

St. Mark Seeker's Study Guide

January 18, 2017: Moral Decision Making and Conscience

'Life holds only one tragedy: not to have been a saint'

— Léon Bloy



1. "Holiness is Wholeness" What does it mean to be 'whole and what role does morality play in your experience? What did the boy mean when he said that he didn't hit the girl because 'he is a man'?

Points to Ponder

"The Christian moral life is one that seeks to cultivate and practice virtue. "A virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself" (CCC, no. 1803). An effective moral life demands the practice of both human and theological virtues."

2. St. Thomas Aquinas observed that "we are animals of a rational nature." What does it mean to be rational? What does it mean to be an animal?

Points to Ponder

Human virtues form the soul with the habits of mind and will that support moral behavior, control passions, and avoid sin. Virtues guide our conduct according to the dictates of faith and reason, leading us toward freedom based on self-control and toward joy in living a good moral life. Compassion, responsibility, a sense of duty, self-discipline and restraint, honesty, loyalty, friendship, courage, and persistence are examples of desirable virtues for sustaining a moral life. Historically, we group the human virtues around what are called the Cardinal Virtues. This term comes from the Latin word *cardo* meaning "hinge."

3. Is sin reasonable in some sense or is it just animal instinct?
4. How do you overcome sin? What role can the practice of virtue play? (*Catholic point: Did you know when we examine our conscience we ask what did we do and what did we fail to do?*) Is it possible to develop virtue to aid in overcoming sin?
5. In your own experience of life, what are the virtues that you have most admired in others that you would like to emulate? Please tell a story to illustrate your love of this person.

The Cardinal Virtues

All the virtues are related to or hinged to one of the Cardinal Virtues. The four Cardinal Virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. There are a number of ways in which we acquire human virtues. They are acquired by frequent repetition of virtuous acts that establish a pattern of virtuous behavior. There is a reciprocal relationship between virtue and acts because virtue, as an internal reality, disposes us to act externally in morally good ways. Yet it is through doing good acts in the concrete that the virtue within us is strengthened and grows. The human virtues are also acquired through seeing them in the good example of others and through education in their value and methods to acquire them. Stories that inspire us to want such virtues help contribute to their growth within us. They are gained by a strong will to achieve such ideals. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) (2012-04-02). United States Catholic Catechism for Adults. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Kindle Edition.

6. What are the events in your life that have been most formative of your conscience?
7. What role do our desires play in leading us to wholeness? How do we know which desires are good for us or bad?
8. Conscience is a judgment of practical reason. Judgment is a decision. Practical is something we actually say or do. Reason is the use of our intellectual ability to guide our actions, not just pure emotion. Conscience must be based on truth. Conscience is taking responsibility for what we say and do. How can you sin against conscience?
9. What are the three elements of the moral act? What is the difference, morally, between what a surgeon does versus a bank robber armed with a knife does according to the three elements of the moral act?
10. What is the difference between an examination of conscience and the examination of consciousness or examen?

Points to Ponder

The Formation of Conscience The formation of a good conscience is another fundamental element of Christian moral teaching. “Conscience is a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act” (CCC, no. 1796). “Man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary” (GS, no. 16). Conscience represents both the more general ability we have as human beings to know what is good and right and the concrete judgments we make in particular situations concerning what we should do or about what we have already done. United States Catholic Catechism for Adults (Kindle Locations 1902-1905). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Kindle Edition.