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A Clergyman's View of the Changing Morality

Rev. Paul J. Loeffler, C.M.

When I first received the invitation to talk to you, the subject given to me was 'A Clergyman's View of the Changing Morality.' In the program which I later received, the subject was listed as "*The Clergys' View of the Changing Morality.*" Just as I am sure that there is unanimity in this convention on certain basic principles of medicine, so I feel just as sure that there are a great variety of techniques used. I feel confident, therefore, that you will accept my talk as "*a Clergman's View of the Changing Morality.*"

Perhaps I can make this clearer with an analogy. I once heard a story from an Austrian doctor in China about an incident that happened when he was a medical student in a class on Gynecology. Delivering by forceps was the instruction in this particular class. The young student who was chosen to deliver the doll went about the task in all seriousness. When he finally had the baby dangling from the forceps, the instructor paused a few moments, and then calmly said to the student, "Son,

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suppose you take those forceps and crack the father over the head. Then you will have wiped out the whole family."

The point I wish to make is that the student probably had the same respect for life — and the preservation of mother and child as did the instructor. But due to ignorance or the lack of proper skill and technique, he was not able to preserve the basic value-human life.

A physician also has the same basic will — to heal, to save, to make whole, but even the most successful among you will perhaps shudder when he reflects back upon some of his earlier operations and lack of acquired skills.

So, too, in the area of morality, we know from divine revelation and/or human reason that there are basic and absolute moral values such as "Do good and avoid evil" or in a more religious context, "Love God and your fellow man." God's revealed Will, however, does not give man a blueprint for every conceivable situation, nor is man, wending his pilgrim way through this world, always or perhaps ever fully attuned to God's revelation or to His Spirit. Man's moral decisions, therefore, are relative to his

knowledge of God's Will, to his openness to the Spirit of God and to his own conscience, and, to a great extent, relative also to his life situation.

Where, however, do we find the basic moral values, — values which are changeless and unchangeable. And, specifically, in our context, with what is Christian morality concerned?

Christian morality is the study of Christ and the revelation in Christ as a Way of life. "I am the Way, the truth and the Life." Christ is both the manifestation of God to man, — and an invitation to man to give himself to God. The study of Christian morality concentrates on man's response to God in Christ through his life and behavior.

I Moral decisions, i. e., man's behavioral decisions must, first of all be God-centered. God invites; man responds. Sounds simple, doesn't it? — but here is where the problems start.

God invites: But

—we know of this invitation through His Word — but a *Word* given to us *in the words of men*.

—we know of this invitation through His *Church*, — a *human* as well as a divine reality.

—we know of this invitation through the *voice of conscience*, — fallible and at times erroneous.

Man responds: Yes, but

—he responds in his own life situation which is so different for different men in different times and places.

—he responds, — but he is guided and even somewhat determined or conditioned by the culture and environment of which he is a part.

—he responds, — but often out of fear instead of love.

II Moreover, while it is God who invites and man who responds, this invitation and response is mediated in *Christ*, Who is God yes; but God clothed in human flesh. And our encounter with Christ today is again mediated for us through *Word*, *Sacrament*, and *Church*. How difficult at times is the understanding of the *Word*; how dependent on faith our union with Christ in the *Sacraments*; how human the face of the *Church*. And thus, problems again arise because of the human material and therefore fallible elements involved in those persons and things which mediate Christ to us.

III Finally, the invitation given by God to man through Christ involves the *personal response* of man to God. Nor can this personal responsibility be abdicated. We cannot morally throw off this responsibility. *Moral* decisions, guided though they must be, must be *our own personal decisions*, just as the decision to believe, for those of us who are of age, must be our own *personal will to believe*. We are not denying the words of St. Paul "that it is God who works in us both to will and to accomplish", but even with the gifts of God, man, as a decision-making animal, must himself will to believe and will to live a good and moral life.

Christian morality, then, must be God-centered, based on the life and teachings of Christ and personal in expression.

We leave aside, therefore, in our discussion any purely humanistic outlook on life. In the Christian outlook, the human is inextricably and unalterably interwoven with the divine. Moral questions, in our context, arise from a confrontation of the known Will of God as revealed in Christ with the situation of the person endowed with conscience and freedom. Most of the moral problems of our day, as of any era of the history of Christian life, arise from the attempt to understand and know with certainty the answers to the questions, "What is God's will for me in this situation?"; "What is my answer in conscience?"; "What should I freely decide to do?" The solution demands an honest evaluation of all three questions.

There is yet another element, touched on above — a very important one, — that must enter into our moral decisions. Christ did not leave us alone in facing up to the problems of moral life and behavior. The authentic and divinely appointed interpreter of the teaching of Christ and the guide to and guardian of Christian morality is the teaching Church. All personal moral decisions should be made in the light of and with regard to the moral pronouncements of this Church.

When we speak, therefore, of a changing morality in a Christian context, we must be careful to exclude, *first of all*, changes that are introduced into our culture by those with a purely humanistic or materialistic outlook on life and its purpose.

Secondly, we must be wary of thinking of morality as a mere system of laws of behavior. Such a morality of law or code morality totally ignores the personal dimension of morality, or the autonomy and competence of the educated conscience in the area of practical moral judgment. Ignored, also, is the fact that the basic moral law is love, and this is found, not primarily in any external code, but in the heart of man, living in union with God.

Finally, (in speaking of a changing morality), we must not allow it to be based on any self-orientation of life, as if there were no such thing as an objective moral law. Such a self-structured morality would be *pure moral anarchy*.

However, excluding all humanistic, authoritarian, or subjective bases of morality, we come back to God speaking to us in Christ through His Church.

The authentic teacher of Christian morality, the Church, proclaims the Gospel to us in terms of the basic law: "Love God above all things, and your neighbor as yourself".

The authentic Christian is the one who freely consents not only to accept but to live that message of love.

The Church proclaims this message anew to each succeeding generation and to every nation and culture. Evolving and developing as she is, (which is the nature of every living and non-static being), and doing so in a world that is ever-changing, she is constantly beset with new questions.

More specifically, in the field of morality, the Church's proclamation of the love of God in Christ provides

the antidote to the introduction into the world of any non-Christian culture or morality. She is the perennial voice crying out in the wilderness upholding the honor of God and the dignity of man.

And yet, even within our Christian culture, new questions arise because of a better understanding of God's Word as given to man in the Scriptures and because of scientific advances in the knowledge of man himself and of the universe in which he lives.

Because of scientific advances in methods of interpretation, we understand better today what the sacred writers were really saying to the men of their time, and can better appreciate the relevance of this teaching for our times and culture.

Because of technological advances, new moral problems arise from man's legitimate aspirations to a better life on earth.

Because of medical and surgical advances, new questions are asked as to what is morally permitted when dealing with human life. For example, there came a time in the history of surgery when amputations became morally permissible because of the acquired ability to cauterize successfully. There came a time in the history of surgery when appendectomies became morally permissible because of the moral certitude of being able to save the patient's life. Recently, organ transplants have become permissible for the same reason.

The same may be said when we enter other areas of scientific and professional competence. Advanced scientific knowledge raises new moral questions.

For the Christian seriously striving to answer any given moral problem, the authentic and positive teaching of the church should be his first consideration. If the specific answer to the specific problem is not found there, the basis of the answer will certainly be discovered in principle. Put in another way, the Christian is obligated to form and inform his conscience according to the positive moral teaching of the Church. Conscience is supreme as the final arbiter in making a practical judgment on the morality of one's actions. Man makes these moral judgments, however, in the realization that God Who is the ultimate judge has given to him a moral guide — the Church — according to whose teaching he should form his conscience.

The moral teaching of the Church must always be understood in the light of the Gospel proclamation. It is very understandable, therefore, because of what has been already said, that there is a development in this teaching. In our day, the more positive elements of the Gospel message and its social implications, (love, justice, peace, responsibility) are being given the pre-eminence due to them. This emphasis on the message itself creates an atmosphere of changing morality.

When one stresses the Gospel teaching of love and justice, is it not natural that the necessity for social justice and individual rights will be more clearly seen? Will not the immorality of unbridled capitalism be made more apparent?

When emphasis is given to Christ's teaching about peace, can we be content merely to talk about conditions for a just war? Are we not all involved in our government's decision to wage war? And even if we

are engaged in a just war, what are we doing for the cause of peace?

When the New Testament teaching on the sanctity of married life is understood, is there not a greater appreciation of the importance of the family to society? Are not the positive values of human love and sexuality thereby strengthened?

When we read what God has revealed about the dignity of human life and the human person, can we ever treat man simply as an object?

And while this teaching on the personal dignity of man is addressed to all men, it has a very special relevance to men in your profession and in mine.

The priest mediates the Church, and therefore Christ, in preaching the Kingdom of God and Christ, and the means whereby citizenship in this Kingdom may be acquired, strengthened and completed. But it is the hearers of the message who decide, because of their dignity as free persons, to accept or reject the message. The ultimate moral responsibility is theirs, not that of the priest.

So, analogously, the physician, whose life is dedicated to the use of

scientific skills to preserve human life, has a service to offer. *His* primary moral decision concerns the necessity of the procedure and his ability to perform it with reasonable chance of success. However, since he is dealing with human life, the decision to have the operation is the moral right of the patient. Except for an operation that would be intrinsically evil, the moral responsibility of submitting to an operation belongs to the patient.

In conclusion, I should simply like to say, that, instead of speaking of "the Changing Morality", I would rather we spoke of the changing climate or atmosphere in which moral decisions are made. The basic moral law "Love God and your fellow-man" is changeless. Our understanding of the obligation of love *does* undergo constant development according to our advance in the understanding of God's revelation in Christ and our increasing knowledge of man and the universe. Guided by the teaching Church in her ever-growing awareness of God's revelation, and by the Spirit of God to Whom our consciences must ever be open, we encounter life's situations and problems optimistically and without anxiety, with the words of St. Paul in our hearts, "Lord, what do you will that I do?"