

# MAKING MORAL DECISIONS

## I. The status of moral values.

- A. Do moral values pertain to truth or opinion?
- B. Speculative vs. evaluative knowledge.

## II. Sources of moral decision-making.

A. How have you made moral decisions in the past? How do you decide what is good and what is bad? What are your moral decisions based on?

B. Deductive (begins with the law; taken too far it results in legalism and moral absolutism).

C. Inductive (begins with experience; taken too far, it result in moral relativism).

D. Jesus as a deductive moralist: “Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to fulfill them. Remember that as long as heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the law will be done away with...You must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Mt. 5: 17-22, 48.)

E. Jesus as an inductive moralist: **Mk 2: 21-27**: “Jesus said to them...No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if they do, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if they do, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins...One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him; how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him? The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath.’”

**Lk 13:10-17** “Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her, ‘Woman, you are freed from your infirmity.’ And he laid his hands upon her and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God. But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.’ Then the Lord answered him, ‘You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?’

F. Avoiding extremes of deductive legalism and inductive relativism: perspectivalism.

## III. The magisterium's contribution: deductive morality.

A. Magisterial authority (**Mt. 16:13-19**): indefectability and infallibility: “Jesus went to the territory near the town of Caesarea Philippi, where he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist, Others say Elijah, while others say Jeremiah or some other prophet.’ ‘And you,’ he asked them, ‘who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus answered, ‘blessed are you, Simon, son of John! For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven. And so I tell you, Peter, you are a rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of evil will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.’”

B. Magisterial teachings--from the solemnly infallible teachings which demand acceptance to the instructions which ask for a respectful benefit of the doubt while acknowledging the possibility of error.

“Bishops who teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff are to be revered by all as witnesses of divine and Catholic truth; the faithful, for their part, are obliged to submit to their bishops' decision, made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals, and to adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind. This loyal submission of the will and intellect must be given, in a special way, to the authentic teaching authority of the

Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra* in such wise, indeed, that his supreme teaching authority be acknowledged with respect, and sincere assent be given to decisions made by him, conformably with his manifest mind and intention, which is made known principally either by the character of the documents in question or by the frequency with which a certain doctrine is proposed or by the manner in which the doctrine is formulated.” (Lumen Gentium, 24)

“This infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining a doctrine of faith and morals is coextensive with the deposit of divine revelation, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded. This is the infallibility which the Roman pontiff, the head of the college of bishops, enjoys in virtue of his office, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith, he proclaims by a definitive act some doctrine of faith or morals...The infallibility promised to the Church resides also in the body of bishops when that body exercises supreme teaching authority with the successor of Peter.” (Lumen Gentium, 25)

#### **IV. Strengths and weaknesses of deductive, magisterial teaching.**

**A.** The magisterium can provide a cross-cultural, trans-historical perspective on morality.

**B.** The loss of certainty in the move from the formal to the particular.

“A thing taken in its primary consideration, in the absolute, may be good or bad; yet when additional considerations are taken into account may be changed into the contrary.” *Summa Theologiae, I,II, 19,1.*

“The more you descend into the detail the more it appears how the general rule admits of exceptions, so that you have to hedge it with cautions and qualifications. The greater the number of conditions accumulated the greater number of ways in which the principle is seen to fall short. *Summa Theologia, I,II 94,4*

**1.** The formal norm: do good and avoid evil.

**2.** Divinely revealed norms, such as the Ten Commandments

**3.** Human derived law,

**4.** Individual applications,

#### **V. Strengths and weaknesses of Inductive morality.**

**A.** Limits to our freedom and knowledge in moral decision-making: Inductive morality has the danger of being short-sighted, and vulnerable to rationalization and self-justification. Sometimes, when our conscience is not formed properly, we do not become adept at properly discerning our moral options. In other words, conscience must be developed and informed, and this is the role of the church.

**B.** But just as the magisterium helps our moral judgments, our moral judgments help the magisterium as well. Through inductive morality, moral teaching stays grounded in real experience. The *sensus fidelum*: Christian psychologists, physicians, sociologists, theologians, indeed, all Christians have the spirit and are led toward God's will:

*The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when...it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. (Lumen Gentium, 12)*

#### **VI. The sovereignty of the formed conscience.**

**A.** Pope John Paul II: “The judgment of conscience also has an imperative character; man must act in accordance with it.” (Veritatis Splendor, # 60)

**B.** “Since teachings that are not infallible can be erroneous, the principles of the pursuit of truth and the primacy of conscience still come into play. In other words, dissent is possible because the teachings mentioned in the canon can be and de facto have been mistaken. To search for the truth is everyone’s duty and right.” (Canon law society of America’s commentary on Canon 752 of the Code of canon law.)

**C.** The *via media*. Every magisterial statement must be thoughtfully considered, with an attempt to integrate its statements into the dictates of one's conscience. Conscience must be open to the teachings of the Church. However, magisterial statements do not replace the role of conscience. They do not demand blind obedience. Mature responsibility involves a middle path, between the extremes of blind obedience or casual rejection of magisterial authority.