



How Catholics Live



Section 2:

Human Nature, Basis for Morality



To Luke E. Hart, exemplary evangelizer and Supreme Knight from 1953-64, the Knights of Columbus dedicates this Series with affection and gratitude.

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

HUMAN NATURE AS THE BASIS FOR MORALITY

PART THREE • SECTION TWO 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
Peter Kreeft

General Editor
Father John A. Farren, O.P.
Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

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Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council
PO Box 1971
New Haven CT 06521-1971

www.kofc.org/cis
cis@kofc.org
203-752-4267
800-735-4605 Fax

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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.

The Catholic Information Service recommends reading at least one Hart series booklet each month to gain a deeper, more mature understanding of the Faith.

SECTION 2: HUMAN NATURE AS THE BASIS FOR MORALITY

1. Human nature is the basis for morality

There are two very different ideas in the world today about the basis for morality. The typically modern idea is that moral laws are man-made rules like the laws of a game such as tennis: created by human will and therefore changeable by human will. The traditional idea, on the other hand, taught not only by the Catholic Church but by all the world's major religions and nearly all pre-modern philosophies, is that the laws of morality are not rules that we make but principles that we discover, like the laws of a science such as anatomy: they are based on human nature, and human nature is essentially unchanging, and therefore the laws of morality are also essentially unchanging, like the laws of anatomy. Just as our anatomical nature makes it necessary for us to eat certain foods and to breathe oxygen for our bodies to be healthy, our moral nature makes certain virtues necessary for our souls to be healthy. There are universal principles, based on human nature, for bodily health and for mental health – and also for moral health.

Because our human nature is composed of body and soul, with powers of intellect, will, and feelings, and because it is our nature to love the good but also to be tempted by evil, this is why it is necessary for us to cultivate such virtues as self-control, wisdom, courage, and honesty. Catholic morality follows the classical Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in deriving the essential principles of morality from unchanging human nature and its real, objective needs rather than from the changing subjective feelings and desires of individuals. Thus its essential principles are 1) universal (the same for everyone), 2) objective (discovered, not invented; real, not just mental), and 3) unchangeable.

2. *The meaning of the “natural law”*

Such a morality is often called a morality of “natural law.” This means two things: 1) that moral laws are based on human nature, derived from human nature; and 2) that they are naturally and instinctively known by human reason. (“Reason” means more than just “reasoning;” it includes an intuitive awareness of our obligation to “do good and avoid evil,” and of what “good” and “evil” mean.)

- 1) Moral laws are based on human nature. That is, what we ought to do is based on what we are. “Thou shalt not kill,” for instance, is based on the real value of human life and the need to preserve it. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” is based on the real value of marriage and family, the value of mutual self-giving love, and children’s need for trust and stability.
- 2) The natural law is also naturally known, by natural human reason and experience. We do not need religious faith or supernatural divine revelation to know that we are morally obligated to choose good and avoid evil, or what “good” and “evil” mean. Every culture in history

has had some version of the Ten Commandments. No culture in history has thought that love, kindness, justice, honesty, courage, wisdom, or self-control were *evil* or thought that hate, cruelty, injustice, dishonesty, cowardice, folly, or uncontrolled addiction were *good*. Speaking of pagans, St. Paul says that “they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness” (Romans 2:15).

The term “natural law” is sometimes misunderstood. “This law is called ‘natural,’ not in reference to the nature of irrational beings, [i.e. animals – it is not a law of biology] but because reason which decrees it properly belongs to human nature” (CCC 1955). Thus the Church teaches that artificial contraception is against the natural law not because it is a rational human intervention rather than an irrational biological process, but because it is contrary to right reason. It violates the integrity of human nature by divorcing the two naturally-united aspects of the essence of the sexual act, “the unitive and the procreative,” that is, personal intimacy and reproduction. “Test tube babies” do the same thing.

3. *The characteristics of the natural law*

- 1) “The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men” (CCC 1956). It is not universally *obeyed*, or even universally *admitted*, but it is universally *binding* and authoritative.
- 2) “Even when it is rejected in its very principles, it cannot be destroyed or removed from the heart of man. It always

* CCC=*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

rises again in the life of individuals and societies....”
(CCC 1958)

- 3) “The natural law is *immutable* and permanent throughout the variations of history...¹⁰” (CCC 1958), because it is based on God-made essential human nature, which does not change with time or place, rather than man-made accidental developments, which do.
- 4) Because man’s essence does not change but his accidental features do (i.e. his circumstances and situations), “[a]pplication of the natural law varies greatly....” (CCC 1957) For instance, capital punishment may be morally necessary in a primitive society, but needlessly barbaric in a society with secure laws and prisons; and the moral restrictions on warfare today, with its weapons of mass destruction, must be far stricter than those in the past.
- 5) “[I]t provides the necessary basis for the civil law . . .” (CCC 1959), for civil law forbids some acts, such as rape and torture and slavery, because they are morally wrong and harmful to human nature’s health and flourishing. Without a natural law basis for civil law, civil law becomes based on power, whether collective or individual. The French Revolutionary slogan, “the voice of the people is the voice of God,” is just as idolatrous, and proved to be just as totalitarian as “the divine right of kings,” which it replaced.

4. *How is a “natural law” morality Christian?*

Since human nature finds its perfection and ultimate meaning in Christ, the one perfect man, and since morality is based on human nature, therefore morality finds its perfection and ultimate meaning in Christ. “The moral law finds its fullness...in Christ. Jesus Christ is in person the way of

perfection” (CCC 1953). The ultimate end of all morality is to become Christlike, to be able to say, with St. Paul, “for me to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21, the best possible one-word definition of the good life).

Like the rest of the series, this booklet is all about Christ. It focuses more on his human nature than on his divine nature, even while recognizing that Christ himself is one. In Christ, both natures are united, without confusion, in his one Person.

5. *Four kinds of law*

Catholic tradition, following Saint Thomas Aquinas, distinguishes four kinds of law.

- 1) *Human laws* are laws made by communities of men, and are therefore changeable or revocable by men. Many of these are conventions with no intrinsic moral rightness or wrongness, such as traffic rules. But many of them are based on the moral law, if they are good laws, such as requiring the just payment of debts, or are in violation of the moral law if they are bad laws, such as laws that deny essential human rights to Jews (Nazi Germany), or to black slaves (America, *Dred Scott*), or to unborn children (America, *Roe v. Wade*).
- 2) *The natural law*, as we have seen, should be the basis of human (civil) laws. It is the law of human nature.
- 3) The natural law, in turn is “man’s participation in *the eternal law*” of God. This “law” refers to the moral character of God, the ultimate reason why we must be moral: “Be ye holy for I the Lord your God am holy.” This formula is repeated many times in Scripture (e.g. Leviticus 11:44).

The natural law points to the eternal law; it is strong evidence for the existence of God. “[T]his command of

human reason [natural law] would not have the force of law if it were not the voice and interpreter of a higher reason [eternal law] to which our spirit and our freedom must be submitted⁵” (CCC 1954).

- 4) *Divine law* means laws supernaturally revealed by God, whether for all (the Ten Commandments) or for one people (ancient Israel’s liturgical laws) or to one individual (a command to one of his prophets). “The eternal law” derives from the eternal nature or character of God himself; a “divine law” is God’s choice to intervene at a certain time to reveal a command or establish a covenant.

The *Catechism* sums up the four kinds of law as follows: “There are different expressions of the moral law, all of them interrelated: eternal law — the source, in God, of all law [#3, above]; natural law [#2]; revealed law, comprising the Old Law and the New Law, or Law of the Gospel [#4]; finally, civil and ecclesiastical laws [#1]” (CCC 1952).

The summary above adds the important distinction within divine, revealed law between the Old Law (Old Testament) and New Law (New Testament). The purpose of the two is different. “[T]he [old] law is holy, spiritual, and good,¹⁴ yet still imperfect. Like a tutor¹⁵ it shows what must be done, but does not of itself give the strength, the grace of the Spirit, to fulfill it. Because of sin, which it cannot remove [only Christ can], it remains a law of bondage. According to Saint Paul, its special function is to denounce and *disclose sin . . .*¹⁶” (CCC 1963) – like an x-ray, to move us to go to Christ the surgeon.

6. *Morality is a science*

Morality is obviously not an empirical science (good and evil have no shape or color) or a mathematical science. But it is a science in the broader, earlier meaning of the word.

- 1) It is a rationally organized body of knowledge.
- 2) Like all sciences, it consists of universal laws. In morality, these are not laws of how things really do in fact behave, as in physics, but laws of how people really ought to behave.
- 3) It is about objective truths, not subjective opinions or feelings. (Note the word “really” in the preceding paragraph: it characterizes both kinds of sciences.)
- 4) It has data: human nature.
- 5) And it is discoverable by natural human reason.

7. *The relation between morality as a science of natural reason and divinely revealed Catholic morality*

- 1) Divine revelation, in the Catholic religion, *includes* this naturally-knowable morality, reminds us of it, formulates it, clarifies it, defends it, and gives it a divine sanction.
- 2) It also *refines and deepens* it. From divine revelation, we learn more about morality than we know by reason alone.
- 3) But this supernatural knowledge *never contradicts* the morality we know by our natural reason, since it comes from the same source, the same Teacher: God, who is Truth. Truth never contradicts truth. And God never contradicts himself – though he increases his demands and expectations as his children mature, just as good human parents do.

8. *Morality and man's place in the universe*

Human nature is not isolated. Man is defined by his place in the created order of things, the cosmic hierarchy. He is on the highest level of the visible, material world, which includes minerals, vegetables, and animals below him, and he is also on the lowest level of the invisible, spiritual world, which includes angels (created pure spirits) above him.

Since man is neither angel nor animal, moral law for man is not the same as moral law for angels or animals. Angels have no bodies and therefore no temptations to things like lust, greed, or gluttony. And there is no moral law for animals, who do not have self-conscious reason, free will, or conscience. Catholic morality takes account of this two-sidedness of man and is neither “angelistic” (ignoring our animality) nor “animalistic” (ignoring our spirituality and rationality).

9. *The basis for Catholic morality in the origin of man*

Morality is about human persons in their relationships with other human persons, with themselves, and with God. Therefore the nature and dignity of human persons is a fundamental basis for morality. If human persons were only animals, morality would be impossible and unnecessary.

So what is the basis for the dignity of human persons? Is that basis something uncertain, changeable, and fallible, such as the State, or popular consensus, or one's own opinions and feelings and desires?

No, “[t]he dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God” (CCC 1700). This is one of the most important sentences in the *Catechism*. The real basis for natural morality is this fact. It is also the ultimate basis for social and political order, for “human law” (social and political law) rests on “natural law” (moral law), and natural law rests on

eternal law. We outlaw things because they are wrong, and they are wrong by their own nature ultimately because that nature is opposed to the nature and character of God.

However, this ultimate basis need not be explicitly known or believed by everyone before they can be moral; even atheists can respect persons as ends and obey their conscience.

10. *The basis for morality in the destiny of man*

A second basis for the dignity of man, and thus for morality, is man's ultimate end. "The dignity of the human person is... fulfilled in his vocation to divine beatitude" (CCC 1700).

Since man's end is to share God's own beatitude, man is a high and holy mystery, not a thing to be used. "[T]he human person is 'the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake'⁶" (CCC 1703). And we must do the same: love persons for their own sake, not use them for the sake of anything else – in other words, *love persons* as ends and *use things* as means rather than using persons as means and loving things as ends. This rule is rooted in the fact that God created man to be an end, like himself, and all other things to be means for man (1 Corinthians 3:22-23).

This "religious" fact makes great "secular" differences. For instance:

- 1) We have a responsibility to take good care of the earth, the environment, and the ecology – not for their own sake but for the sake of humanity and a better human life on earth. Material things are means, not ends; persons are ends, not means. The material world is precious, not as an end in itself but as a means to the good of persons. The good of persons must never be sacrificed for the good of the natural environment.

- 2) Humans must not be harmed by being used as “guinea pigs” for scientific experiments, however important the purpose of those experiments may be.
- 3) Politicians and businesses must recognize that the ruling purpose of the economy is not power or profit but human welfare. Economic policies must be judged by that qualitative standard, not just the standard of quantitative efficiency.

11. Is man good or evil?

Morality for man also depends on the fact that man is created by God in his image, and is therefore very good, yet at the same time also a fallen and sinful creature. He is capable of reason and virtue, but is often irrational and vicious. Catholic morality does not ignore this two-sidedness of man, and is neither pessimistic, denying our intrinsic goodness, nor optimistic, denying our capacity for evil.

If man were simply good, there would be no sin, guilt, repentance, or punishment, and morality would be nothing but love and self-esteem. If man were simply evil, morality could be only legalistic: a matter of external compulsion, based on fear of punishment, forcing us to act contrary to our nature and evil instincts. Morality is both an aid to our good instincts and a threat to our proclivity to evil, and appeals to both the love of good and the fear of evil. This is the morality of common sense and of the Catholic faith.

Man is very good in his being, his essential nature. Man is the most valuable thing in the universe. For man is God’s creature and God’s child.

But man has fallen from moral innocence (though not from ontological goodness, goodness in his very being) into “original sin,” instinctive selfishness. Life is now a spiritual warfare

between good and evil, both of which lie in all of us. (“There’s a little good in the worst of us and a little bad in the best of us.”) The best of us, the saints, are the most honest and clear-eyed about their own evils. “There are two kinds of people: sinners, who think they are saints, and saints, who know they are sinners” (Pascal) – just as there are two kinds of people: fools, who think they are wise, and the wise, who know they are fools (Socrates).

“Man is divided in himself. As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness”¹¹ (CCC 1707).

12. Man as spiritual

Here is the most obvious and radical difference between Catholic morality and the morality of the modern secularized society that the Church confronts today. For Catholic morality, as for all the world’s religions, man is a spiritual being, with a soul. He is not a mere clever ape, a mere biological organism. He is “[e]ndowed with ‘a spiritual and immortal’ soul”⁵ (CCC 1703).

The consequences for morality are obvious: in a word, “be what you are.” We act out our believed identities. If we believe we are apes, we will act like apes. We ape the apes we think we are. And if we believe we are beloved children of a pure and holy God, we will act like the King’s kids.

The social consequences are also radical. For one thing, if we are immortal, each individual is eternally precious, more valuable than any temporal earthly nation. The secular view of man, on the other hand, contains no guarantee against totalitarianism. For if we are not immortal spirits but only mortal animals, what is the one-century-long life of one animal compared with the many-century-long life of a nation of millions? But if we are spirits,

each individual is immortal. Long after all nations, races, stars and galaxies have died, each one of us will still exist.

13. *The human body as part of man's dignity and God's image*

Many philosophers, ancient and modern, sharply divide our souls from our bodies and see glory and greatness and the divine image only in the soul (e.g. Platonism in ancient philosophy, Gnosticism in the early Christian era, Cartesianism in early modern philosophy, and the New Age Movement today).

But:

- 1) God deliberately designed our bodies. They are no accident, or mistake. God meant our souls to be the life of our bodies. Bodies are not prisons, or even hotel rooms, or even homes for our souls. We are not meant to be pure spirits, like the angels, and we are not pure bodies, like the animals. Our bodies are ours as much as our souls are ours. We can't take our bodies off, as we can take our clothes off. They are part of our essential human nature.
- 2) No temple in the world is holier than the human body, for God incarnated himself into a human nature, with body and soul, in Christ. And God has this human body forever. The Ascension was not the undoing of the Incarnation.
- 3) Our bodies shared the fall of our souls into sin, by receiving death as its penalty. And they will share our souls' redemption too, by resurrection. God will resurrect our bodies, as he resurrected Christ's. We will have bodies forever.

The *Catechism* sees the "image of God" not only in the spiritual, rational, and immortal soul but also in the body: "[t]he human body shares in the dignity of 'the image of God': it is a human body precisely because it is

animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the Body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit²³²” (CCC 364).

The consequences for morality are shocking to many people today: a good spiritual intention – love and sincerity – is not enough. For instance, the difference between morally right sex and morally wrong sex is not only the spiritual attitudes, but the physical facts: not merely what motives or feelings are in our souls, but which bodies are copulating. Sex with anyone not your spouse is wrong. So is “mercy-killing:” even though the spiritual motive is mercy, the physical deed is killing.

Whenever we deal with objective reality, subjectively good intentions are not enough. Are they enough for your dentist? Or for your financial advisor? So, if you say they are enough for morality, you are saying that morality is not about objective reality.

14. An outline of the basis of Catholic morality in reality

Catholic morality is based on the truth of God. The basic principles of morality derive from reality as given by God, and from this we see the reason for labeling some things right and some things wrong:

- 1) Because the Creator is not a creature and no creature is the Creator, we should not worship any creature as our end, or try to use the Creator as a means.
- 2) Because spirit is greater than matter, we should not value material things like money above spiritual things like wisdom and virtue. Yet matter is God-created and good. Our goal is not “liberation” from matter but proper use of it.

- 3) Because man is not simply animal but has a rational soul, he should not be treated as an animal, whether by being forced to slave labor or by being euthanized. Because animals are not persons, they should not be loved like persons but as animals – i.e. they may be used as pets or clothing, or even as food. But persons may not.
- 4) Because the soul is more than the body, the body should serve the soul. The body should not be served as a lord, but it should be respected as a good.
- 5) Because the mind, like a mirror, receives the light of truth (both by faith and by natural reason), we ought to follow its guidance, as a captain follows his navigator.
- 6) Because the will is the captain of the soul, it ought to lead the emotions by following the guidance of reason.
- 7) Because the will is free, it is therefore responsible.
- 8) Because the emotions are the raw material for the work of the will, guided by reason, the emotions ought to be neither served nor avoided, but formed, like a work of art. Each *ought* is based on what *is*.

15. *The moral importance of the mind*

“By his reason, man recognizes the voice of God which urges him ‘to do what is good and avoid what is evil.’⁹ Everyone is obliged to follow this law, which makes itself heard in conscience . . .” (CCC 1706).

In Catholic morality, moral goodness cannot be divorced from truth and from that power of the soul by which we know truth, namely the mind, or reason. (“Reason” in the traditional sense means more than just the ability to do logical reasoning or calculating. It means also the ability to *understand* the true natures of things. It is not simply “IQ”).

Typically modern morality does not speak of the “intellectual virtues” because it usually underestimates the moral importance of the mind, or intellect, or reason. But in Catholic morality there are “intellectual virtues” (virtues of the mind) that are necessarily connected with moral virtues (virtues of the will). The most important of these is “prudence,” or practical wisdom.

The virtues of the mind and the will help each other to grow: wisdom makes us more charitable and charity makes us more wise. The vices of mind and will also reinforce each other: foolishness makes us selfish and selfishness makes us foolish.

A prerequisite for all moral virtues is the fundamental virtue of honesty, or sincerity, or the will to truth, the refusal to deceive or be deceived, the absolute love of light and not darkness. Truth, like love, is an absolute, for it is what God is (John 14:6), it is an eternal and infinite attribute of God.

The sins of the intellect can be as serious as those of the will. Christ denounced dishonesty more vigorously than any other sin when he found it in the Pharisees.

16. *Conscience*

Conscience is to good and evil what sight is to color. It is the power of the soul which gives us awareness of the moral dimension of life, of the goodness or evil of human acts.

The moral importance of the mind becomes obvious once it is understood that conscience is an intellectual power. It is essentially a power of knowing, not feeling (though feeling is usually associated with it). To know that an act is morally obligatory, or morally forbidden, or neither, is not the same as to feel it. Sometimes our moral knowledge, or moral awareness, is accompanied by feeling and sometimes not. For instance, sometimes we *know* we are guilty of a certain wrong but we don't *feel* guilty, just as sometimes we *know* that a certain thing or

person or deed is really beautiful without *feeling* subjectively attracted, or we know it is ugly without feeling repulsed.

Conscience is powerfully *aided* by right feelings. It is much easier for us to become saints if we feel attracted to the life of sanctity than if we feel afraid of it. But conscience itself is essentially a power of knowing. It is an intuitive or immediate awareness of good and evil, as well as the power to apply this standard to actions by making value judgments about them through moral reasoning. Thus it includes understanding, judging, and reasoning, the three acts of the mind. At the heart of true morality there is knowledge; true morality involves living in the truth, in reality; true *sanctity* is true *sanity*.

17. *The will*

If the intellect is the soul's navigator, the will is its captain. A wise captain listens to his navigator, but it is the captain who is in charge, and ultimately responsible for the ship.

The human will is responsible because it is free. We have free will, or free choice. "By virtue of his soul and his spiritual powers of intellect and will, man is endowed with freedom, an 'outstanding manifestation of the divine image'⁸" (CCC 1705). This does not mean we are not influenced, or "conditioned" by many factors that come to us. But our *choices* come *from* us. We are not just passive links in a chain of causes.

The will is close to the heart of the self, the "I." When we say, "I promise you," or "I choose (or refuse) to do that," we stake our very "I" to what we promise or what we do. It is by the will, the power of free personal choice, that we do this. Our free will makes us morally responsible.

Just as with the intellect and conscience, the will and choice are not essentially feelings or emotions. It may be *accompanied* by emotion, and rightly ordered emotions make it much easier for

the will to choose the right thing; but the will is distinct from the emotions. “I feel like doing this” is not the same as “I choose to do this.”

18. *Love*

This point is especially important when it comes to love. The essence of love in the Biblical sense (*agape*) is not an emotion or feeling; the essence of love is a choice of will, good-will, the willing of the other’s good, the choosing of what is really best for the other. This is the unspectacular, unemotional essence of love. The exciting feelings are additions to the essence.

We can love someone even when we don’t feel loving toward him or her. We can will the good of others even when we feel aversion or embarrassment toward them. For we often do this to ourselves: we don’t always “feel good about ourselves,” but we always will good to ourselves, we always seek our own true good and happiness. When we feel sick, we seek to be healed; when we feel stupid, we seek to be wise; when we feel guilty, we seek to become better persons.

Christ commands us to love our neighbor “as ourselves,” i.e. as we already do love ourselves. This love cannot be a feeling because feelings cannot be commanded; only free choices of the will can. Therefore love – the love Christ commands – is essentially a free choice of the will rather than a feeling.

This point becomes extremely practical when applied to questions like homosexuality. Homosexual feelings are not sins, since they are not freely chosen. Homosexual acts are “intrinsically disordered”(as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has declared) because they “are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity” (CCC 2357). Homosexual acts are sinful (as are heterosexual acts

outside marriage) insofar as they are freely chosen acts of disobedience to God's known will and law. Homosexual desires, feelings, and emotions are *disordered*; they are *troubles*, but not sins, unless freely chosen by the will.

19. *Free will*

- a) *The meaning of free will.* "God created man... a person who can initiate and control his own actions.... '[Man] is created with free will and is master over his acts'²⁷" (CCC 1730).

"Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one's own responsibility. By free will one shapes one's own life" (CCC 1731).

- b) Free will is necessary for morality. "It [free will] is the basis of praise or blame" (CCC 1732).

If our wills are not really free, morality is really meaningless. All moral language – language about good and evil, right and wrong, ought and ought not, sin and virtue, praise and blame, all counseling and commanding – makes sense only when addressed to free persons, not necessitated and "determined" animals or machines. We do not praise or blame, reward or punish a machine. When the Coke machine fails to deliver, we do not reason with it or call it a sinner; we kick it.

- c) Freedom can be increased or decreased. "The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes" (CCC 1733) "Progress in virtue...enhance[s] the mastery of the will over its acts" (CCC 1734). And the more one does evil, the less free he becomes. "He who sins is a slave to sin" (Romans 6:17). Sin is using our freedom to sell ourselves freely into slavery and into addiction to sin. We forge the

chains of our bondage with the power of our freedom. Freedom is not a constant: we are free to increase our freedom or decrease it. There is total freedom in Heaven, no freedom in Hell.

20. *Law and freedom*

The modern mind perceives the value of human freedom more deeply than previous ages did. But it often makes a key error about freedom: opposing it to the authority of law, human or divine, and obedience to law. Pope John Paul II's encyclical, "*The Splendor of Truth*," addresses that problem very profoundly.

The very idea of law is in a state of crisis because our culture views law negatively, as a set of prohibitions, and therefore as something that seems to lessen freedom. But good laws ensure freedom even when they are negative, like guard rails along mountain roads, or labels on poison bottles.

Submission to God, his will and his law, cannot lessen freedom, for God is the author of man and his freedom – both his free will to choose and his freedom from evil and sin. The author of freedom cannot be the enemy of freedom! The same is true of good human laws, laws that express the natural law, which in turn expresses God's eternal law. It is the secular concept of freedom as self-will, or licence – freedom as the opposite of law – that has proved terribly destructive to freedom, especially in the twentieth century, in many nations, families, and individual lives.

21. *Emotions*

One of the real benefits of modern psychology has been more attention to and understanding of the emotions, including their role in making moral choices. Though they are not free, like the will, they are important for morality because emotions are closely connected with the will and powerfully help or harm it.

Well-ordered emotions make moral goodness more attractive and easier; unnatural, unrealistic, or uncontrolled emotions make it unattractive and difficult. Thus, good psychological counseling can be a powerful aid to good morality (as can good bodily health habits). Just as a good instrument helps a musician make good music, good emotions help us to live good moral lives.

“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” (CCC 1768). But this expression is a part of human perfection: “[t]he perfection of the moral good consists in man’s being moved to the good not only by his will but also by his ‘heart’ [meaning here ‘emotions’]” (CCC 1775).

Emotions are part of God’s design for human nature. Even the emotions that we find hard to control, like sexual desire, anger, and fear, are not evil but good in themselves and play a necessary role; without them we are not completely human. Christ did not ignore or suppress his emotions but accepted and used them rightly, including “negative” ones like sadness (see Mark 14:34; John 11:33-36) and anger (John 2:13-17).

“It belongs to the perfection of...human good that the passions be governed by reason⁴⁵” (CCC 1767). Emotions are like horses. Some are tame, some are wild; all need to be cared for and ruled by prudence (practical wisdom), fortitude (courage), temperance (self-control), and justice (fairness), the four “cardinal virtues,” as a horse needs to be ruled by a rider. The horse should not lead the rider, nor should the rider lock up the horse in the stable all the time. Wise governance is good for the horse as well as for the rider, and wise governance of the emotions is good for the emotions as well as for the mind and will that govern them.

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

- ¹⁰ Cf. *GS* 10.
- ⁵ Leo XIII, *Libertas praestantissimum*, 597.
- ¹⁴ Cf. *Rom* 7:12, 14, 16.
- ¹⁵ Cf. *Gal* 3:24.
- ¹⁶ Cf. *Rom* 7.
- ⁶ *GS* 24 § 3.
- ¹¹ *GS* 13 § 2.
- ⁵ *GS* 14 § 2.
- ²³² Cf. *1 Cor* 6:19-20; 15:44-45.
- ⁹ *GS* 16.
- ⁸ *GS* 17.
- ²⁷ St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 4, 4, 3: PG 7/1, 983.
- ⁴⁵ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *STb* I-II, 24, 3.

“Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response.”

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

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Knights of Columbus, Catholic Information Service
PO Box 1971 New Haven, CT 06521-1971
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