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Helping Collegians Develop a Moral Code by Which to Live

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Father Mangan is a professor of theology at Loyola University of Chicago. This talk was delivered at the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars' Convention in Kansas City in April, 1978.

For over 20 years I taught moral theology at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary, the major seminary of the Archdiocese of Chicago. During those years and routinely within my series of courses, I taught the future priests of Chicago the morality of pre-marital, marital and extra-marital sexual behavior. About 10 years ago, I asked for a transfer and moved to Loyola University of Chicago to teach theological-ethics to men and women collegians.

Asked by the chairman of the theology department at that University what course I might like to teach, I suggested one not being offered at that time on "Contemporary Christian Sexuality." In my judgment, it was a course which needed to be offered to collegians. My suggestion was accepted and approved and I have taught that course regularly ever since.

In planning for and developing the course on "Contemporary Christian Sexuality," I realized that for today's youth a strong emphasis would have to be placed on the reasoning behind whatever positions we discussed in class. I, of course, agreed with the affirmations of Vatican II that "The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 1) and again that ". . . children and young people have a right to be encouraged to weigh moral values with an upright conscience, and to embrace them by personal choice" (*Gravissimum Educationis*, n. 1).

Norms and standards of sexual behavior are not being accepted today as readily, if at all, as formerly. Any effective course, therefore, would have to include discussions of current controversial philosophical and theological opinions. Since the student body at Loyola includes, besides Roman Catholics, many other Christians and non-Christians, I anticipated in my classes students representing a variety of differing religious persuasions. I would need to show respect for all my students and their sincere opinions in dissent from as well as in agreement with my own. But since most of the students in my classes would be Roman Catholics, I would need to present clearly and force-

fully Roman Catholic doctrine, together with the reasons supporting it. I would need to make my students aware of the new speculative thinking of some Catholic theologians among others. And I would have to make it clear that the changing speculative opinions of contemporary theologians when they express dissent do not dislodge authentic Catholic doctrine.

Vatican II had warned us of the extremely grave moral errors abroad today (and I quote) “. . . Since, in this age of ours, new problems are arising and extremely serious errors are gaining currency which tend to undermine the foundations of religion, the moral order, and human society itself, this Council earnestly exhorts laymen, each according to his natural gifts and learning, to be more diligent in doing their part according to the mind of the Church, to explain and defend Christian principles, and to apply them to the problems of our era. . . . Affected by original sin, men have frequently fallen into multiple errors concerning the true God, the nature of man, and the principles of the moral law. The result has been the corruption of morals and human institutions and, not rarely, contempt for the human person himself” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, nn. 6,7). In this state of contemporary moral confusion to which the Council refers, each of us needs a clear and reliable moral code to guide his conscience. I hoped to be able to help the collegians appreciate their need and develop within themselves a solid moral code for their own personal behavior.

The course, as it has developed over the past few years, attempts to explore in depth the authentic role and dignity of sexuality according to the mind and will of Our Heavenly Father in the order of creation and of revelation through past centuries to the present. I feel that every college student before he graduates should have an educated understanding of the many issues of sexuality in general and of his or her sexuality in particular. Such an understanding is important for the individual in coming to grips with his own self-identity and for his interpersonal relationship with others. Especially he should have a mature appreciation of the personal values inherent in one's sex-identity and in sexual behavior. One purpose of this course is to help the student achieve this personal appreciation.

This course takes very little for granted of the students' academic understanding of the subject. The progress of the course moves at the pace with which the students themselves are comfortable. The many issues of sexuality are discussed in a historical and contemporary setting. Although Sacred Scripture, Catholic magisterial teaching, theology, biology and psychology are the main resources, the course also consults advances in civil law, medicine, and the social sciences.

Controversies are faced fairly and an understanding of opposing positions is expected of the students, but not a commitment to either side. Commitment is the student's personal responsibility, not the

teacher's. The students are provided an opportunity to deepen their understanding and to strengthen their commitment whether newly acquired or not.

Doctrinal Teaching Discussed

In this spirit, the doctrinal teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is clearly explained and discussed. The reasons behind the teaching are emphasized. Understanding of that teaching and of the reasons supporting it is demanded of all the students, but not commitment to the doctrine or to the reasons. Dissent and questions of possible re-evaluation and/or re-articulation of past formulations of doctrine are faced squarely. Specifically on the subject of marriage: Marriage is understood as established by God and qualified by His laws. For a Christian, it is a sacramental relationship between a man and a woman rooted in the conjugal covenant of mutual consent (Vd. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 48). An opportunity is presented to study the full meaning of this covenant of marital love scripturally, theologically, psychologically, and scientifically through past centuries to the present.

In our teaching of the young today, especially at the college level, it would be a serious mistake simply to ignore the current controversies, disagreements, and opinions dissenting from Catholic doctrine. But especially for Catholic students in a Catholic university, the proper place of private theologians' dissenting opinions *vis-a-vis* the authentic teaching of the Magisterium is a critical issue. Our age is an age of permissiveness, in which theologians and non-theologians publish their own insights in all areas of morality with or without ecclesiastical approval. We need to be aware and to make sure that the young are aware that not all of these publications are reliable as guides to acceptable moral behavior for the Catholic faithful. It behooves those loyal to authentic Catholic doctrine to deepen their understanding of and commitment to that doctrine as normative for the faithful. It also behooves the faithful to deepen their understanding of and commitment to the one Magisterium as the authentic voice of Christ in the world today.

Let me bolster what I have just been saying from the documents of Vatican II. I shall be quoting from four of the documents, from the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, and the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*.

Vatican II says:

... Bishops are preachers of the faith who lead new disciples to Christ. They are authentic teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach to the people committed to them the faith they must believe and put in practice. . . . Bishops, teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to divine and Catholic truth. *In matters of faith and morals, the Bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful*

are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 25).

The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living Magisterium of the Church whose authority is exercised in the Name of Jesus Christ. . . . (*Dei Verbum*, n. 10).

(Parents) must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the Church's Magisterium, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel. The divine law reveals and protects the integral meaning of conjugal love, and impels it toward a truly human fulfillment (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 50).

As regards activities and institutions in the temporal order, the role of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is to teach and authentically interpret the moral principles to be followed in temporal affairs. Furthermore, it has the right to judge, after careful consideration of all related matters and consultation with experts, whether or not such activities and institutions conform to moral principles (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 24).

Clearly the teaching of the Magisterium is normative of what is morally acceptable behavior for the Catholic faithful.

Theologians' Special Role

Acknowledging this unique role of the bishops in union with the Roman Pontiff, the living Magisterium of the Church, the theologians also have a legitimate, special role in the Church in support of that Magisterium. They have special competence in researching Our Father's truth. Their special role calls upon them also to responsibly manifest their particular insights to their peers, to the members of the Church's authentic teaching body, and to the people of God at large.

As Vatican II states:

. . . all the faithful, clerical and lay, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 62).

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially the pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 44).

While adhering to the methods and requirements proper to theology, theologians are invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to the men of their times. For the deposit of faith or revealed truths are one thing; the manner in which they are formulated without violence to their meaning and significance is another (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 62).

It is the task of exegetes to work . . . toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgment of the Church may mature. For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judg-

ment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God (*Dei Verbum*, n. 12).

Since Vatican II, many theologians and others, striving to fulfill their vocations within the Church, have made many attempts to contribute positively to the development of Catholic moral theology by rethinking fundamental principles, freedom and responsibility of conscience, the validity of absolutes, the importance of the person, etc. Many of these attempts have been very thoughtful and thought-provoking and a significant contribution to on-going positive development. In general these published discussions are properly asking questions and making suggestions, but not giving answers reducible to practice. Some of the discussions, however, under the banner of academic freedom, pretend to offer valid answers reducible to practice contrary to authentic Catholic doctrine promulgated by the one Magisterium.

Especially today some theologians in their quest for theological understanding are very jealous of their proper academic freedom theoretically to question magisterial statements of doctrine ("Stone the Theologian! The Role of Theology in Today's Church" by Walter J. Burkhardt, S.J., *Catholic Mind*, Sept., 1977, pp. 42-50). Proper academic freedom is one thing, but nowhere in the documents of Vatican II do we find any indication that theologians can legitimately so express dissent as to instruct the faithful in behavior contrary to authentic Catholic doctrine, contending that such behavior is valid and morally acceptable for the Catholic faithful.

When an individual private theologian or a group of theologians propose to their peers or to the public at large insights contrary to authentic Catholic doctrine, their insights do not constitute a sufficiently solid base for implementation by the faithful in their daily lives. Speaking with papal authority just 10 years after Vatican II, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has explicitly affirmed this truth, lest there remain any doubt.

Responding to the American bishops on the subject of sterilization on March 13, 1975, the Congregation declared: "The Congregation, while it confirms this traditional doctrine of the Church (on sterilization), is not unaware of the dissent against this teaching from many theologians. The Congregation, however, denies that doctrinal significance can be attributed to this fact as such, so as to constitute a 'theological source' which the faithful might invoke and thereby abandon the authentic Magisterium, and follow the opinions of private theologians which dissent from it" (from the translation published by the Bishops of the United States).

On another occasion, a few months earlier, that same Congregation again speaking with papal authority, issued a "Declaration on Abortion" on Nov. 18, 1974, for the whole Catholic Church to "confirm

certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine for all Christians." In that declaration the Congregation called attention to recent "controversies and new opinions" and added: "... it is not a question of opposing one opinion to another, but of transmitting to the faithful a constant teaching of the supreme Magisterium, which teaches moral norms in the light of faith. It is therefore clear that this Declaration necessarily entails a grave obligation for Christian consciences" (*Declaration on Abortion* by Sacred Cong. for the Doctrine of the Faith, U.S.C.C., 1975, n. 4, p. 2).

Unfortunately we are faced today with examples of some theologians who on their own authority, unsatisfied with legitimate academic freedom offer specific guidelines to the faithful for behavior as morally acceptable in practice contrary to Catholic doctrine. This is currently true especially in the area of sexual morality whether within or outside of marriage. A very concrete danger resulting from such offering of guidelines to the public is that priests in their role of counselor and teacher, both lay and religious, in grammar school and high school, may mistakenly follow the teaching of such theologians instructing and guiding young people accordingly in the education and formation of their consciences.

Parents cannot validly presume today that the instruction being given in Catholic schools is in accord with the teaching of the Church. Such an educational environment is unsettling for the faithful in general and has led to confusion and excessive permissiveness on the part of the young.

Clear Personal Stand

For my part, after my classes have reviewed the various moral issues, and discussed the opposing opinions with whatever evidence we have been able to uncover, I take a clear personal stand, leaving myself open to whatever question or confrontation the students may wish. At this stage of the course in the matter of sexual morality, I take my stand explicitly in the context of the *Documents of Vatican II* (1965), *Humanae Vitae* (1968), and the *Declaration on Sexual Ethics* (1975), emphasizing throughout the reasons supporting the authentic teaching.

From the *Documents of Vatican II*, for example, I stand with the teaching of the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* that "... the moral aspect of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective standards... based on the nature of the human person and his acts" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 51).

From the *Declaration on Sexual Ethics* (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, n. 7), I stand with the "Christian doctrine... that every genital act must be within the framework of marriage. . . ."

And again by way of example, from the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, I stand with the doctrine that "Each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life. That teaching, often set forth by the Magisterium of the Church, is founded upon the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning. . ." (nn. 11, 12).

This is the way I try to lead collegians to deepen their own moral integrity and to act accordingly. The result, I have found, is that for the most part they will listen and try to think out with me the issues we are considering. Almost universally the students admit that they have developed, through the course, a deeper understanding of the Catholic Church's traditional moral positions as divine law positions and a deeper respect for the reasons in support of those positions. Some say that although they understand and appreciate better, that does not necessarily mean they agree. Some are very selective in what they personally agree with after the course.

What continues to amaze and encourage me, however, is the fact that this course, more than any other course I have offered at Loyola, challenges the collegians at the core of their being. This course develops academic encounters of the deepest kind, at the level at which the students are thinking most deeply as human and religious persons.

At the end of each course I ask the students for an honest evaluation of it and for suggestions for its improvement. I promise them that I will not read their evaluations until I have handed in their grades. Their evaluations, therefore, whether signed or not, whether favorable or not, in no way will affect their grades. In that situation, the students sometimes communicate a very personal response. Let me share some of their responses with you.

"I learned how to analyze a problem, so that I could make a moral decision."

A young man: "In the past I have been unclear on some moral issues and diffident about standing up for what I believed. Now I am better prepared and I now stand up for what I believe."

A Baptist student: "This course has definitely strengthened my faith, and given me support as far as my committed beliefs are concerned."

A young woman: "I'm going home now and ponder my morals and sex-life. You've got me thinking. Is that what this whole semester has been about?"

A young man: "My girl friend and I decided to change our sexual relationship to a Christian model. . . . I want to be a better person, and I believe you have greatly contributed to that."

A Lutheran young man: "You have had a strong impact on my life. I now feel very strongly on a number of moral issues and defend them with others who disagree. I agree with you so strongly, it has cost me some friendships."