.

It’s almost, I have come to believe, like one has to really develop a sophisticated sense of being able to live with a bit of ambiguity to deal with this issue in our modern times. And be neither one of those who would just reject the LGBT person … Nor someone who would automatically villify the Church because we don’t feel that we can just easily “ditch” what is said in the Bible and in our long history as a Church about this issue.

STEM CELLS

What is a stem cell? A stem cell is a relatively unspecialized cell that, when it divides, can do two things: make another cell like itself, or make any of a number of cells with more specialized functions. For example, just one kind of stem cell in our blood can make new red blood cells, or white blood cells, or other kinds—depending on what the body needs. These cells are like the stem of a plant that spreads out in different directions as it grows.

Is the Catholic Church opposed to all stem cell research? No. Most stem cell research uses cells obtained from adult tissue, umbilical cord blood, and other sources that pose no moral problem. Useful stem cells have been found in bone marrow, blood, muscle, fat, nerves, and even in the pulp of baby teeth. Some of these cells are already being used to treat people with a wide variety of diseases.

Why is the Church opposed to stem cell research using the embryo? Because harvesting these stem cells kills the living human embryo. The Church opposes the direct destruction of innocent human life for any purpose, including research.

Haven’t doctors, scientists, and commentators said that embryonic stem cell research will lead to the cure of many diseases? No medical advances or breakthroughs have been gained from using embryonic stem cells even after decades of research.

Has research using adult stem cells ever accomplished anything? Yes. All the breakthroughs accomplished in stem cell research have been gained from adult and umbilical chord cells. Thousands of lives have been saved by adult stem cells—most often in the form of "bone marrow transplants" for leukemia and other conditions (where the active ingredient in the bone marrow is stem cells). Today, adult stem cells have been used to help people with Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injury, sickle-cell anemia, heart damage, corneal damage, and dozens of other conditions.

ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE


“Since 1919, the United States Catholic bishops have supported decent health care for all and government and private action to advance this essential goal…” In the recent health care debate the USCCB called universal and affordable health care “an urgent national priority and moral imperative.”

HUMAN CLONING

What is human cloning and how is it related to stem cell research?

In human cloning, the DNA from the nucleus of a person's body cell is inserted into an egg whose own genetic material has been removed, and the egg is then stimulated to begin embryonic development. The resulting cloned embryo would genetically be an almost identical twin to the person supplying the body cell. This research overlaps with the stem cell issue. That is, human cloning might be done to create an embryo who will be destroyed to provide...
stem cells genetically matched to a patient, so the cells will not be rejected as foreign tissue. But some cloning research is done for other purposes—for example, to create embryos with devastating illnesses from the body cells of sick patients, to study the early progress of that disease. Most embryonic stem cell research involves embryos created by in vitro fertilization, not cloning.

**Why does the Church oppose human cloning?**
Cloning is a depersonalized way to reproduce, in which human beings are manufactured in the laboratory to preset specifications. It is not a worthy way to bring a new human being into the world. When done for stem cell research, it involves the moral wrong of all embryonic stem cell research (destroying an innocent human life for possible benefit to others) plus an additional wrong: It creates human beings solely in order to kill them for their cells. This is the ultimate reduction of a fellow human being to a mere means, to an instrument of other people's wishes.