

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

THE ESSENCE OF CATHOLIC MORALITY

PART THREE • SECTION ONE OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

by
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A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith. Following are the titles in our series.

Part I: What Catholics Believe (Theology)

- Section 1: Faith
- Section 2: God
- Section 3: Creation
- Section 4: The Human Person
- Section 5: Jesus Christ
- Section 6: The Holy Spirit
- Section 7: The Holy Catholic Church
- Section 8: The Forgiveness of Sins
- Section 9: The Resurrection of the Body
- Section 10: The Life Everlasting

Part II: How Catholics Pray (Worship)

- Section 1: Introduction to Catholic Liturgy
- Section 2: Introduction to the Sacraments

- Section 3: Baptism and Confirmation**
- Section 4: The Eucharist**
- Section 5: Penance**
- Section 6: Matrimony**
- Section 7: Holy Orders and the Anointing of the Sick**
- Section 8: Prayer**
- Section 9: The Lord's Prayer**
- Section 10: Mary**

Part III: How Catholics Live (Morality)

- Section 1: The Essence of Catholic Morality**
- Section 2: Human Nature as the Basis for Morality**
- Section 3: Some Fundamental Principles of Catholic Morality**
- Section 4: Virtues and Vices**
- Section 5: The First Three Commandments: Duties to God**
- Section 6: The Fourth Commandment: Family and Social Morality**
- Section 7: The Fifth Commandment: Moral Issues of Life and Death**
- Section 8: The Sixth and Ninth Commandments: Sexual Morality**
- Section 9: The Seventh and Tenth Commandments: Economic and Political Morality**
- Section 10: The Eighth Commandment: Truth**

SECTION 1: THE ESSENCE OF CATHOLIC MORALITY

1. The place of morality in the Catholic faith

Taking its origin from the Faith, this series has three parts:

- 1) How Catholics think (Catholic theology);
- 2) How Catholics pray (Catholic worship);
- 3) How Catholics live (Catholic morality).

There are three elements that enter into every religion: faith, spiritual life, and morality; creed, cult, and code (liturgy); or words, worship, and works.

They correspond to the three parts of every human soul: mind, heart, and will.

All three are equally central to being a Catholic.

The three parts do not come separately but simultaneously. Catholics do not first decide what to believe, then

move on to prayer and worship, and then begin to live morally after that. In fact, the order is sometimes the reverse: for the most usual source of a loss of faith is an immoral life, and the most powerful source of a moral life is prayer and the sacraments. The more prayer, the more virtue; the more virtue, the more faith.

The three parts are like the three legs of a tripod. The legs may be weak or strong, long or short, but if all three are not there, it is not a tripod. A person is not a Catholic without belief in the essence of what the Church teaches as God's revealed truth, or without a sincere effort to obey what the Church teaches as God's commandments, or without facing God in prayer as the Church does. To refuse to believe, obey, or to pray is to be a non-Catholic; to believe, obey, and pray weakly is to be a weak Catholic; to believe, obey, and pray well is to be a strong Catholic.

God alone is able to judge whether anyone is a weak Catholic or a strong Catholic; but you can and should be able to judge whether you are a Catholic or not.

2. The three parts are parts of one single thing

These three parts of the Catholic religion – faith, works, and worship – are three aspects or dimensions of the same single reality, like the three dimensions of space. The same reality that we confess in the creed is the reality we obey in the commandments and participate in in the sacraments. That one reality is the life of Christ. Not just *imitating* the life of Christ, but *that life itself*; not just trying to copy its imagined essence, but sharing in its reality. That is what being a Catholic is ultimately about.

The *Catechism* (C 1692) says this: “What faith confesses, the sacraments communicate: by the sacraments of rebirth [baptism first of all], Christians have become ‘children of God’² [Jn 1:12; 1 Jn 3:1], ‘partakers of the divine nature’³ [2 Pt 1:4]. . . . Christians are called to lead henceforth a life ‘worthy of the gospel of Christ’⁴ [Phil 1:27],” because this means living morally the very life of Christ that we receive sacramentally and confess credally. It is one thing, one life.

3. The centrality of Christ in Catholic morality

In our busy, complex world Christ surely says to us what he said to Martha in Luke 10:41-42: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful.” That “one thing” is Christ himself.

Just as the Eucharist is not just a rite or symbol, but Christ himself, so the moral life of the Christian is Christ himself living his life in his people. We are his own “Body!” Christ is present in our moral life in a way different from the way he is present in the Eucharist, of course: mixed with human imperfections, so that we do not worship good men or good deeds, as we worship the Eucharist. But the moral life of the Christian is not simply a human effort to imitate Christ; it is what St. Paul called “the mystery of Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 4:3).

Christ is not merely a teacher of a moral code but God himself, the One who is the sole source of all good things. Two very good things are the moral law and our obedience to it. It follows that both originate in him: he is the God who gave the moral law to Moses (compare Jn 8:58 with Ex 3:14) and the God who gives us the grace to live it.

Whenever we obey the commandments, we obey Christ, for they are *his* commandments.

Christian morality is not merely a means to the end of a better world, or peace and justice, or the welfare of the family, or social harmony (though all of these are very, very good things). These things are relative to Christ, not Christ relative to them. They are ways of obeying his will. They are good because they are from him; he is not good because he is for them.

The *Catechism* clearly states its Christocentrism at the beginning of each of its major sections, including the one on morality: “The first and last point of reference of this catechesis will always be Jesus Christ himself, who is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’²⁴” (C 1698) – and then the same paragraph quotes St. Paul’s one-word summary of Christian morality, the best one ever given: “For me to live is Christ” (Phil 1:21).

He then adds, “and to die is gain.” For if our life is Christ, then death is only more Christ, and more life.

4. The practical consequences of Christocentrism

Consciousness of the Christocentric nature of Catholic morality not only is the most accurate way to understand it, but also is the most effective way to practice it and overcome our sins and weaknesses. The very first words of the section on morality in the *Catechism* explain the connection.

“Christian, recognize your dignity and, now that you share in God’s own nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning. Remember who is your head and of whose body you are a member. . . .” (C 1691).

Nothing comparable exists in secular morality. No other basis for human dignity can rival this: that God has given us a share in his own divine nature by incorporating us into Christ's Body. At the beginning of this course in Catholic morality, at the beginning of each day, and before each moral choice, we should take time to let this essential point sink in, to listen to the heartbeat of this heart of Catholic morality.

5. The personalism of Catholic morality

What is the image of "Catholic morality" propagated by today's secular world, especially the media establishment which forms modern minds through TV, movies, journalism, and public education?

It is that of a joyless, repressive, dehumanizing, impersonal, and narrow-minded system, something alien and inhuman and often simply stupid.

How totally different Catholic morality looks from the inside, from the viewpoint of those who live it, especially the saints! When the media meet someone whom many consider a saint, like Mother Teresa, their stereotypes dissolve and die.

Nothing looks more different from inside than from outside than Catholic morality – except perhaps being in love. Nothing can appear more foolish to non-lovers, or more wise and wonderful to lovers.

For Catholic morality *is* a love affair with Christ and his people, though not "romantic love." It has its laws and rules, as a city has its streets. Streets are essential to a city, but they are not the very essence of a city. And they are not to live in (though unfortunate "street people" do).

Streets are a means to the end of getting home. Home is where the real living takes place. Similarly, moral rules are the street map to the good life, but they are not the thing itself. The thing itself is a relationship of love, like a marriage.

The marriage covenant has laws, like God's covenant with us. But husband and wife are faithful to *each other* first of all, not to the laws. The laws define and command their fidelity to each other. Principles are for persons, not persons for principles. Catholic morality is "personalistic;" it is person-centric because it is Christocentric and Christ is a person, not a principle.

But though they are only *means* to the greater end of the good of persons, laws are *essential* means. As you cannot be an engineer without knowing and following the material laws of physics, you cannot be a Christian without knowing and following the spiritual laws of morality.

Christianity is essentially a love relationship with persons: God and neighbor. What is it to love God? Here is how God himself defines it: "If you love me, keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). Christ does not contrast love and law, but joins them, like soul and body. Love without law is like a soul without a body – a ghost. Law without love is like a body without a soul – a corpse.

6. "Seeing the big picture"

Nothing is more necessary in re-evangelizing modern man than this vision of human life, this "big picture" in Catholic morality: seeing what the Church sees. One of the main reasons why we fail to practice our morality well is that we fail to understand it well. We fail to understand that

it is not just a way of behaving, but a way of being, not just “living a good life” but becoming “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), becoming “a little Christ.” When we read what the saints say about the perfection of charity, or what Christ himself says in the Beatitudes, we are startled to see how different this vision is from the common conception of morality, how high and holy and beautiful and full of joy.

If we forget this “big picture,” this ultimate reason for being moral (to enter into Christ’s own very life and love), then even if we remember all the rest of Catholic morality – its realism, its reasonableness, its justice – we will miss its beauty and we will miss the joy of its adventure.

For Catholic morality means not just following laws, but following Christ, and that is more like following a speeding car than following a set of directions: it is alive! Annie Dillard says that when we go to Mass we are “like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear... velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and... draw us out to where we can never return.”

Pagans, ancient or modern, love goodness *in man*, where they can see it. Jews and Muslims as well as Christians love goodness also *in God*, first of all in God, where they cannot see it; but Christians love goodness most of all where we saw it perfectly on earth: in Christ. What did goodness look like then? It looked like a Cross: God loving us to death, to the end, no matter what it cost

him and no matter how undeserving we are. It is not a love-until, or a love-unless, but a love-unqualified. *That* is the living source of Catholic morality: a source as real and as fiery as the burning bush where Moses saw God. This is the vision of morality that made the saints saints. They did not just “imitate” it; they participated in its life, as branches in a vine (see Jn 15:5).

7. The relation between religion and morality: can we be good without God?

“If God does not exist, everything is permissible,” wrote Dostoyevski. For if it is only man’s will and not God’s that makes moral laws, then they are as changeable and contingent as the rules of a game. If we make the rules, we can change them or unmake them. Destroy religion and you destroy morality.

Yet many great pre-Christian pagan thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Confucius, and Lao Tzu knew much of the content of the moral law and recognized its binding force without knowing much of God. And St. Paul wrote that all men, pagan as well as Christian, know God’s moral law through natural reason and conscience (Rom 1:17-21), and he used this principle in preaching to the pagan philosophers in Athens (Acts 16). So there can be true morality without true religion.

Both Dostoyevski and Paul are right. Dostoyevski is right because if God, the first cause and ultimate origin of the moral law, did not exist, then an objectively real and universally binding moral law would not exist either. But Paul is also right because man can know God’s effects without explicitly knowing God as their cause, in morality

just as in natural science. All men know the creation; not all know the Creator. All men know the moral law; not all know the Lawgiver.

But we cannot know the moral law *as well* without knowing the Lawgiver and his character. God's supernatural revelation clarifies the knowledge of morality we have by natural reason, and corrects our errors. For fallen man's moral knowledge is not infallible, but God's revelation is.

A practical consequence of Paul's point that all men have knowledge of morality by natural reason (conscience) is that we can argue against such errors as abortion and euthanasia by universal rational principles, just as we can argue against slavery or racism. These are not purely "religious issues" or attempts to impose a specific religious morality on unbelievers. "Thou shalt not kill" does not come with a postscript saying, "for Catholics only."

A practical consequence of Dostoyevski's point, that without God everything is permissible, is that we can't *really* be good without God, even if we don't *know* that fact. Whenever anyone is good, that's God's grace working, whether we know it or not. God deserves the credit and the thanks because he is "the source of every good and perfect gift" (Jas 1:17), especially our natural moral knowledge and our good moral choices. They are ours, and they are free; but they are also God's grace, for God's grace turns our freedom on, not off.

8. Why be a Catholic if you can live a good moral life without it?

You *can* be moral without being a Catholic, without being a Christian, without being religious at all. You can

also live a long and healthy life without knowing or practicing anything about diet or exercise or medicine. But it's not easy! Your chances of succeeding in doing anything always increase the more truth you know. So you are much more *likely* to live a good life if you have better knowledge of what "a good life" really means, from divine revelation.

You also have a far greater *power* to be good if you use the sacraments of the Church, channels of divine grace established by Christ for that very purpose.

But you can honestly be a Catholic only if you believe it is *true*. You can't believe what you think is not true, even if you think it would make you *good*. You don't believe in Santa Claus, even though that belief probably made you quite good each Christmas when you were a child. Why not? Because you know it is not true.

"Why be a Catholic if you can live a good moral life without it?" If you are asking this question as a reason to avoid becoming a Catholic, or as a reason to cease being a Catholic, you are really saying that you do not care what is true, only about being good. But that is not really honest, and thus not really good.

Goodness is absolutely important. But so is truth. Both make absolute demands on us. It is never right to compromise either one.

9. The absolute importance of morality in Scripture

Catholic *morality* (deeds) is consistent with Catholic *theology* (beliefs). And that theology teaches what God has revealed. And the primary data of this revelation come from Scripture. And Scripture tells us that right morality, not just right theology, is the main source of God's bless-

ings. This simple point is repeated constantly in Scripture – by Moses (Dt 30), by David (Ps 1), and by Christ (Mt 25).

Right faith (“orthodoxy”) is crucial, but right practice (“orthopraxy”) is also necessary. Orthodoxy is indispensable, yet it does not exist for itself alone, but for a further end, as a plant’s roots exist for its fruits. The Pharisees had correct theology but they rejected Christ because they were not morally honest or humble, but hypocritical and proud.

The 2000-year-long historical narrative of the Old Testament proves one unmistakably clear principle: whenever God’s people obey his laws, they are blessed; whenever they disobey, they are punished, to bring them to repentance and obedience and then blessing again. The same principle is clear in the history of the Church, the New Israel. In the first few centuries it was a Church of saints and martyrs, and it conquered the world. It converted the pagan Roman Empire to Christ. When Catholics were distinctive, when it cost something to be a Catholic (often one’s blood!), the Church flourished – and still does so in times of adversity. Increasingly, in the last few centuries in the West, it has cost very little, and Catholics have been behaving no differently than the secularized world – and have been steadily losing that world. Statistics show that in America, the country of the West whose practice of religion is highest, Catholics commit adultery, abortion, fornication, rape, murder, euthanasia, and suicide at just about the same rate as everyone else!

10. The role of morality in the decision to believe

How do people decide whether or not to believe in any religion?

Consciously or unconsciously, it is by three qualities they look for: truth, goodness, and beauty. These are three attributes of God: God is infinite truth, infinite goodness, and infinite beauty. And God created man in his image (Gn 1:27). That's why man naturally seeks truth, goodness, and beauty.

All the religions of the world, all man's searchings for God, seek these three ideals. Christianity fulfills them because it is not man's search for God but God's search for man, not man's way up but God's way down, divine revelation. Thus we find supreme truth, goodness, and beauty in Christ. And the Catholic Church is essentially Christ's continuing presence on earth. Catholic Christianity, when it is true to its nature, attracts man's spirit, when man is true to his nature, by all three qualities.

It is goodness that is usually the most powerful attraction. If the Church did not produce saints, then even her most brilliant theologians and her most creative artists would not convince man to entrust his soul to her care. Starting with the Virgin Mary, in a category by herself, all the way down to Mother Teresa, holiness has always been the Church's most effective attractiveness.

The commonest path to God is through goodness; the commonest argument for God is the argument from goodness to truth, from the trustworthiness of saints to the trustworthiness of their faith, from the good fruit to the

good tree (Mt 7:16). For truth and goodness can not fundamentally contradict each other.

11. The importance of morality historically: our Jewish moral heritage

Both man's moral instinct (conscience) and man's religious instinct to worship are innate and natural to him, and therefore present in all times and places in human history. But these two eyes of the soul have not always worked in united vision. Their perfect union was accomplished only by one people in ancient times: the people God chose to be his collective prophet to the world, to reveal his true character as moral and good and holy and demanding holiness from us. Today, nearly half of humanity knows this God, for the world's two largest religions, Christianity and Islam, learned of him from the Jews. But before Christ only Abraham and the people God formed from him knew the true God. Morality was not central to pagan religions as it was to Judaism. The gods of the pagans were as immoral as the men who made them in their own image.

While the common error in ancient times was to separate religion from morality, the common error in modern times is to confine religion to morality, and to reject or ignore religion's supernatural elements. The two main motives behind this "modernism" are an unjustified embarrassment at the supernatural as supposedly unscientific, and a justified embarrassment at the history of religious warfare, persecution, and hatred, which modernists think come from the contradictions between different theologies and the belief that theological orthodoxy is important and truth is objective. (In fact, war, hatred, and persecution

come from sin, not from belief in objective truth!) If we ignore theological dogma, and reduce religion to morality, the modernists argue, we will find unity and peace among the different religions of the world.

But this good end does not justify the less-than-honest means. We cannot ignore truth. We cannot negotiate away any part of the gift of divine revelation, for it is God's unchanging truth.

Truth is unchanging, but this does not mean that our knowledge of the truth is unchanging. The Church is a living thing. Like a tree growing new branches from within, her teaching grows in both theology and morality, as she explores "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom 11:33) that he has revealed to her in the "deposit of faith" she received from Christ, and as she applies these never-changing principles to ever-changing situations.

12. The importance of morality today: the moral crisis of our time

The development from the Middle Ages to modern times is both a progress and a regress, judged by Christian moral standards.

On the one hand, there has been substantial progress not only in scientific knowledge but also in moral knowledge: for instance, sensitivity to human rights, the humane treatment of the handicapped, and the nearly universal consensus against torture, cruelty, slavery, and racism.

On the other hand, especially since the so-called "Enlightenment," Western civilization has been increasingly

secularized and de-Christianized, morally as well as theologically and ecclesiastically. The attempt to preserve Christian morality without Catholic doctrine, Catholic authority, or Catholic sacraments has not worked. Today the secular media, the mind-molders of our civilization, are increasingly skeptical of traditional morality, especially sexual morality; of the very idea of any certainty or any absolutes in morality; and of the idea of morality as God's commandments rather than man's ideals.

The twentieth century's record is far bloodier than that of any other century. For the first time in human history, the planet's most influential civilization has ceased to believe in an objectively real, universally binding moral law.

The crisis exists within the Church as well. In most European countries and in America, many or even most Catholics say they believe morality is subjective and relative. This is new. There have always been crises in the Church, but those of the past were usually theological rather than moral. The Church in the first six centuries confronted many heresies and hammered out the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation; medieval Christendom did the same with the sacraments, and the Counter-Reformation with the doctrines of salvation and Church authority. But today the controversies are almost always about morality. So the critical teachings of the Church today are her moral teachings, her response to the moral crisis both in the Church and in the world.

13. The supernatural character of Catholic morality

The crisis of faith today is rooted in a loss of the sense of the supernatural: in theology (e.g. “demythologizing” miracles and Christ’s resurrection), in liturgy (e.g. substituting the “horizontal” human community for the “vertical” divine worship), and in morality (e.g. changing God’s absolute commandments into man’s relative values).

But Christian morality is supernatural in its essence (paragraph 13), in its origin (paragraph 14), and in its end (paragraph 15).

The essence of Christian morality is a relationship with God and his will, not just human self-fulfillment, or society, or abstract ideals or values, however important these aspects of morality are. The quest for personal happiness, for social justice and peace, and for higher and deeper human values is still quite popular in modern secular civilization, fortunately. But the idea of submission to God’s authority and obedience to his laws certainly is not. (What immediate reaction is produced by such words as submission, authority, obedience, and law?)

14. The supernatural origin of Catholic morality

Morality has a supernatural origin: God’s truth, which is part of his unchangeable nature, or character.

God’s truth is made known to us in two ways: naturally, through reason and conscience; and supernaturally, through God’s special revelation to Abraham, Moses, the Jewish prophets, and, most completely, in Christ and the Church he established “on the foundation of the apostles” to teach in his name and with his authority (Lk 10:16; Eph 2:20).

15. *The supernatural end of Catholic morality*

Morality's supernatural end is eternal Heavenly happiness. That is why we exist in the first place, why God created us; that is the ultimate meaning and purpose of human life: "God put us in the world to know, to love and to serve him, and so to come to paradise" (C 1721). As the well-known and well-loved beginning of the old *Baltimore Catechism* put it:

1) Q. Who made you?

A. God made me.

2) Q. Why did God make you?

A. God made me to know him, love him, and serve him in this world and to enjoy him forever in the next.

"[T]he natural desire for happiness . . . [is] of divine origin: God has placed it in the human heart in order to draw man to the One who alone can fulfill it" (C 1718). As St. Augustine said, in the most famous Christian sentence outside Scripture, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and [therefore] our hearts are restless until they rest in thee" (*Confessions I, 1*).

Catholic morality is a road map on our path through this world to Heaven. Its single most important teaching is its answer to life's single most important question: What is the greatest good, the final end, the meaning of life? Of course the answer is "happiness," for "[w]e all want to live happily; in the whole human race there is no one who does not assent to this proposition . . ."¹³ (St. Augustine; C 1718). But where is happiness to be found? That is the crucial question. The Church teaches us the true meaning of

happiness: “that true happiness is not found in riches or well-being, in human fame or power, or in any human achievement — however beneficial it may be – such as science, technology, and art, or indeed in any creature, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love” (C 1723). Or, in just three words, “‘God alone satisfies’¹⁵” (St. Thomas Aquinas; C 1718).

16. The two ways

There are many ways to live, many paths through this world, but ultimately there are only two. “The way of Christ ‘leads to life’; a contrary way ‘leads to destruction’²⁰ [Mt 7:13; Dt 30:15-20]. The Gospel parable of the *two ways* . . . shows the importance of moral decisions for our salvation: “There are two ways, the one of life, the other of death; but between the two there is a great difference’²¹” (C 1696).

This antithesis, this dualism, this either/or, life-or-death vision is far from familiar to the modern secular mind but it is familiar to all other cultures. The commonest image for life in all the world’s literature is the “road” of life. Roads fork, and at each fork the traveler must make a choice. Thus the need for moral road maps. There is a right road and a wrong road.

Christ, Church, and Scripture teach this; so do natural reason, conscience, and experience. It is moral realism. In the real world, choices have real consequences: you can’t get from Chicago to the Pacific by walking east, however sincerely you try. Subjective sincerity is not enough. We must choose not only in the right spirit, but we must also choose the right thing.

Moses summarizes all God's moral demands in the two words "choose life" (Dt 30), for moral choice is ultimately a matter of life or death, for each individual and each civilization. If our civilization is becoming a "culture of death," as Pope John Paul II has dared to call it, we must call it back to the path to life, both human and divine. But we must first find and walk that path ourselves.

17. Beatitude

On this road to life, the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17) summarize a kind of minimum, or what is necessary, and the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-8) summarize a kind of maximum, or what is sufficient.

The "Beatitudes" describe beatitude (the perfection of charity and of happiness). Beatitude is supernatural: it is beyond human nature, human understanding, and human power. "Beatitude makes us 'partakers of the divine nature' and of eternal life."²¹ With beatitude, man enters into the glory of Christ²² and into the joy of the Trinitarian life" (C 1721). "Such beatitude surpasses the understanding and powers of man. It comes from an entirely free gift of God: whence it is called supernatural . . ." (C 1722).

But this begins on earth – in fact, with Baptism. Henceforth every right moral choice we make is not merely a choice for or against some distant ideal but a choice for or against what by God's grace we already are, a choice for or against the Christ-life within us.

This is why morality is so practical: because our choices between good and evil are ultimately choices between our own beatitude and misery. Because this beatitude is freely given to us by God, it must be freely chosen

by us; for a gift must be freely given *and* freely received. This is why “[t]he beatitude we are promised confronts us with decisive moral choices” (C 1723). Because these choices concern our eternity, because morality has a supernatural end, morality is infinitely dramatic.

This supernatural end also gives Catholic morality a greater hope and a greater joy than any other. For its end is Heaven, and “all the way to Heaven is Heaven,” as one of the great saints said. Deep joy often accompanies the holiness that marks the outstanding saints of the Church. It is secular, Godless morality that is joyless and dull; Catholic morality is something more full of joy than *The Joy of Sex*. It could rightly be titled *The Joy of Love*.

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

² *Jn* 1:12; *1 Jn* 3:1.

³ *2 Pet* 1:4.

⁴ *Phil* 1:27.

²⁴ *Jn* 14:6.

¹ St. Leo the Great, *Sermo 21 in nat. Dom.*, 3: PL 54, 192C.

¹³ St. Augustine, *De moribus eccl.* 1, 3, 4: PL 32, 1312.

¹⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expos. in symb. apost. I.*

²⁰ *Mt* 7:13; cf. *Deut* 30:15-20.

²¹ *Didache* 1, 1: SCh 248, 140.

²¹ *2 Pet* 1:4; cf. *Jn* 17:3.

²² Cf. *Rom* 8:18.