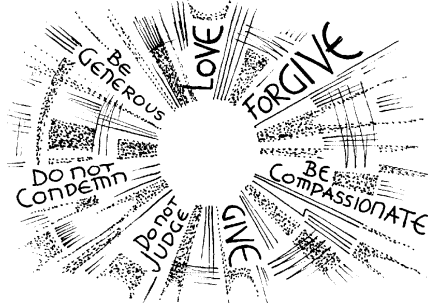


# THE HUMAN PERSON

## 4. The Morality of Human Acts

### Texts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*



Freedom makes man a moral subject. When he acts deliberately man is, so to speak, the *father of his acts*. Human acts, that is, acts that are freely chosen in consequence of a judgement of conscience, can be morally evaluated. They are either good or evil. (1749)

#### THE SOURCES OF MORALITY

The morality of human acts depends on:

- the object chosen;
- the end in view or the intention;
- the circumstances of the action.

The object, the intention and the circumstances make up the “sources”, or constitutive elements, of the morality of human acts. (1750)

##### ***The object chosen***

The *object* chosen is a good toward which the will deliberately directs itself. It is the matter of a human act. The object chosen morally specifies the act of the will, insofar as reason recognizes and judges it to be or not to be in conformity with the true good. Objective norms of morality express the rational order of good and evil, attested to by conscience. (1751)

##### ***The intention***

In contrast to the object, the *intention* resides in the acting subject. Because it lies at the voluntary source of an action and determines it by its end, intention is an element essential to the moral evaluation of an action. The end is the first goal of the intention and indicates the purpose pursued in the action. The intention is a movement of the will toward the end: it is concerned with the goal of the activity. It aims at the good anticipated from the action undertaken. Intention is not limited to directing individual actions, but can guide several actions toward one and the same purpose; it can orient one's whole life toward its ultimate end. For example, a service done with the end of helping one's neighbour can at the same time be inspired by the love of God as the ultimate end of all our actions. One and the same action can also be inspired by several intentions, such as performing a service in order to obtain a favour or to boast about it. (1752)

##### ***The end does not justify the means***

A good intention (for example, that of helping one's neighbour) does not make behaviour that is intrinsically disordered, such as lying and calumny, good or just. The end does not justify the means. Thus the condemnation of an innocent person cannot be justified as a legitimate means of saving the nation. On the other hand, an added bad intention (such as vainglory) makes an act evil that, in and of itself, can be good (such as almsgiving). (Cf. Mt 6:2-4) (1753)

##### ***Circumstances of a moral act***

The *circumstances*, including the consequences, are secondary elements of a moral act. They contribute to increasing or diminishing the moral goodness or evil of human acts (for example, the amount of a theft). They can also diminish or increase the agent's responsibility (such as acting out of a fear of death). Circumstances of themselves cannot change the moral quality of acts themselves; they can make neither good nor right an action that is in itself evil. (1754)

#### GOOD ACTS AND EVIL ACTS

##### ***Conditions for a morally good act***

A *morally good* act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together. An evil end corrupts the action, even if the object is good in itself (such as praying and fasting "in order to be seen by men").(1755)

The *object of the choice* can by itself vitiate an act in its entirety. There are some concrete acts - such as fornication - that it is always wrong to choose, because choosing them entails a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil.

##### ***Intention is not enough***

It is therefore an error to judge the morality of human acts by considering only the intention that inspires them or the circumstances (environment, social pressure, duress or emergency, etc.) which supply their context. There are acts which, in and of themselves, independently of circumstances and intentions, are always gravely illicit by reason of their object; such as blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery. One may not do evil so that good may result from it. (1756)

*The human person is ordered to beatitude by his deliberate acts: the passions or feelings he experiences can dispose him to it and contribute to it. (1762)*

## PASSIONS

### ***What are passions?***

The term "passions" belongs to the Christian patrimony. Feelings or passions are emotions or movements of the sensitive appetite that incline us to act or not to act in regard to something felt or imagined to be good or evil. (1763)

### ***From the human heart***

The passions are natural components of the human psyche; they form the passageway and ensure the connection between the life of the senses and the life of the mind. Our Lord called man's heart the source from which the passions spring. (Cf. Mk 7:21). (1764)

### ***Love***

There are many passions. The most fundamental passion is love, aroused by the attraction of the good. Love causes a desire for the absent good and the hope of obtaining it; this movement finds completion in the pleasure and joy of the good possessed. The apprehension of evil causes hatred, aversion, and fear of the impending evil; this movement ends in sadness at some present evil, or in the anger that resists it. (1765)

### ***Movement of the heart toward the good***

"To love is to will the good of another" (St. Thomas Aquinas). All other affections have their source in this first movement of the human heart toward the good. Only the good can be loved. Passions "are evil if love is evil and good if it is good" (St. Augustine). (1766)

## PASSIONS AND MORAL LIFE

### ***Passions must be governed by reason***

In themselves passions are neither good nor evil. They are morally qualified only to the extent that they effectively engage reason and will. Passions are said to be voluntary, "either because they are commanded by the will or because the will does not place obstacles in their way" (St. Thomas Aquinas). It belongs to the perfection of the moral or human good that the passions be governed by reason. (1767)

### ***When are passions good?***

Strong feelings are not decisive for the morality or the holiness of persons; they are simply the inexhaustible reservoir of images and affections in which the moral life is expressed. Passions are morally good when they contribute to a good action, evil in the opposite case. The upright will orders the movements of the senses it appropriates to the good and to beatitude; an evil will succumbs to disordered passions and exacerbates them. Emotions and feelings can be taken up into the *virtues*, or perverted by the *vices*. (1768)

### ***Passions in the Christian life***

In the Christian life, the Holy Spirit himself accomplishes his work by mobilizing the whole being, with all its sorrows, fears and sadness, as is visible in the Lord's agony and passion. In Christ human feelings are able to reach their consummation in charity and divine beatitude. (1769)

Moral perfection consists in man's being moved to the good not by his will alone, but also by his sensitive appetite, as in the words of the psalm: "My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God" (Ps 84:2). (1770)

## IN BRIEF

- **The object, the intention and the circumstances make up the three "sources" of the morality of human acts. (1757)**
- **The object chosen morally specifies the act of willing accordingly as reason recognizes and judges it good or evil. (1758)**
- **"An evil action cannot be justified by reference to a good intention". The end does not justify the means. (1759)**
- **A morally good act requires the goodness of its object, of its end, and of its circumstances together. (1760)**
- **There are concrete acts that it is always wrong to choose, because their choice entails a disorder of the will, i.e., a moral evil. One may not do evil so that good may result from it. (1761)**
- **The term "passions" refers to the affections or the feelings. By his emotions man intuitively feels the good and suspects evil. (1771)**
- **The principal passions are love and hatred, desire and fear, joy, sadness and anger. (1772)**
- **In the passions, as movements of the sensitive appetite, there is neither moral good nor evil. But insofar as they engage reason and will, there is moral good or evil in them. (1773)**
- **Emotions and feelings can be taken up in the virtues or perverted by the vices. (1774)**
- **The perfection of the moral good consists in man's being moved to the good not only by his will but also by his "heart." (1775)**