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MAKING TRUE MORAL JUDGMENTS AND GOOD MORAL CHOICES

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In the midst of the moral confusion of the 20th century, the Catholic Church has stood fast and boldly proclaimed before the world the dignity of the human person made in the image and likeness of God. Dr. May, writing in the Catholic tradition concerning the making of moral judgments, makes use of the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Second Vatican Council to critique the “proportionalism” of Richard McCormick.



MY PURPOSE HERE IS TO PROPOSE THE CRITERIA OR NORMS IN TERMS OF WHICH true moral judgments and good moral choices can be made. I will proceed as follows: (1) I will summarize Catholic thought on human dignity and the crucial relationship between human dignity, moral judgments, and moral choices; (2) I will take up the question of the “good” and its relevance to human choice and action; and (3) I will propose an approach for making true moral judgments and good moral choices, i.e., I will propose normative criteria for distinguishing alternatives that are morally good from those that are morally bad, and in doing so I will also offer a critique of another approach to this subject which is widely advocated today but which is, in my judgment, quite mistaken.

HUMAN DIGNITY, MORAL JUDGMENTS, AND MORAL CHOICES

According to the Catholic tradition, as found, for example, in St. Thomas Aquinas and in the teachings of Vatican Council II, there is a twofold dignity proper to human beings: one is intrinsic and an endowment or gift; the other is also intrinsic, but is an achievement or acquisition.¹

The first dignity proper to human beings is the dignity that is theirs simply as members of the human species, which God called into existence when, in the beginning, He “created man in his own image ... male and female he created them” (Gn 1:27).² Every living human body, the one that comes to be when new human life is conceived, is a living image of the all-holy God. Moreover, in creating Man, male and female, God created a being inwardly receptive to His own divine life.³ God cannot become incarnate in a dog or cat or ape because these creatures of His are not inwardly capable of being divinized; but, as we know from God’s revelation, He can become incarnate in His human creature, and in fact He has freely chosen to become truly one of us, for His Eternal and Uncreated Word, true God of true God, became and is a human being, a Man. Thus every human being can rightly be called a “created word” of God, the created word that His Uncreated Word became and is precisely to show us how deeply we are loved by the God who shaped us in our mothers’ wombs (cf. Ps 139:11-15). Every human being, therefore, is intrinsically valuable, surpassing in dignity the whole material universe, a being to be revered and respected from the very beginning of its existence.⁴

This intrinsic, inalienable dignity proper to human beings is God's gift, in virtue of which every human being, of whatever age or sex or condition, is a being of moral worth, an irreplaceable and nonsubstitutable person. Because of this dignity a human being, as Karol Wojtyla has said, "is the kind of good that does not admit of use and cannot be treated as an object of use and as such a means to an end." Because of this dignity a human being "is a good toward which the only adequate response is love".⁵

When we come into existence we are, by reason of this inherent dignity, persons. As God's "created words," as persons, we are endowed with the capacity to discover the truth and the capacity to determine our lives by freely choosing to conform our lives and actions to the truth. A baby (born or preborn) does not, of course, have the developed capacity for deliberating and choosing freely, but it has the *natural* capacity to do so because it is human and personal in nature.⁶ Yet when we come into existence we are not yet fully the beings we are meant to be. And this leads us to consider the second sort of dignity proper to human beings, a dignity that is intrinsic but an achievement, not an endowment.

This second kind of dignity is the dignity to which we are called as intelligent and free persons capable of determining our own lives by our own free choices. This is the dignity that we are to give to ourselves (with the help of God's unfailing grace) by freely choosing to shape our lives and actions in accordance with the truth. In other words, we give to ourselves this dignity and inwardly participate in it by making good moral choices, and such choices are in turn dependent upon true moral judgments.

The nature of this dignity was beautifully developed at Vatican Council II, and a brief summary of its teaching will help us grasp the crucial importance of true moral judgments and good moral choices if we are to respect our God-given dignity and participate in the dignity to which we are called as intelligent and free persons.

According to Vatican Council II "the highest norm of human life is the divine law - eternal, objective, and universal - whereby God orders, directs and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community in a plan conceived in wisdom and love." Immediately after making this claim, the Council Fathers went on to say: "Man has been made by God to participate

in this law, with the result that, under the gentle disposition of divine providence, he can come to perceive ever increasingly the unchanging truth."⁷ Precisely because he can come to "perceive ever increasingly the unchanging truth," man "has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth."⁸ The truth in question here is obviously not a merely contemplative truth, but the truth that is to shape and guide human choices and actions.

This passage, taken from *Dignitatis Humanae*, concludes by saying that "on his part man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience,"⁹ and the role of conscience in helping us come to know the "unchanging truth" of God's divine and eternal law and its "imperatives" is developed in another document from the Council, *Gaudium et Spes*. There we find the following significant passage:

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. The voice of this law,¹⁰ ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment, do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. *His dignity lies in observing this law* (emphasis added), and by it he will be judged.¹¹

Fidelity to conscience means "a search for the truth" and for "true solutions" to moral problems. Conscience, this passage notes, can indeed err "through invincible ignorance without losing its dignity" (so long as there is sufficient "care for the search for the true and the good"); but "to the extent that a correct conscience holds sway (emphasis added), persons and groups turn away from blind choice and seek to conform to the objective norms of morality" (emphasis added).¹²

The teaching of Vatican Council II on the nature of the second kind of dignity proper to human beings, and the relationship between this dignity and moral judgments and choices is powerful. I think that it can be summarized as follows. Human actions are like "words" that human persons speak, and through them they give to themselves their identity as moral beings, their character. At the heart of a human action is a self-determining choice. From this it follows that a person's moral identity or character is given to the person by the choices that he or she freely makes.¹³

We are free to choose what we are to do - the "words" that we are to speak - but we are not free to

make what we choose to do to be right or wrong, good or bad. Their rightness or wrongness is determined by objective criteria or norms which we can come to know. We ought to choose in accordance with our own best judgments. But these can be mistaken (and corrected). If the mistake in them is not attributable to our own negligence in seeking the truth, we do not make ourselves to be wicked persons in choosing to act in accord with them, even if what we choose to do is not, of itself, what we ought to do. Our judgments, however, will be “correct,” i.e., true, if they are made in terms of objective moral criteria or norms.

To sum up: we have the gift of free choice, of self-determination. Choice is possible only where there are alternatives from which to choose, i.e., intelligible proposals that we can adopt by choice and execute through our deeds. But it is possible to choose wrongly as well as rightly, and choice proceeds from deliberation. Thus it must be possible for us to determine, prior to choice, which alternatives are morally good and which are morally bad - which “words,” to put it differently, are true to the image of God within us and which are not. This determination is the work of our intelligence or capacity to know the truth. Moral norms are truths - not arbitrary and legalistic decrees - to guide human choices. But what are these moral truths, these criteria or norms for distinguishing between morally good and morally bad alternatives of choice? To answer this question it is necessary first to examine the relationship between the “good” and human choice and action.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE “GOOD” AND HUMAN CHOICE AND ACTION

Human choices and actions, whether morally good or morally bad, are intelligible and purposeful. Wrongful choices, while unreasonable, are not irrational, meaningless, unintelligible. All human choice and action is ordered to an end, a purpose, and the ends or purposes to which human choices and actions are ordered are considered as “goods” to be pursued. The “good” has the meaning of what is perfective of a being, constitutive of its flourishing or well-being. Consequently, the proposition that “good is to be done and pursued and its opposite, evil, is to be avoided” is a proposition to which every human being, as intelligent, will assent.¹⁴ It is a “principle” or “starting point” for intelligent, purposeful human activity. If human beings are to do anything, there must be a point in doing it, and the point is that the deed

chosen is related by the one choosing it to some “good.” The principle, “good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided” is not, then, in itself a moral norm or criterion for distinguishing morally good alternatives of choice from morally bad ones. It is simply a directive for intelligent, purposeful human choice and action.

Moreover, there definitely are real goods of human persons, aspects of their flourishing or full-being, and these goods are grasped by our practical reason as purposeful ends of human choices and actions. St. Thomas Aquinas suggested that there is a triple-tiered set of such human goods, which, when grasped by practical reason, serve as the first principles or starting points for intelligent, purposeful human activity. The first set includes being itself, a good that human beings share with other entities, and since the being (*esse*) of living things is life itself (*vivere*), the basic human good at this level is that of life itself, including health and bodily integrity. The second set includes the union of male and female in order to transmit the good of human life to progeny who need education and care if they are to flourish, and this is a set of goods that human persons share with other animals but, of course, in their own unique and distinctive way. The third set includes those goods that are unique to human beings, for instance, the good of knowledge, especially, but not exclusively, the knowledge of God, the good of living in society with others (friendship and justice), and the good of being reasonable in making choices, a good that we can call the “good of practical reasonableness.”¹⁵



St. Thomas’s list of basic goods perfective of human persons is not intended by him to be taxative, but illustrative, as indicated by the fact that he uses such expressions as “and the like” (*et similia*) in referring to them. His point is that these goods, when grasped by our intelligence, serve as starting points or principles for deliberating about what we are to do. These principles of practical reason, with the exception of the principle based on the good of practical reasonableness itself, are not moral norms but are rather, as is the principle that good is to be done and pursued, practical principles making purposeful human choices and actions possible. They are used by everyone, even the wicked, and cannot be

obliterated from the human mind.¹⁶ Whatever we do, whether morally good or morally bad, is ultimately done so that we may participate in one or another of these basic goods.

But note that one of the goods in question is the one I have called the good of “practical reasonableness.” This is the good that we pursue and in which we participate when we seek sincerely to discover the “truth” about what-we-are-to-do and then choose to act in accordance with this “truth.” This good has its own demands and requirements, and these requirements enable us to judge correctly and choose well and to make ourselves, by our self-determining choices, morally upright persons, beings who seek to shape their lives in accord with the “highest norm of human life” as this is made known to us through the requirements of practical reasonableness.

But what are the requirements of practical reasonableness, the moral norms or criteria in terms of which we can distinguish between alternatives of choice that are morally good and alternatives that are morally wicked? This is the issue to which we shall now turn.

PRACTICAL REASONABLENESS AND ITS REQUIREMENTS: THE CRITERIA FOR MAKING TRUE MORAL JUDGMENTS AND GOOD MORAL CHOICES

Our task here is to identify the basic requirement of practical reasonableness and its specifications. The issue is this: how are human persons, in and through their self-determining free choices, to relate themselves to the goods of human persons and to the persons in whom these goods are meant to flourish? What criteria can they employ, prior to making their choices, to discover which possibilities of choice are morally good and which are morally bad?

Serious disagreement abounds here. First I will examine a proposal made by many today, including prominent Catholic theologians, for making true moral judgments and good moral choices, and then offer a critique of this proposal. I will then propose and defend an alternative that is rooted in the Catholic tradition as found in St. Thomas Aquinas and Vatican Council II, and rooted as well in truth and reality.

According to several contemporary Catholic thinkers, the basic requirement of practical reasonable-

ness or basic norm for distinguishing between morally good and morally bad possibilities of choice is the following: In freely choosing to pursue good and avoid evil, we ought to adopt by choice that possibility that promises the greater proportion of good over evil.¹⁷ These thinkers first distinguish between “pre-moral” (“non-moral,” “ontic”) goods and bads (the goods we have previously discussed and their contraries) and “moral” good and bad, that is, the way persons relate themselves, through their choices, to these “pre-moral” goods and bads. They then point out that every choice is limited: the choice to do one good is a choice to leave another undone. Moreover, many of our choices are ambiguous insofar as they cause both (pre-moral) good and (pre-moral) evil: choosing to amputate a person’s gangrenous leg, for instance, protects the good of life in that person, but it also damages his bodily integrity and leaves him mutilated. Accordingly, they argue, the way to make good moral choices is to choose the alternative offering the proportionately greater good. On this view, a true moral judgment is based on a comparative evaluation of the (pre-moral) benefits (goods, values) and (pre-moral) harms (evils, disvalues) promised by the possibilities for choice, and the judgment that one of these alternatives offers the greater balance of good over evil; this is the alternative that ought to be chosen.¹⁸

Because this approach entails the comparative assessment of the various possibilities of choice in order to determine which offers the greater proportion of good over evil, it has become known as proportionalism. On this view a person can freely choose to do a (pre-moral) evil, for example, kill a person, even an innocent one, if this alternative promises the greater proportion of good over evil.¹⁹ Killing an innocent human being in the absence of a proportionately related greater good is morally wicked, as is all deliberate choice of (pre-moral) evil; but choosing to do this (pre-moral) evil or any other such evil is morally right and good in the presence of a proportionately related greater good.

Initially this approach seems plausible. The norm proposed - namely, to choose that alternative which promises the greater proportion of good over evil - seems self-evident, for the alternative seems to be that we ought to choose the alternative promising the greater proportion of evil over good, and this is absurd. In fact, one of the leading advocates of proportionalism in this country, Richard A. McCormick, has stressed the apparent self-evidence of this norm. He put it negatively to show how

it is used in “conflict” situations, i.e., situations in which both good and evil inevitably result, and are foreseen to result, from an action we choose to do. He wrote: “the rule of Christian reason, if we are to be governed by the *ordo bonorum* [the basic goods of human persons already discussed], is to choose the lesser evil. This general statement, it would seem, is beyond debate, for the only alternative is that in conflict situations we should choose the greater evil, which is patently absurd.”²⁰

Despite its initial plausibility, proportionalism as a method for making moral judgments and choices is mistaken. The claim that the norm, choose that possibility that promises the greater proportion of good over evil, is self-evidently true does not stand up to critical scrutiny. The plausibility of this norm rests on ambiguity in the term “good.” The morally upright person surely is seeking to do the greater good, in the sense of the morally good action. Yet the proportionalists claim that it is possible to determine, prior to choice, which among diverse alternatives is morally good by balancing or measuring or commensurating the *pre-moral* (*nonmoral, ontic*) goods and evils that one’s freely chosen act will cause. The difficulty here, as many critics of this position have shown,²¹ is that there is no unambiguous or univocal measure according to which the various goods in question (goods such as human life itself, knowledge of the truth, appreciation of beauty, friendship, justice, peace, harmony with God) can be compared. These goods of human persons, unlike useful goods such as money, clothes, food, etc., are simply incalculable and incommensurable. Although none is an absolute good, in the sense of the highest good or Summum Bonum, each is truly a priceless good of human persons and as such a good to be prized not priced, a good participating in the goodness of the human person. To attempt to compare them, to measure them off against each other, to commensurate them, is like trying to compare the number 87 with the length of this line-----. One simply cannot do so. One could if they were reducible to some common denominator, as one can compare the number 87 with the length of this line----- if one compares them in terms of a common denominator such as millimeters or centimeters or inches. But the goods in question cannot be reduced to some common denominator. They are simply different and incomparable goods of human persons. Thus the presupposition upon which proportionalism rests is false. One cannot determine, in an unambiguous way, which human goods are “greater” and which “less.” They are all incomparably good, irreducible aspects of human flourish-

ing and well-being.

Two different kinds of response have been given to this criticism. One advocate of proportionalism, McCormick, who previously asserted that the judgment of proportionality required the commensurating of human goods and the establishment of them into a hierarchy, now admits that it is, in the strict sense, impossible to compare or commensurate them against each other. Yet he claims that “while the basic goods are not commensurable (one against the other) they are clearly associated” or interrelated. Moreover, he continues, by considering these goods in their interrelationship one can make a judgment that the deliberate choice to destroy one good in present circumstances will not lead to an undermining of that good and that its destruction or impeding here and now is necessary in order to foster the flourishing of related goods, including the good one freely chooses to destroy.²²

This response is simply not adequate. What it comes to is saying that although there is no unambiguous way for commensurating the goods, we nonetheless succeed in so commensurating them by associating or interrelating them. McCormick himself admits as much, for he speaks of assessing the greater good as a “prudent bet” and of commensurating “in fear and trembling” and doing so by adopting a hierarchy.²³ What he is in fact doing by saying this is admitting that we commensurate the goods by choosing or stating our preferences. But the problem proportionalism was advanced to solve was that of determining, prior to choice, which possibilities are morally good and which are morally bad. Now McCormick tells us that to commensurate the goods we have to make a choice, to adopt a hierarchy. This simply will not do, nor does it respond to the criticism that the goods in question are incommensurable.

A second response to the criticism that proportionalism entails an impossible commensurating of human goods is that the same kind of commensuration is demanded by the “principle of double effect” (cf. its fourth condition as usually stated, namely, that there must be a “proportionate reason to permit the evil effect”). Since the critics of proportionalism accept the principle of double effect, they must admit that the goods can be commensurated. Thus McCormick writes that the critics of proportionalism cannot avoid the kind of consequentialistic (proportionalistic) reasoning that our sensibilities seem to demand in such conflict cases. For if a good like

life is simply incommensurable with other goods, what do we mean by a proportionate reason where death is ... indirect? Proportionate to what? If some goods are to be preferred to life itself, then we have compared life with these goods. And if this is proper, then life can be weighed up against other values too, even very basic ones.²⁴

What about this response? It should be noted, first, that proportionalists claim that one can determine the *true moral norm or standard* regulating human choice and action by commensurating human goods. Those who reject proportionalism and accept the principle of double effect deny this claim. They admit that language that sounds proportionalistic was used in articulating the fourth condition of the principle of double effect, but this does not lead to the conclusion that those accepting the principle of double effect believe that one can determine a moral norm by commensurating human goods and then choosing the alternative promising the greater good. Those who accept the principle of double effect (which, I must note, proportionalists reject) hold that a moral norm has already been established, namely the norm that one ought not directly intend evil and that one ought not choose to do evil so that good may come thereby (cf. the second and third conditions of the principle of double effect). Within the context provided by these moral norms, a normative meaning is already presupposed by expressions implying a comparison of goods. Let me illustrate this by referring to the Catholic teaching regarding justice in war, *jus in bello*. Catholic teaching, as the bishops of the United States made very clear, absolutely forbids the intentional killing of non-combatants, of innocent human beings: “the lives of innocent persons may never be taken directly.”²⁵ This normative requirement, however, does not exclude the use of lethal force against the military forces and installations of the enemy, even if it is foreseen that some innocent human beings will be killed as a result. However, as the bishops stated, “once we take into account not only the military advantages that will be achieved by using this [morally legitimate] means but also all the harms reasonably expected to follow from using it, can its use still be justified? We know, of course, that no end can justify using means evil in themselves, such as the executing of hostages or the targeting of noncombatants. Nonetheless, even if the means adopted is not evil in itself, it is necessary to take into account the probable harms that will result from using it and the justice of accepting those harms.”²⁶ This is what “proportionality” means

as set forth in the fourth condition of the principle of double effect, namely, considering the fairness or justice of doing an act, already judged to be morally acceptable in itself, in view of the harms and sufferings the use of this means will cause. Moral norms, such as justice and fairness, are being employed as a criterion for making an ethical judgment. One is not, prior to choice and prior to any moral norms, seeking to commensurate the incommensurable.

In sum, proportionalism is false. The basic criterion or moral norm it proposes for distinguishing, prior to choice, morally good and morally bad alternatives, rests on the false assumption that human goods can be commensurated, measured, calculated; but they cannot. Other objections to proportionalism can also be made, but the critique just given should suffice to show that it is not the answer we are looking for.²⁷

There must, then, be an alternative way of making true moral judgments and good moral choices. But what is it? I suggest that here we look for guidance from St. Thomas Aquinas and the teaching of Vatican Council II and from some contemporary authors who seek to develop the thought of Aquinas and the Council.

St. Thomas, in an article devoted to showing that all of the moral precepts of the Old Law could be reduced to the ten precepts of the Decalogue, taught that the twofold law of love for God and neighbor, while not included among the precepts of the Decalogue, nonetheless pertained to it as “the first and common precepts of the natural law.” Consequently, all the precepts of the Decalogue must be referred to these two precepts, love of God and love of neighbor, as to their “common principles.”²⁸ In other words, for St. Thomas the first moral requirement of practical reasonableness is that we ought to choose in such a way that we exhibit, in and through our choices, a true love for God and neighbor. This seems sound. Moreover, if we really love God, we ought to accept from Him His good gifts, the goods perfective of human persons. And if we love our neighbor, we ought to will that the goods of human existence flourish in them.

Vatican Council II likewise suggested a basic normative principle or requirement of practical reasonableness to direct human choices and actions. After noting that human activity is important not only for its results but also and even more importantly because it develops

human persons and gives to them, by reason of its self-determining and free character, their identity as moral beings, the Council declared:

Hence, the norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it should harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and allow men as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it.²⁹

This normative proposal of Vatican Council II is another way of saying what St. Thomas was saying when he affirmed that the ten precepts of the Decalogue - and indeed all moral precepts - must be referred to the two-fold law of love as to their common and universal principles.

This fundamental normative principle or basic requirement of practical reasonableness, which is itself one of the basic goods of human persons, is further clarified, in my opinion, by the articulation given to it recently by Germain G. Grisez, namely, "In voluntarily acting for human goods and avoiding what is opposed to them, one ought to choose and otherwise will those and only those possibilities whose willing is compatible with a will toward integral human fulfillment."³⁰ By this he means that in choosing among alternatives, we should choose only alternatives whose willing is compatible with a love for all the goods of human persons and of the persons in whom these goods are meant to flourish.

The matter can be put this way. We ought, in our choices, to revere and respect the goods of human existence, the goods to which we are directed by the first principles of practical reasoning. Our hearts ought to be open to them, and they ought to be open to them precisely because they are goods perfective of human beings. A person who is to choose in a morally upright way respects all the basic goods and listens to all the appeals they make through the principles of practical thinking. Because of the incompatibility of possibilities that lie before us, since it is not possible to do everything at once, choice is necessary. But no single good, nothing promised by any one possible alternative, exhausts human possibilities and realizes the whole potentiality for mankind's well-being. Thus one can choose one possibility which promises certain goods and is not relevant to other goods promised by alternatives without violating the practical principle directing action to these other goods. In this case, one remains open to these other goods; one is not

opting for a restrictive standard of goodness.

A person about to choose in a morally wrong way does not respect all of the real goods of human persons. The alternative that one is about to adopt by choice involves detriment to some human good, which, we must recognize, exists in real human beings. One is tempted to accept this detriment for the sake of realizing some other good. Such an alternative is responsive to at least one principle of practical reasoning, and it might be merely irrelevant to and thus consistent with some others, but it is both relevant to and inconsistent with the principle that directs one to promote and respect the good which the proposed alternative will impede or destroy or set aside.³¹

In sum, the basic requirement of practical reasonableness is that we ought to choose in such a way that we are open to the real goods of human persons and unwilling to neglect, slight, ignore, damage, destroy, or impede them either in ourselves and others. Morality comes from the heart, and our hearts ought to be open to what is really good and to the human persons in whom what is really good is meant to flourish.



Just as the first principle of practical reasoning, good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided, is specified by identifying the real goods of human persons that are to be pursued and done, so too the basic normative principle of practical reasonableness can be specified by identifying ways of choosing that do, in fact, fail to honor and respect "integral human fulfillment," i.e., the whole range of real goods perfective of human beings. These specifications of the first normative principle can be called "requirements of practical reasonableness" or "modes of responsibility." They can be set forth in different ways, affirmatively and negatively,³² and it may be helpful to indicate these specific requirements of practical reasonableness. First of all, we are required to take the real goods of human persons into account in judging and choosing what to do; simply to disregard them, to be unconcerned and lazy about them, is to manifest a will that is not truly open to them. In addition, we are to pursue these real goods of human existence, the intelligible goods grasped by our intelligence as worthy

of human choice, and to seek them rather than sensible goods such as pleasure. Moreover, every one of these goods demands of us that, when we can do so as easily as not, we avoid ways of acting that inhibit their realization and prefer ways of acting that contribute to their realization. In addition, each of these goods requires us to make an effort on its behalf (and on behalf of the person[s] in whom it is meant to exist, when its significant realization in some other human person or persons is in peril). Other requirements necessary if we are to shape our lives in accord with this normative truth can be spelled out: for instance, fairness or the Golden Rule that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us and not do unto others as we would not have them do unto us. One requirement that is surely crucial, however, is this: we ought not freely to choose, with deliberate intent, to put aside these goods, to destroy, damage, or impede them either in ourselves or in others. We might be tempted to do this out of hostility toward some good that we personally and arbitrarily do not wish to accept, or, more commonly, we may be tempted to do so because the continued flourishing of one or another good either in ourselves or in others inhibits our participation in some other good that we arbitrarily erect as “greater.” In short, we are not to do evil so that good may come about (cf. Rom 3:8; 6:1, 15).

The basic normative truth - in freely acting for the good and avoiding what is evil, choose and otherwise will those, and only those, possibilities whose willing is compatible with a love and respect for all the goods of

human existence - and its specifications will enable us to derive more specific moral norms, such as the norms requiring us to keep our promises and not to kill innocent human beings. Some of these specific norms will not be absolute, that is, they will have exceptions, because the actions to which they direct choice can, in particular instances, violate the normative requirements on which these more specific norms are grounded. Thus the obligation to keep our promises, which is grounded on the requirement of fairness or the Golden Rule. But some more specific moral norms, such as the one that we ought not choose to kill innocent human beings, are absolute and admit of no exceptions, because they are grounded on the requirement that we ought not to choose to damage, destroy, or impede what is really good, and the life of an innocent person is really good.

In conclusion, a respect for the inherent and inalienable dignity of human persons is necessary if we are to acquire the dignity to which we are called as persons capable of discovering the truth and freely choosing in accord with it. A basic normative truth is that we ought to choose in such a way that we are open to the real goods of human persons, goods which are both gifts from God and aspects of human flourishing. Only by choosing in this way will we honor the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of human beings as living images of God, His “created words,” and only in this way will we give to ourselves the identity of persons who are true to God’s image within us, true to the “word” He has communicated to us.



NOTES

1 On this see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, 93, 4. There St. Thomas actually distinguishes a three-fold dignity proper to human persons. The first is the dignity human beings have by virtue of being made in God’s image; the second is their dignity as beings who know and love God by conforming to His grace, but in an imperfect way as sojourners in life; the third is their dignity as beings now living in complete union with God, and this is the dignity of the blessed. The first kind of dignity exists in all men; the second, only in the just; the third only in the blessed. For the teaching of Vatican Council II see *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 12 and 14 on the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of human beings as made in the image of God; see nn. 16 and 17 for the dignity they are called to give to themselves by choosing in accord with the truth.

2 On the “beatifying beginnings” of human existence see the probing analyses provided by Pope John Paul II in his *The Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on Genesis* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981).

3 As Augustine said, “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You” (*Confessions*, 1.1).

4The Church has always taught that human life, precisely because it is a gift from God and is destined for life in union with Him, is priceless and merits the most profound respect from its very beginning. A useful collection of Church documents emphasizing the inherent dignity of life is provided by the volume, *Yes to Life* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1977), which is an anthology of important Christian affirmations of the preciousness of human life from the Didache in the first century to the pastoral letter of the American bishops on moral values in 1976, *To Live in Christ Jesus*. See also the recent *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origins and on the Dignity of Procreation*, issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in March, 1987.

5Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981), p. 41.

6Here the comments of the philosopher Alan Donagan on the identity between being human and being a person are relevant. He writes: “Duties owed to any being arise out of the respect that is owed to it. Let it, then, be provisionally conceded that, in the first instance, respect is recognized as owed to beings by virtue of a state they are in: say, that of rational agency. If there are beings who reach that state by a process of development natural to normal members of that species, given normal nurture, must not respect logically be accorded to them, whether they have yet reached that state or not? The principle underlying this reasoning is: if respect is owed to beings because they are in a certain state, it is owed to whatever, by its very nature, develops into that state. To reject this principle would be arbitrary, if indeed it would be intelligible. What could be made of somebody who professed to rate the state of rational agency as of supreme value, but who regarded as expendable any rational creature whose powers were as yet undeveloped? *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 170. On this matter also see Mortimer Adler, *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* (New York: Meridian Books, 1968) and my “What Makes a Human Being to Be a Being of Moral Worth?” *Thomist* 40 (1976) 416-443.

7Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 3.

8Ibid.

9Ibid.

10In the Abbott translation of *The Documents of Vatican Council II* (New York: America Press, 1965), this passage from *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 16, is incorrectly translated as “the voice of conscience.” The Latin text is *cuius vox*, with the antecedent of *cuius* being *lex* (law), not *conscientia* (conscience).

11Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 16.

12Ibid.

13For an excellent presentation of the self-determining character of free choices see Germain G. Grisez, *The Way of The Lord Jesus*, Vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles*, chapter 2, pp. 41-72, especially pp. 50-53, 55-59.

14St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2, 94, 2.

15Ibid.

16*Summa Theologiae*, 1-2, 94, 6.

17A useful collection of essays setting forth this position is provided by *Readings in Moral Theology*, No. 1, edited by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, SJ, *Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition*. The essays by Peter Knauer, Louis Janssens, Joseph Fuchs, Bruno Schuller, Franz Scholz, Walter Jeffko, Albet Di Ianni, Richard McCormick, and Charles E. Curran included in this volume all propose the positions briefly described here. See also Timothy E. O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality* (New York: Seabury, 1978), especially pp. 144-196, for a presentation of this view.

18On this view, as McCormick, one of its leading advocates, quite clearly admits, one can intend a “lesser” premoral evil for the sake of a “greater” premoral good: “The ‘greater good’ does not mean that the premoral disvalue is not intended; it means that it is not intended propter se. Therefore, would it not be better to say that it is legitimate to intend a disvalue in se sed non propter se? When there is no proportionate reason, the disvalue is chosen and intended in se et propter se, and it is this propter se that makes the act immoral.” Richard A. McCormick, “Notes on Moral Theology,” *Theological Studies* 33 (1972) 74-75.

19Ibid. See also McCormick’s “Notes on Moral Theology,” *Theological Studies* 39 (1978) 115, where he writes: “It is the presence or absence of such a[proportionate] reason that determines whether the attitude of the agent is adequate or not?”

20McCormick, “Ambiguity in Moral Choice,” in *Doing Evil To Achieve Good*, edited by Richard A. McCormick, SJ, and Paul Ramsey (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1978), p. 38.

21 Among the most important sources for this critique of proportionalism are the following: Germain G. Grisez, "Against Consequentialism," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 23 (1978) 21-72; Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, pp. 151-154; John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 118-125; Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1983), pp. 86-90.

22 McCormick, "A Commentary on the Commentaries," in *Doing Evil to Achieve Good*, p. 227; see also pp. 251-253.

23 Ibid. For a brilliant analysis of McCormick's position and a critique showing that, on his view, one acts wrongly in framing an innocent person to prevent a lynch mob from hanging a group of innocent persons not because one is willing to kill an innocent person but because one is practicing "extortion" on the lynch mob by not respecting their freedom to change their minds - surely an absurd position, see Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, pp. 99-105.

24 McCormick, "Ambiguity in Moral Choice," in *Doing Evil to Achieve Good*, p. 27.

25 *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response, A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace*, May 3, 1983, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983), n. 104.

26 Ibid., n. 105.

27 For an excellent critique of proportionalism stressing its impracticability and arbitrariness, see B. M. Kiely, "The Impracticality of Proportionalism," *Gregorianum* 66/4 (1985) 655-686.

28 *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2, 100, 3, ad 1.

29 *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 35.

30 Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, p. 184.

31 On this see Germain G. Grisez and Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., *Life and Death With Liberty and Justice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), pp. 365-366.

32 In his latest work, *Christian Moral Principles*, pp. 205-226, Grisez expresses the "modes of responsibility" negatively. He believes that it is important to do so, because these modes exclude ways of violating the basic normative principle. In his earlier writings (e.g., *Contraception and the Natural Law* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1964) and *Abortion: The Myths, the Realities, and the Arguments* (New York: Corpus, 1970) he had expressed most of them affirmatively and only the mode requiring that one not set aside what is really good negatively. For an alternate affirmative and negative formulation of the requirements of practical reasonableness, see Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 100-133.