

**CATHOLIC FAITH AND HUMAN LIFE
PROCEEDINGS
of the
FIRST CONVENTION
of the
FELLOWSHIP OF CATHOLIC SCHOLARS**

April 28-30, 1978

RAMADA INN-AIRPORT

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

PROGRAM

Friday, April 28th

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| 4:00 p.m. | — Business meeting
All present members are requested to attend |
| 8:00 p.m. | — Keynote address
THE TEACHING OFFICE OF BISHOPS
William Cardinal Baum
<i>Archbishop of Washington</i>
<i>President and General Chairman</i>
Fr. Ronald Lawler, O.F.M., Cap. |
| 10:00 p.m. | — Social Hour |

Saturday, April 29th

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| 9:00 a.m. | — First Session
THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF MAN
<i>Chairman</i> — Fr. Joseph Fessio, S.J.
University of San Francisco |
| | <i>Speaker</i> — Fr. James Schall, S.J.
Georgetown University |
| 11:00 a.m. | — Second Session
THEOLOGY AND THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES
<i>Chairman</i> — Fr. Frederick M. Jelly, O.P.
Mt. St. Mary's Seminary
Emmitsburg, Maryland |
| | <i>Speaker</i> — Fr. Charles Corcoran, O.P.
Vice President, Theological and Spiritual
Renewal Consultants |
| 12:30 p.m. | — Lunch |
| 2:00 p.m. | — Third Session
CATHOLIC THEOLOGY, CATHOLIC MORALITY,
CATHOLIC CONSCIENCE
<i>Chairman</i> — Mr. John Kippley, President
Couple to Couple League |
| | <i>Speakers</i> — Professor Germain Grisez
University of Regina, Canada

Fr. William Smith
St. Joseph's Seminary, New York |
| 5:00 p.m. | — LITURGICAL CELEBRATION
Most Rev. John J. Sullivan, D.D.
Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri |

CATHOLIC FAITH AND INTRINSICALLY EVIL ACTS

Professor Germain Grisez

The theology developed by Catholic moralists in the centuries between Trent and Vatican II had many virtues, but it also had some serious defects. Among its defects not least was the separation of moral reflection from the effort to understand the basic doctrines of faith. Taking for granted the principles of Christian living which had been received and taught in the Church for centuries, the moralists systematized these principles, and worked from them by a casuistic method adapted from the method of law. This method preserved the received body of moral wisdom, but did not conduce to its development except with respect to casuistic applications. Moreover, this method did nothing to clarify the moral-theoretical concepts implicit in substantive Christian moral wisdom.

Today everyone agrees that moral theology ought to be more closely integrated with reflection upon fundamental Christian doctrines, and many thinkers have been trying to articulate an adequate moral theory for Christian life. This paper is an essay in these tasks. Of course, a brief essay cannot deal with the whole of Christian doctrine and its implications for Christian life. *I limit my reflection here to five points of Christian doctrine, and from these points I illustrate only one proposition relevant to Christian morality, namely, that certain kinds of acts are such that acts of these kinds always are objectively evil.*

The first of the points of doctrine is the transcendence to morality of the vocation of humankind. Christ's mission was not to establish a new moral order, nor was his intent to inculcate morality conforming to the order of creation. Rather, his mission was to redeem sinful humankind, to call human persons, who were created in God's image, to share in divine life. This sharing in divine life is altogether disproportionate to human powers to achieve. Redemption and sanctification are wholly the work of grace.

Morality is concerned with the goods of human nature and the fruits of human work. If it were possible for a person to be morally perfect without being a Christian, this moral perfection would avail nothing toward salvation. A full and happy human life remains merely human, and infinitely inferior to the divine life to which humankind is called in Christ. *For Christian life, then, morality never can be primary and architectonic. Moral goodness, no matter how important it might be, always remains a secondary and subordinate consideration.* It is part of that whole world which it profits men and women nothing to gain if they do not share in the reign of God, and his justification.

The second point to be considered is an aspect of the Christian understanding of human persons. The human person is not merely one kind of animal, specialized by the peculiar ability to reason. Rather, the human person is a subject who projects his or her own world. Human thinking is creative. Outward behavior is significant only insofar as it expresses one's subjectivity, executes the proposals one articulates by deliberation and adopts by choice.

Thus Christian morality is a morality of the heart, of inner dispositions and attitudes. It is not to be confused with some legalistic list of rules designed to regulate outward behavior. Because of the essential inwardness of Christian morality, what is most important in it are the fundamental dispositions of faith, hope, and love. Without these forma-

tive principles, no human action can be of positive significance for the life of the Christian. With them, it matters little what one does.

The Christian view of the subjectivity of the person dictates that moral norms not be imposed arbitrarily. One is morally responsible only to the extent that one is aware of being morally responsible. *And one is morally responsible for doing precisely what one believes with a sincere heart one must do.* No moral requirement is in force for the Christian unless the requirement is understood and accepted as valid.

The third point to be considered is that the created world is not eternal and static. According to Christian faith, the world is created by God from nothing, and it is a historical process unfolding under the guiding hand of his providence. Moreover, creation is undergoing a radical and pervasive transformation in virtue of the incarnation and redemptive work of the divine Word.

Human persons are not mere passive parts of the created world. They are active participants in the work of creation and redemption. Made in God's image, they share in his intelligence and freedom. Human persons dispose of their existence by their own free choices.

Human persons are set over the works of God's hands. By their actions, persons confer meaning and value; at God's direction they name things, transforming them into a world of human significance. *Thus human persons are not called to conform to a static set of natural laws, but are to take responsibility for the world, to shape it, to rule over it. It follows that the whole of the human world including human society itself is constantly unfolding new dimensions. In different times and places, under different social and cultural conditions, even those acts which come naturally, such as engaging in sexual intercourse, change their meanings.*

Nor will it do to suppose that this process of transformation is only superficial, that it reaches no further than the accidental features of things. There is no positive, invariant core of human life, since the whole of existence is a living and integrated system of meanings. A change in any part of this system affects all its other parts. To deny this point, to assert a static human nature, will entail the denial either of the radical significance of sin or of the radical effect of grace.

This leads to the fourth point. According to Christian faith, the world is infected by sin. Although the redemptive work has begun, nowhere in the world is it completed. Nothing in the world is perfectly right, nothing untouched by corruption. The world is a broken world. The Church itself is a gathering of sinners. No institution, no structure possesses the holiness to which Christians are called. Only God is good, perfect, holy.

Universal sinfulness has obvious implications for morality. Any morality worth considering must be based upon a realistic acceptance of the truth about the way things are. A set of moral standards which would be appropriate in an ideal, sinless world would be simply irrelevant to this world in which Christian life must be lived. Moreover, it would be a gross mistake to suppose that moral perfection could be found in mere conformity to the Church as structure and institution, because pure holiness is to be found only in heaven. In this life, holiness is commingled with sin. Mere conformity to the Church would mean identification with its sinfulness as well as with its holiness.

The fifth doctrinal point is that by virtue of the redemptive grace received in baptism, Christians enjoy by participation the liberty of God himself. The freedom of the children of God will find its expression in their lifestyles. There is no minute code of rules to

which Christians must conform. Rather, Christians can develop their own personal and communal forms of life. The governing law is the inward grace of the Spirit, who works within the heart and conscience of each person.

It follows that Christian morality must be a morality of responsibility. Christians have only one vocation: to share in divine life. They have as many diverse missions as their varied abilities and the opportunities presented by their different situations suggest — suggest when prayerfully reflected upon in the inner light of the Spirit's gentle teaching. The responsibility of a Christian cannot be captured in universal rules. Responsibility is shaped by each unique context of life. Moreover, it is shaped by the Spirit to the gradual development of faith, hope, and love, which are the only constant factors running through all of every Christian's life.

The preceding doctrinal principles are acknowledged by everyone working today in the field of Catholic moral theology. Some might add various refinements and qualifications to these summary statements of doctrine. But nobody would deny any of these principles. All of them obviously are very near the most central tenets of Christian faith. It would be easy to illustrate each of them with texts from Scripture and other sources of theological reflection.

I am going to use these points of doctrine to clarify the proposition that certain kinds of actions are intrinsically evil. What is meant by the phrase, "intrinsically evil acts?"

No one doubts that there are moral norms which admit of no exception, if these norms are formulated in morally significant terms. Unjust acts are always wrong. So if "murder" means unjust killing, murder is always wrong. But such moral norms are hardly instructive.

Sometimes the question about intrinsically evil acts is formulated as follows: Are there certain patterns of behavior which render actions in which they are included objectively evil, so that the evil cannot be eliminated by any circumstance in which or intention with which the action is done? I do not accept this formulation of the issue, and it is important to make clear why not.

Human acts are not specified by outward patterns of behavior. Rather, one does what one thinks one is doing. Behavior has the character of human action only insofar as it executes a proposal which a person has adopted by choice, after having articulated the proposal through deliberation. Hence, kinds of acts must be distinguished by the kinds of proposals one adopts.

Proposals are excogitated as ways of realizing appealing possibilities. Possibilities are appealing either because their realization is seen as intrinsically good and satisfying (that is, seen as an end) or because their realization appears to be a step toward bringing about a state of affairs seen as intrinsically good and satisfying (that is, appears to be a means to an end).

If there were no necessity to choose, there would be no moral problem. If all appealing possibilities had only positive and no negative implications for goods considered as ends, there likewise would be no moral problem. The moral problem arises because all possibilities about which anyone deliberates have some negative aspects — at least the aspect of excluding other possibilities which are somehow appealing. In many cases, a proposed means to an end would result in preventing, damaging, harming, or destroying something else which is considered as an end.

In speaking of what is intrinsically good here, the word "good" is not used in a moral sense. All human acts, whether morally good or morally evil, aim at something which appeals to the one choosing as humanly and personally good. Anything else in which one can be interested ultimately reduces to some aspect of the fulfillment or flourishing of persons. Such aspects of the full-being of persons are ends; they are seen as intrinsically good and satisfying. I call them "basic human goods." Examples of basic human goods are human life and health, knowledge of the truth, peace, and friendship. It is worth noticing that these and other human goods are constantly acknowledged as proper, central human concerns in Scripture and Christian tradition.

Now, I understand "*intrinsically evil act*" as follows. If one's proposal to take a certain means to one's end includes a proposal to prevent, damage, harm, or destroy one of the basic human goods – whether in oneself, in another person, or in some multitude of persons – then the proposal defines a kind of action which is intrinsically wrong, no matter what other circumstances and intentions might be taken into consideration or even included within one's proposal.

It is important to notice that on the stated definition, a norm forbidding an intrinsically evil act is not formulated in terms which already signify moral goodness, for the word "good" used in reference to the basic human goods is not used in a moral sense, and intrinsically evil acts are specified by their relation to basic human goods.

It also is important to notice that according to the stated definition, an intrinsically evil act is specified by a proposal contrary to a basic human good, not merely by the fact that the execution of a proposal will have some negative consequences in respect to such a good. Thus, if it is an act intrinsically evil to propose that one kill oneself, to adopt this proposal by choice, and to execute it, still not every performance which causes one's own death is an act of that intrinsically evil kind. A performance which leads to one's own death might execute a proposal which includes no proposal that one kill oneself. For example, Jesus laid down his life in obedience to the Father's will, but he did not adopt a proposal to kill himself.

The next question is whether there are any intrinsically evil acts. I hold that there are, and that the five doctrinal points previously summarized can help clarify why there are. But some Roman Catholic moral theologians today deny that there are any intrinsically evil acts, and often they use one or more of these same points of doctrine in arguing theologically for their position. While I do not need for my present purpose to examine their theological reasoning at length, a brief, somewhat simplified summary of it will help to point up the significance of the explanations I am going to articulate.

First, it can be argued that since morality is secondary and subordinate in Christian life, since the true vocation of Christians altogether transcends the moral sphere, no kind of act is inherently absolutely incompatible with the Christian vocation, and so no kind of act is intrinsically evil. The Spirit blows where he wills and is not limited in the varieties of fruit he can produce. Christian life will be the overflow and outgrowth of reconciling and elevating grace. Grace does not specify a certain set of performances as its necessary expression. Nor could it, without making the vocation of Christians homogeneous with the finite, merely human goods which are the starting points of morality.

Second, it can be argued that since persons can be morally responsible only to the extent that they are aware of what they are doing, and since different persons have different conceptions of the significance of various patterns of behavior, no kind of act

can be intrinsically evil. Since moral obligations are mediated by conscience and since Christians of sincere conscience do not universally agree in sensing any kind of act to be absolutely incompatible with faith, hope, and love, it also can be argued on this score that no kinds of acts are in fact always wrong.

Third, it can be argued that since all things human are subject to radical transformation and since actions are determined by human meaning giving, which varies according to times and places, no kind of act can be wrong always and everywhere. The apparent constancy of certain kinds of acts is only apparent; morally considered, they are transformed through and through in the course of history.

Fourth, it can be argued that since Christian morality must take realistic account of evil, kinds of acts which would be forbidden absolutely in an ideal world cannot be considered wholly inappropriate in the real world. In many difficult cases, one must have the courage to do the lesser evil. Moral compromises are necessary, it is argued, since one is required by charity to do good to others without any pharisaic nervousness about one's own moral purity.

Fifth, it can be argued that since Christian responsibility is individual and contextual, the real moral demand always is concrete and unique. General norms can be helpful as guidelines, but they must not be taken as legalistic absolutes. What is common to all people at all times and in all places is merely an abstract human nature; concretely, the responsible Christian will be responsive to the total situation and will not be absolutely bound by any single, abstracted aspect of it.

Now, it is important to notice that those who advance some or all of these arguments, or arguments similar to them do not hold that there are no acts which are almost always wrong. Indeed, most of them hold that there are moral norms which are practically or virtually exceptionless. Their position is that traditional Christian moral wisdom properly located certain kinds of acts which are very generally wrong, and perhaps under given cultural conditions were inevitably wrong because of their relationship to certain human goods. Even today, it is admitted, one can think of kinds of acts to the wrongness of which one cannot imagine any exception — for example, for an adult male to compel a six-year-old child to engage in sodomitic intercourse (where "sodomitic" is used in a merely descriptive sense). Those who hold that there are not intrinsically evil acts merely wish to say that it is a contingent — in no sense a necessary — truth that acts of certain kinds always are wrong. In principle, they could be right in some circumstances or if done with some intention. Perhaps, for example, if new psychological knowledge indicated that the only way to stop certain psychotic conditions developing in children was to sodomitically rape them, then in that situation the act would become virtuous.

Now, within the context of Roman Catholic faith, I think it must be held that there are intrinsically evil acts. Although this proposition has not been defined as a truth of faith, I think it has been infallibly held and handed down in the Church.

Vatican Council II, in its discussion of the teaching office of the bishops, explained how doctrine proposed by the ordinary magisterium can be taught infallibly:

Although the bishops individually do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they nevertheless proclaim the teaching of Christ infallibly, even when they are dispersed throughout the world, provided that they remain in communion with each other and with the Successor of Peter, and that in authoritatively teaching on a matter of faith and morals they agree in one judgment as that to be held definitively.
(*Lumen gentium*, 25)

John C. Ford, S.J., and I have written an article which appeared in *Theological Studies* (June 1978); in our article we present a careful exegesis of this passage from the teaching

of Vatican II, and then go on to argue that the received Catholic teaching on the morality of contraception has been proposed in a way which meets the conditions for infallible teaching by the ordinary magisterium. We do not attempt to show that Vatican II's formulation of the conditions in this passage itself expresses a truth of faith, but I think it does and that this can be shown.

Assuming Vatican II's formulation as a premise, one can easily conclude that many points of traditional Catholic moral teaching have been proposed infallibly. Throughout the world during the centuries from Trent to Vatican II, the Catholic bishops in union with one another and the popes exercised their teaching office by establishing and closely supervising seminaries where their priests were trained. These priests passed on Catholic moral teaching both in the confessional and in other ways.

The vehicles for communicating moral teaching in the seminaries were the approved textbooks in moral theology. Much of the content of these books varied; most of it was not proposed as Christian teaching to be held definitively. However, in these books, various kinds of acts were characterized as intrinsically and gravely evil, and in most cases any kind of act thus characterized by one of the approved authors was similarly characterized by all of them.

This substantive moral teaching had been held and handed down as part of the Christian tradition for centuries before the reformation, both by the Roman Catholic Church and by the Eastern Catholics, and it continued to be held and handed on by all Christians for centuries after the reformation. These teachings were clearly proposed as beyond doubt, as moral norms to be held definitively. In fact, many of them were backed by citations to Scripture. No matter what a modern exegete might think of the use to which Scripture was put in moral teaching, those who appealed to Scripture to back up moral teaching *thought* they were appealing to divine revelation, and the faithful understood the claim which was made. Obviously, if one claims that a certain point of teaching is divinely revealed, one calls for an assent of faith, and a *fortiori* proposes this point of teaching as one which is to be held definitively.

Thus, the substantive moral teaching common in the Catholic Church from Trent to Vatican II was proposed by the bishops in a way which meets the conditions articulated by Vatican II for teaching which is infallible, even though not solemnly defined. This body of moral teaching was proposed as unquestionable and absolutely binding, and the faithful accepted it as such. People considered themselves sinners if they did not live up to it.

Now, if the Catholic Church already has taught infallibly that certain kinds of acts are intrinsically and gravely evil, then the question whether there are intrinsically evil acts is settled in the affirmative so far as Catholic moral theology is concerned. But it is one thing to accept a fact, and it is another to try to understand it. *The main point of the present paper is to try to clarify the fact that there are intrinsically evil acts, by considering this point of teaching in the light of more basic teachings of faith. In particular, I wish to show that the five points of doctrine previously summarized, far from implying that there are no intrinsically evil acts, rather imply that there are — or, at least, help make this fact intelligible. It is a matter of faith that fornication can bar one from the heavenly kingdom.* The problem is to see why this barrier is not a merely arbitrary test, so that it could not as well have been the case that eating Jonathan apples would bar one from the kingdom but fornicating would not.

The transcendence of the Christian vocation implies that Christian morality is much less concerned with results — since the ultimate destiny of Christians is nor proportionate to human action — than it is with the right disposition toward God. God is to be loved above all things for his own sake. God's goodness is identical with himself. In its infinite plentitude, divine goodness embraces in a superior way all of the goods of creatures. The various goods of creatures, including all of the basic human goods, are only various inadequate images of divine goodness.

But precisely as images of divine goodness, basic goods of persons deserve to be loved and revered just to the extent of their goodness. The exemplar is dishonored if the image is not duly revered. Moreover, the calling of human persons to share in divine life, far from nullifying the inherent value of proportionate goods, ennobles them. The basic human goods are intrinsic aspects of the full-being of persons called to share in divinity, and so these goods share in divine dignity.

The assumption of human nature and the human condition by the Word of God also implies that in him and in those united with him, an offense against human goods is an offense against God. Moreover, human goods have not been created to be annihilated. In the heavenly kingdom they too will have their place, for the divine life we are called to share will be shared by us as human persons, richly satisfied with all of the human goods for which we also hope. Seek first the kingdom of God and all else shall be added besides — not discarded as rubbish.

It follows that Christian morality is a morality of love of neighbor and of oneself for the love of God. How can one love God whom one does not see if one hates one's neighbor whom one does see? As long as one does something to the least of Jesus's siblings, and through him our other neighbors share in divinity. Their goods must be treated with due reverence.

The intrinsic goods of human persons are multiple. Each reflects God's perfect goodness inadequately and each catches a somewhat different aspect of it. The common denominator of all of these goods, the divine goodness itself, transcends human comprehension. Thus we have no way to estimate the ultimate significance of any one of these goods in terms of another. Insofar as these goods are possibilities to be realized or fragile realities to be protected, we are called upon by love of God to realize and to protect them. Yet human power is limited and human resources never adequate to the good which is to be done and pursued.

In this situation, however, an attitude which incarnates love of God can and must have one constant implication for one's action. The implication is that one's heart maintain reverence toward all the basic goods of human persons. Reverence does not demand a performance in every case, but it does forbid violation in each and every case.

Since human action is not merely external performance, but rather is a matter of inward disposition, one does not necessarily violate a basic human good whenever one does something which happens to harm it. But one does necessarily violate a human good if one adopts a proposal to prevent, harm, damage, or destroy it. In adopting such a proposal, one sets one's heart against the human good one chooses to violate. And in setting one's heart against a human good, one sets one's heart against God himself, since the human good is an irreplaceable image of God, an intrinsic aspect of a person called to share in divine life, an aspect of the flourishing of a sibling of the Word incarnate, and a secondary but real constituent of heavenly glory.

It follows that acts of kinds which include the adoption of a proposal to violate in some way one of the basic goods of a human person are always wrong. Such acts are necessarily incompatible with Christian love. For Christian love extends not only to divine goodness in God himself, but also extends, just as God's own love extends, in due measure to this same divine goodness as it is participated in creatures. God is not jealous of human love of created goods, for he did not create them to be unloved, but so that in their very created otherness they might share in his own goodness. But God is jealous of that unique and irreplaceable aspect of his own infinite goodness which is found in each and every finite good which contributes to the flourishing of human persons. To treat such a good irreverently is to offend God.

This brings us to the second point of doctrine: the Christian conception of human persons as subjects.

Human subjectivity does imply that human action is no mere external pattern of behavior, but rather is the enactment of a humanly given meaning. But it does not follow that human acts are endlessly plastic. Behavioral patterns are not acts except insofar as they execute proposals adopted by choice. Such proposals are human understandings articulated in deliberation. The human subject, by reinterpretation, can give new meaning to anything other than understandings themselves. But understandings are not subject to interpretation and so they are not plastic to reinterpretation. If one's proposal is to negate some intrinsic good of a human person, nothing else one thinks about the action can remove the interpretation which this very understanding imposes upon it.

It is true that what is most important about Christian existence is that it incarnates faith and love. For this very reason, the view that it is morally permissible and even necessary to use whatever means might be required to achieve some humanly good results or to avoid disastrous consequences is alien to Christian moral reflection. Consequences are not morally determinative. Ultimately, the outcome of any difficult situation must be left to providence. In this respect, hope is as essential a Christian disposition as is faith or love.

Furthermore, as I have explained already, a life which truly incarnates Christian love will be marked by reverence for every aspect of the intrinsic full-being of human persons. The affirmative demands of love are open-ended and indefinable. But the adoption of a proposal to negate a basic human good always is incompatible with love of God. That for the sake of which one would adopt such a proposal is treated as if it were superior to the divine goodness present by participation in the good which is violated. The end used to justify the means is an idol — a created good loved not insofar as it shares God's goodness, but beyond this, as if it were good or itself and apart from God. Had the end not been idolized, had it been loved only in due measure, the good which is violated would also have been loved in due measure — that is, to the extent of its own goodness — but then one could not have adopted a proposal to violate it.

Faith and love are real relationships. One does not have these dispositions of the heart merely by feeling in a certain way, merely by wishing for them, merely by using the right jargon. As real relationships, faith and love set real, interpersonal requirements. Real, interpersonal requirements must be understood and accepted for what they are. Thus Christian morality cannot be an arbitrary set of rules, imposed by fiat.

Neither the pope nor the Church, not even God himself, can make actions right or wrong by a mere act of the will. Christian morality excludes all such authoritarianism. It

is not a despotic morality; it is a morality of truth. The requirements of Christian existence are the true demands of the real, interpersonal relationships of faith and love. If despotic commands were given, servile obedience to them would be of no value. Even when real moral requirements are proposed, mere outward conformity which does not express the inward dispositions of faith and love is useless.

Precisely for this reason, the subjectivity of the person does not entail subjectivism. Subjectivism is mere individual arbitrariness, a denial of the morality of truth, an assertion that nothing will be immoral for oneself if one does not accept it as such. Against such individualistic self-assertion, the intrinsic demands of the interpersonal reality of faith and love make their appeal. This appeal always is intelligible to the Christian in the light of faith by virtue of the inward teaching of the Spirit.

A Christian is bound only by conscience. But the first duty of conscience is to seek to learn the moral truth and to be ready to accept and follow it. Because moral truth must be learned, an upright person with a sincere conscience can be mistaken in a particular matter. The Spirit is infallible, but one must listen closely to him, and not confuse one's own feelings with his promptings. Moreover, to the extent that we are not perfect Christians, our hearts are not pure. A divided heart inevitably deceives itself about some moral truths.

The historicity of humankind and the intimate participation of Christians in the work of creation and redemption to entail that human acts develop new meanings from age to age. People in diverse cultures who might seem outwardly to be doing the very same things are in reality doing very different things. Marital intercourse for Christians, for example, pertains to a sacrament, and so it has a far greater and richer significance than does an apparently similar act for pre-Christian or post-Christian pagans. And even within the Christian context, such an act can unfold new dimensions of meaning.

Some who have studied the history of Christian morality have brought to this study a set of suppositions appropriate to the study of the history of law, but not suited to the study of the history of Christian morality. The mistake is understandable because of the adoption by moral theology of a methodology adapted from law. The inappropriate suppositions brought to the study of the history of Christian morality include the following: that human acts are patterns of outward behavior, which can change their meaning in the course of history; that in different environments, human goods can be promoted and protected in different ways, and moral norms are merely rules devised to promote and protect human goods in a certain historical context; and that one can legitimately criticize and perhaps revise even those moral norms which derive directly from basic human goods by assuming as a standard the relative importance given to the various basic human goods in the lifestyle of a given society.

As I have explained already, the first of these suppositions is mistaken. Actions are not mere patterns of behavior; people do what they understand themselves to be doing. If people understand themselves to be doing something different, the result is not the same act with a different moral quality, but a different act. However, acts which are the same in kind insofar as they include a proposal to violate some basic human good, can also be different in kind insofar as they include many other diverse elements. For example, acts the same in kind insofar as they include the proposal to kill a person can be different in kind insofar as they are suicide or homicide, executed by performance or by omission, done with beneficent feelings or with great cruelty, done to the Word

incarnate or to the least of his unborn siblings. Through the course of history, people in different situations and cultures understand human life and its destruction rather differently; on this account, killings differ in kind. But insofar as a class or acts is specified by the proposal to violate human life by killing a person, acts of that class are the same in kind and are always evil.

Human goods can be promoted and protected in different ways in different historical contexts. Many moral norms do express no more than a culturally conditioned understanding of ways in which human goods can be promoted and protected under given conditions. However, those fundamental requirements of Christian morality which demand reverence for the basic human goods are not merely instrumental. They express in a direct way the minimum demands of love in relation to these goods. As truths, not rules, such moral norms are immune to change.

To assume that one can criticize and perhaps revise such moral norms by taking as a standard the relative importance which is given the basic human goods in the lifestyle of a given society — for example, the lifestyle characteristic of the contemporary, economically developed, non-communist nations — is to lose one's historical consciousness. Historicity demands rather than excludes insight into the unity of the basic goods of human persons, a unity which cannot be located without arbitrariness in the contingent conditions of the here-and-now which happen to delimit one's own point of view. Only with insight into the unity of human goods can the various ages and conditions of humankind be understood as a history, as a continuous evolution, rather than as a disjoined succession of such arbitrarily absolutized points of view.

It is important to notice that those who think that historicity excludes intrinsically evil acts could not draw this conclusion without assuming, in addition to historicity, that basic human goods and various instances of them can be weighed and balanced against one another, so that in different times and circumstances, a different conclusion might be reached. At one time and place, for example, the goodness of procreation, the importance of the education of children, the sacredness of innocent life, the personal dignity of spouses, and the holiness of marital love might be weighed and balanced in such a way that they would be best protected by the moral wall of a rule forbidding contraception as evil. Under different conditions, the results of weighing and balancing, it is assumed, would be different, so that perhaps the wall would be a prison rather than a bulwark, and would have to be removed.

The assumption that the basic human goods and all instances of them can in some way be rationally weighed and balanced is common to almost all moral theologians who deny that there are any intrinsically evil acts. The practically or virtually exceptionless moral norms, according to them, are not absolute, because in some cases there is a proportionate reason — a greater good to be gained or a greater evil avoided — for violating the basic human good which the moral norm otherwise protects.

Although the argument is too long to articulate here, it is worth noticing that one of the chief aspects of the Christian conception of the subjectivity of human persons excludes the weighing and balancing which is assumed possible by those who deny that there are intrinsically evil acts. According to Christian faith, human persons can make free choices. Nonbelievers can deny this, but Christians cannot, for it is an aspect of the Christian conception of the human person closely tied to the belief that we are made in the image of God who creates and redeems freely, and it is essential to the Christian conception of both sin and the act of faith.

Free choice excludes psychological determinism. Psychological determinism is the theory that one's choice is settled by that which appears to be the most desirable possibility under consideration. If those goods which are ends for human action were commensurable, so that one could tell which alternative contained in some univocal sense the greatest net good or the least evil, one possibility would appear most desirable. If this were so, then psychological determinism would be correct, for one chooses for the sake of the good, and could not adopt a proposal promising less good, if another proposal promised all of that good and more.

It follows that the Christian doctrine of free choice rules out the weighing and balancing which is assumed possible by most who deny that there are any intrinsically evil acts. As I say, this argument is subtle and needs to be articulated at greater length. I have attempted to do so in various other places, perhaps most clearly in a forthcoming book, of which Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., is coauthor, entitled *Life, Death, Liberty, and Justice: A Contribution to the Euthanasia Debate*, chapter eleven, sections C and D, but in more detail in an article, "Against Consequentialism," which will appear in the *American Journal of Jurisprudence* (1978).

I now move on to the fourth of the doctrinal points: the Christian appreciation of the brokenness of the world and the pervasiveness of sin.

Christian morality does take full account of the reality of evil. Thus, it never has proposed standards for living in an ideal world, a world free of sin and its effects. For this very reason, Christian morality, unlike many moral theories which begin by sounding far more high-handed and humane, never has tried to define moral obligation in terms of maximizing good and minimizing evil. The primary demand of Christian morality is a demand for sinners: Repent!

The supposition that a realistic awareness of evil requires that one make exceptions to moral norms as required to mitigate evil in difficult situations presupposes the possibility of weighing and balancing which I have just been criticizing. One cannot make compromises without measuring the violation one chooses against the evil one would have to accept if one refused to violate the good for which the norm to which one makes an exception claims one's reverence.

Other points already considered also tell against the supposed need for compromise. Since Christian morality is primarily a morality of inwardness, consequences are not determinative. A Christian heart, without abandoning faith and love, can tolerate and suffer much evil, and will do so when the alternative is to identify with the evil.

One cannot adopt a proposal to violate a basic human good without identifying oneself with evil. The act is not the outward performance, detachable from the self. To adopt a proposal to kill a person is to make oneself a murderer. One cannot adopt such a proposal, make oneself such a person, without constricting love of the human goods and violating the divine goodness in which they are participations.

To suppose that a Christian who refuses to do evil that good might follow therefrom is evading responsibility out of pharisaic concern with personal moral purity is to presuppose that human responsibility extends in one and the same way to everything to which human power could extend. This assumption would render null the Christian doctrine of trust in providence, for there would be no occasion to stop short of doing everything possible and to rely on providence if there were no limits to the methods one might use in trying to overcome evil.

For Christians, however, there are very definite limits. The necessary refusal to do what violates human goods inevitably leads to alienation between the sinful world and the Christian, just to the extent that the Christian is united with Christ. This alienation means that Christian virtue is its own punishment, for the faithful Christian is plunged into evil, not as a doer of it, but, together with Jesus, as a sufferer.

The readiness to suffer evil as a function of refusing to cooperate in it and compromise with it is an essential, although currently unpopular, aspect of Christian life. It is the properly Christian way of struggling with evil and overcoming evil. This is the law of the cross, which requires of every Christian the readiness for martyrdom, the Christian act par excellance.

Christians do share in the very liberty of God. This is the fifth point of doctrine to be considered.

If Christians are guided by the Spirit, the law loses its hold. But the liberty of the children of God must not be misunderstood. It is freedom from sin, reconciliation with God. Like all goods of Christian life, this liberty must be understood according to the model exhibited in Jesus. Being one with God, in perfect liberty he emptied himself, was obedient, served humbly, suffered, and died. Jesus is the model of responsibility and no legalist, but he deals with evil by patient suffering, with reverence for every good, not by action which would violate and destroy — violate the good in order to destroy and so minimize evil.

Christian morality cannot be captured in universal norms. for each Christian's mission is different. This morality is one of individual responsibility, and the primary law of Christian life is the inward grace of the Spirit.

Nevertheless, if the people of God, carrying on the redemptive work of Jesus through the ages, shared no common good, they could not be united in the same project of salvation history. But in fact they do participate in this common project, and they do so not as puppets but as informed and willing cooperators. As revelation has unfolded, the meaning of the good to be hoped for also has unfolded. This good does trancend the proportionate goods of human persons, but does not exclude them, as I explained previously.

Throughout salvation history there have been certain constants: for example, that death, humankind's oldest enemy, is to be overcome. The subordinate, but essentially related practical insight that human life is a good, that it is sacred, that God is lord of it, and that its violation offends him has been equally constant. And so while there are no moral rules which tell Christians precisely what they ought to do, there are some kinds of proposal which will always be repugnant to a heart into which God's love is poured forth, a heart which hopes for the salvation he promises.

Legalism does indeed need to be excluded from Christian morality. But reverence for the basic goods of human persons is not legalism. The legalistic style would articulate itself into endless prescriptions to direct one to the good, to make sure that one did not miss it, and thus, unfortunately, would delimit the good to certain goals which could be anticipated. Christian morality does not attempt to delimit the good. Its affirmative prescriptions always are open-ended. Yet Christian moral teaching can make clear what must be avoided if one is to live in Christ — responsibly, freely, and through the grace of the Spirit.