

Catholic Morality — Hard Sayings or Good News

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God's people of the old covenant were called to receive his revelation and to prepare a culture and family in which the Word would take flesh. Their task was a great but limited one — to give birth to Mary and Joseph, the apostles and holy women, the chief priests and pharisees. In carrying out their task, the People of the old covenant served God without comprehending what they were doing. For the plan revealed in Jesus was still hidden from them.

But, as Jesus says in today's Gospel, we know what our Master is doing. We are called not just to serve Him but to help Him complete his work of proclaiming the Kingdom and building it up. As God's new people, his Church, we are called to teach the nations, to share with others the truth and love of God we receive from Jesus. Firmly abiding in Him, the Father's vine, we are to bear fruit.

Each branch of the vine, each member of Jesus' Body, the Church, has his or her special gifts. Jesus calls each of us to use our gifts to build up the one Body. We did not choose Him to be our head, but He chose us to be his members, and He has given each of us a unique life of good works, to be our own role in the great drama of salvation history. Each of us must discern what we are called to be, accept our personal vocation, firmly commit ourselves to it, and faithfully fulfill it. In doing that we are Jesus' friends, we love others as He loves us, and we bear the fruit He expects of us.

Some are called to be parents — fathers and mothers who cooperate with the love of the Creator in bringing into being and nurturing toward human maturity and holiness new persons who are to live forever in heavenly communion. Today we especially honor our mothers whose love in a unique way gave us our lives, our very selves. But others also helped to procreate us as human persons and children of God — our fathers, our pastors, our other teachers, and in various ways all the members of the Church, who have done their share in building up this one body in which alone we enjoy our personal lives as members of Jesus.

Celebrations like the one in which we share here today mark stages in our finding and carrying out of our personal vocations. Completing part of their preparation for service to others, those graduating have already begun to serve, for they have already begun to lay down their lives for those whom they wish to serve.

Years more of preparation are still needed. Those years shouldn't be regarded as a deferral of the work to which today's graduates are called, but as the most vital part of that work. Jesus laid down his hidden life for us for many years. If we love others as He loves us, we must lay down hidden lives for them to become the other Christs whose public lives will be of real service. Seminarians look forward to bringing God's truth and

love to others, by preaching the Good News and ministering the sacraments. That is a wonderful prospect. But realism demands that the hardness of this vocation be kept in mind. Today's world is hardly more ready to welcome other Christs and to treat them well than Jesus' world was to welcome him, than the world of the Roman empire was to welcome Paul.

Some call our culture "neopagan." I think that characterization is far too optimistic. Paganism involved confusions about the reality transcendent to man, but it never went so far as to deny all such reality and to claim that human beings are the only source of meaning and value. That is what post-Christian, secular humanist ideologies do claim.

Moreover, paganism offered rather unappealing alternatives to Christian hope in heavenly communion. The various forms of secular humanism offer more appealing alternatives, for they have taken over Christian ideals of freedom, justice, and happiness. Although these ideals are distorted, they retain their human appeal, and they are promised in this life, not another life, and without the cross, without self-denial, through social and political processes. The Gospel encourages poverty, chastity, and obedience, while secular humanism encourages consumerism, instant gratification and the manipulative use of other people.

During the past quarter century, the Church has felt the impact of secular humanism. Pope John XXIII called Vatican II so that the Church could pull herself together and more effectively work to save the modern world. Secular humanists naturally misunderstood and thought the Council's purpose was to bring the Church into conformity with the world.

Unfortunately, many members of the Church became confused and quite a few have preferred the world's agenda to the Council's agenda for the Church. So many children of the Church come to her whining: Mother, why can't I do what all the other children of this age are doing?

This whine defines the situation in which pastoral work must be carried on today. And since our culture favors permissiveness and indulgence, naturally there are many in the Church who urge not only that we pay attention to the whine (as any good mother would do) but that we give into it (as no good mother would do).

The Church, it is said, should avoid harsh moral pronouncements and should stick to her primary task of bearing witness to God's gracious forgiveness, his unending mercy. Hard sayings, we are told, will only make more of the children of the Church pack up and leave home. So anything too demanding must be censored out of the Gospel, as a culturally conditioned element no longer useful in our time. Does the Bible talk

about hell? Ancient near-eastern threat discourse, hardly appropriate in our more civilized age.

Those who urge the Church to be a permissive mother, who want her to adopt an indulgent pastoral practice, do not understand what morality and sin are. They think morality is just a set of rules, only loosely connected with anything of great importance for human life, and that sin is merely the breaking of a rule. They think that a pastor is like a friendly neighborhood patrolman, who prudently softens the requirements of the law, overlooks most violations, and looks out for small children, drunks, and others unable to take care of themselves.

With this misunderstanding of morality, sin, and pastoral work has come a remodeling of God. No more a Father who passionately wants what is really good for his children, he no longer hates evil and becomes angry with sinners.

Wanting us to enjoy ourselves and feel no pain, this remodeled God does not demand repentance, but instead ignores sin, tolerates it, covers it over cosmetically, and makes sure that sinners do not suffer the consequences of their irresponsibility. In place of the almighty God and Father revealed throughout the Bible, we now are presented with something more like a weak male character in a TV situation comedy. God is becoming the great wimp in the sky.

In reality, the norms of morality are no mere set of rules. Rather, they are inescapably necessary requirements for living in accord with our dignity as persons made in God's image and likeness, for reverencing the persons of others, and for working together toward a flourishing life of personal fulfillment and communion in social solidarity.

Sins are self-mutilating acts, which impede or damage or destroy some part of the full being of ourselves and other persons; sins block the way toward integral human fulfillment. To commit a sin is not so much like ignoring the lines which divide spaces in parking lot as it is like ignoring the line which marks the edge of a mountain road beyond which a sheer cliff drops away a thousand feet.

Christian faith illuminates the human condition. Fallen humankind lives in the shadow of death and is terrorized. If our age is too civilized for ancient near-eastern threat discourse about hell, it is not so civilized as to do without the threat of mutual assured destruction and the terror of a nuclear winter in which we shall all die. Selfishness is so wide-spread that it is hard to trust anyone's motives and easy to settle for a veneer of social grace covering a hard core of realistic egoism.

People seek material things and abundance of services to give them some sense of self-fulfillment, passing pleasures to distract them briefly from their anxiety about death, and control over others as a pitiful substitute for real friendship, for intimate communion. But

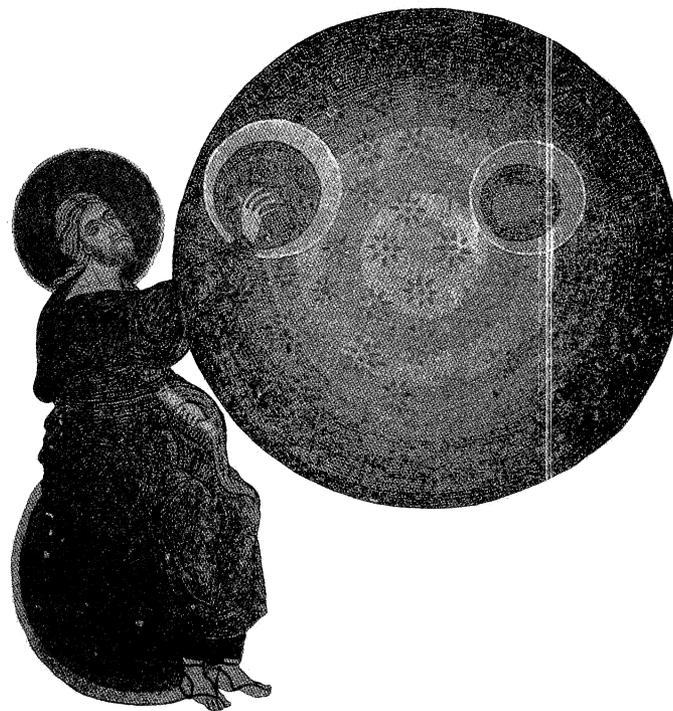
consumerism for some means starvation for others; self-indulgence in passing pleasures leads to emotional emptiness and the meaninglessness of the sensate culture; and mutual attempts to dominate one another bring about a world of lonely individuals for each of whom hell is other people.

God truly is rich in mercy. Hating the evil which mutilates his creatures, still He hates nothing of the good He has made. And though, He is angry with sinners, He restrains his anger. He demands true repentance and enables us to repent; He calls us to return to Him and, if only we allow it, brings us back to Himself. When we are dead in our sin, He does not ignore that fact or treat it as tolerable.

Instead, He loves us so much that He sends his own Son to share our death, and so bring us back to life. God allows us to suffer the consequences of our irresponsibility, not that He wants us to suffer, but because He wants us to know the truth about ourselves. For only if we face the truth can we accept the divine mercy which overcomes sin and its consequences, not by brushing them aside as insignificant, but by dealing with them effectively and making us sinners whole again and holy.

We are called to love others as Jesus loves, by laying down our lives, not as secular humanists loves, by trying to set up some sort of program by which society will solve people's problems.

We are called to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful, by doing what is necessary to heal the wounds of sin, not to be compassionate as secular humanist leaders are compassionate, by killing those who get in the way of their projects for a perfect society — in



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Marxist societies, those powerful enough to be hated oppressors; in our society, those weak enough to be unwanted dependents.

The indulgent pastoral practice advocated by some Catholics today is nothing new. Something very like it has been tried by Protestants. We should know from their experience that to abandon Christian realism about human sin and God's mercy may seem an effective strategy in the short run but in the long run makes the residue of faith and ecclesial life incredible and irrelevant. Most Americans who are practical non-believers were once — or had parents or grandparents who were once — liberal Protestants.

It is clear enough already that soft pastoral practice, intended to keep this generation of Catholics in the Church, is going to be paid for by the loss of much of the next generation. Catholic parents whose lives are hardly distinguishable from the lives of nonbelievers are hardly likely to bring up children who will see any reason to take seriously religious beliefs and practices which they will receive as mere formalities, cheap souvenirs lacking substantial meaning and value.

A certain physician, Dr. Kindly, always treated his patients in a warm and friendly manner, and they all liked him. One day John Jones came to Dr. Kindly, complaining of pains in his chest. The doctor made a thorough examination and found a suspicious lump in John's breast. He sent John for further tests and a biopsy.

When the results came back, Dr. Kindly's worst fears were confirmed: John had breast cancer, which is rare and usually fatal in men. With great sadness, Dr. Kindly prepared to give John the bad news: His only hope lay in radical chest surgery, harsh chemotherapy, and castration. But when Dr. Kindly began to talk with his patient, it became clear that John also already suspected the worst, was very anxious about his condition, and did not wish to hear the grave diagnosis and severe plan for treatment.

"Come on, Doc," John pleaded, "I just need something for these chest pains. Can't you give me a prescription for some pain killers to help me over the next few weeks?"

Feeling great sympathy for John, Dr. Kindly thought: "This patient isn't ready to hear the bad news. Perhaps he will be in a few weeks. Anyway, maybe by then he'll have a spontaneous remission and get well without the surgery, chemotherapy, and castration. After all, miracles do happen."

So Dr. Kindly gave John the prescription he wanted. John got it filled at once, took the pain killers religiously, and for a while felt much better. However, before long John's condition worsened, and the pain became unbearable. He sought treatment, but it was too late. Dr. Kindly came to John's funeral and cried more than anyone else.

Another man, Sam Smith, went to Dr. Severe with similar complaints. Dr. Severe was not by nature a warm and friendly fellow. His patients didn't like him much,

but they respected his competence and appreciated his careful treatment of their ills. Dr. Severe's examination of Sam Smith and the tests showed that Sam also had breast cancer, and that the same plan of treatment was indicated.

Dr. Severe knew that Sam would not want to hear the bad news and would not easily accept the required treatment. So when he met with the patient, Dr. Severe made a special effort to be warm and friendly, to explain the facts as gently as possible, and to put the situation into the most optimistic light. Yet Sam also pleaded for a prescription for pain killers.

Dr. Severe refused and insisted that Sam enter the hospital at once to be readied for surgery. Only as part of that plan of treatment would pain-relieving drugs be administered. Sam very reluctantly accepted the diagnosis and plan of treatment.

Fortunately, it was successful, and every trace of cancer was eliminated. Even so Sam was depressed at first about the price he'd had to pay for his survival. Dr. Severe helped him to adjust and begin life anew. Eventually, Sam came to see that while not the man he once was, he is no less a person with a life to live and be thankful for. When Dr. Severe dies, Sam will go to his funeral.

Now, which one of these physicians is truly merciful? Is Dr. Kindly or Dr. Severe more like the compassionate Jesus?

Deep in their hearts, most people know their true condition. They know how miserable they really are, and how much they need genuine redemption, which they can enjoy only if they accept the full truth of the Gospel, including its plan for the treatment and overcoming of sin. Most people realize how hollow are the promises of secular humanism. They may whine that mother Church should let them do what all the other children of this age are doing, and they may plead for the pain killer of reassurances of mercy without repentance. But the moral truth is written in their hearts, and their consciences together with a sense of faith they cannot silence remind them of that truth.

Yet the preaching of the Gospel in its integrity never has been easy, and it will be especially hard during the next few decades. And so diligent preparation for pastoral ministry is more necessary than ever. That preparation certainly includes study, to more fully understand the truth the Church teaches and to learn how to present and explain that truth as clearly and cogently as possible. But it also, and even more necessarily, includes continuing and more intense work at personal sanctification. Revelation requires both words and deeds. So if we are going to communicate God's truth and love to others, we not only must speak well but must bear witness to the truth we proclaim by living according to it.

Constant effort to fulfill the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience not only is an especially effective way to work at personal sanctification, but a specific

form of witness. For life according to the vows is diametrically opposed to secular humanism's conception of the good life. Poverty radically rejects consumerism; chastity radically rejects pleasure-seeking; obedience radically rejects the manipulation of others.

Today such witness is vitally important. Forty years ago every Catholic knew the main reason why God made us to be happy with him forever in heaven. But the period of reconstruction and prosperity after World War II naturally drew people's attention to this world.

Vatican II's correction of false other-worldliness unexpectedly sent the Church on a dangerous skid toward false this-worldliness. While faithful Catholics did not accept liberalized Christianity's denial of the transcendent, they had to accept the elements of truth in liberalized Christianity's call for relevance — involvement in the causes of human rights, social justice, and peace. In the optimistic atmosphere around the time of Vatican II, thoughts of hell seemed out of place; attention to heaven inevitably carries with it thoughts of hell, and so attention to heaven had to be avoided as an occasion of bad thoughts.

The New Testament and the liturgy are still predominantly concerned with heaven — the hidden kingdom. No faithful Catholic will deny that we must seek it first and that it is not of this world.

Yet in practice even faithful bishops, priests, religious, and layfolk attend almost exclusively to our human concerns in this world (which they nevertheless say should be subordinated to the more real world of faith), and to the standards of this world (to which they nevertheless say we should not conform).

If we really believed in heaven, if our treasure were there and our hearts were there, with a real, live Jesus and Mary, a Jesus and Mary so familiar that just as we expect

from moment to moment to see, hear, smell, and embrace those with whom we live, so we expect to meet Jesus and Mary at any moment, to talk with them, to work and play with them, to eat with them. If heaven were like that for us, Christian morality would no longer be hard sayings, but would be truly good news, the light and joyful yoke and burden of the way of our Lord Jesus.

Thus, the first pastoral necessity today is to awaken lively faith in heaven. If you do that, everything else will come very easily. To meet this pastoral necessity you must learn how to preach and teach the Gospel of the Kingdom.

But words will never be credible unless they are confirmed by lives which show that we really believe that the world of experience is less real than the world in which we hope. Thus, life according to the vows, which seems so unrealistic to the children of this world, has never been a more needed witness than it is today.

And so, to you graduates, I offer my congratulations and earnest encouragement to complete the preparation you have begun. Be still better students; be still their teachers and all the others who have helped them come today, let us rejoice and give thanks.

And, finally, let us pray that our loving Father who has brought us so far will continue to enlighten and strengthen us by the gift of his Spirit, and so bring us at last to the company of Jesus and Mary and all the saints — not only to be in their company, for so we now are, but to experience their company together, and to know that we can never lose it. We ask in Jesus' name.

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