

THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC MORALITY

Father James Chelich – 6 December 2019

Catholic Religion is essentially moral. I do not think that people always understand this about Catholicism. There are four fundamental principles to Catholic Moral teaching and discipline: **The first principle of Catholic Morality is that human beings are essentially good.** The Bible makes this clear in the account of Creation. In the first Chapter of Genesis it says that God created man and woman and pronounced them “very good” (Genesis 1:31). It also says that man and woman were made in God’s “image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26-27). Think about what this means. The potential of human beings to be “good” and to do “good” is infinite: to give life and unfold its potential in themselves and in all things. Catholic morality takes this very seriously.

Catholic Morality is, however, not naive about what human beings actually do and become. Catholic Morality “speaks” to reality, not illusion. **The second principle of Catholic Morality is that human beings do bad and even awful things, things that violate the integrity of others and the elements of creation and violate the right and life-giving relationship between things that sustains the world as living whole.** Chapter three of the book of Genesis, the account of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve, makes it clear that human beings easily grow self absorbed and view things only out of the lens of “What use or good it is for me.” The Old Testament makes it clear that human beings are easily seduced away from the “good” they were made to be and to do: we are vulnerable to abuse at the hands of others, we grow frustrated and despondent, we easily become jealous, envious and greedy. We are prone to anger when our expectations are not met and we become violent – violent enough to burn down the world around us. History tells the truth about us, and Catholic Faith pays close attention.

The third principle of Catholic Morality is that God, in the person of Jesus, calls us to acknowledge the second principle and to set our hearts against doing what is wrong and actively strive to break free of it. Striving against sin in our lives and in the world is the hallmark of Catholic Morality. Saint Paul makes this clear in Chapter 4 verses 17 to 24 of his Letter to the Ephesians. There he calls us to strive to put to death our Old Self in bondage to sin, in order to become a New Man or Woman in Christ. All of God’s moral Commandments and the whole of Catholic Morality presses us to strive to become something more than we are, to actualize our potential to be and to do good (i.e., to become holy). Catholic Morality refuses to make us comfortable with sin. It will not “affirm” where we have parked ourselves morally, either in sin or self-righteousness. Jesus clearly stated that he would not “set aside” or marginalize the Commandments of the Moral Law (Matthew 5:17-7:28). He allowed for no exemptions. The fact that life might have dealt us a “bad hand” or that we have had it “tough going” was for him an incentive for taking responsibility and pressing forward. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus actually “upped the ante:” to “Thou shalt not kill” Jesus added, “Thou shalt not grow angry with your brother or your sister.” The dumbfounded apostles thought this a humanly insurmountable task, but Jesus did not back off his insistence that striving for holiness was at the core of what true religion is about. He didn’t back off because with his entrance into the world something changed radically for humanity.

The fourth principle of Catholic Morality is that Jesus is present and we do not strive alone. Jesus made it clear that “through him, with him and in him, we could rise to become what

men and women have the potential of becoming: all that God created us to be. What is new for humanity is that God is present for us in Jesus. Power flows from him and when we call upon him in our moral “striving” we do infinitely more than we thought possible. Jesus said, “*Behold I am with you always, even to the end of the world.*” (Matthew 28:20) Jesus came to be among us, he died for our sins, and he rose from the dead to take his place at the side of each of us. This is our salvation. Faith means to open your heart to this reality. Jesus prayed: Father, *I have given them the glory you gave me that they may be one, as we are one – I living in them, you living in me.* (John 17:22-23) . Jesus makes this tangible in the Holy Eucharist where he gives his life to live in us. Jesus said: *My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. The man or woman who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.* (John 6:55-56) When you open your heart to this truth, surrender your will to his and walk with Him, it really works. Our Savior never takes his eyes off the image of God in us and the good we were created to do.

You cannot take this “moral striving with Christ” against what we have become and toward what we are called to be out of Catholic Religion. Without it, it is simply not the Catholic Faith—the Faith that was from the beginning, the Faith that transformed millions of human beings from glory to glory (see 2 Corinthians 3:18), and that has progressively transformed the world in human decency..