



Living a Catholic Life No. 9 *Christ as Moral Example*

“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between Knights of Columbus councils, parishes, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

The most important and practical question in morality is, How do you make people good? In the very first paragraph of the *Meno*, Plato mentions four possible answers to this question, which correspond to the four basic answers philosophers would give for the next 2,400 years: (1) Virtue can be taught. (2) Is it acquired by practice. (3) Men have it by nature. (4) It comes in some other way. The first is the position of Plato; the second, Aristotle; the third, Rousseau; and the fourth, Hobbes, if “some other way” is taken to mean “against nature.”

When someone who is instructed by experience and life rather than by philosophers raises this question, however, he is likely to embrace no one of these four solutions, but instead a fifth. For he knows by experience how he has in fact learned morality: by example. That is also how religion is in fact taught most effectively. The disciples of Jesus showed forth something that the rest of the world longed for: “Whatever it is that these people have, we want it, because we want to be like them.”

Children learn morality—and immorality—the same way they learn religion—and irreligion: by comparing “the good guys” with “the bad guys.” And since their small slice of life can’t be counted on to supply all the right examples at all the needed times, literature steps in as a kind of second life, or representative life. Children learn morality primarily through their own real-life stories in their families and then through stories that appeal to the moral imagination. Next to the family, the moral imagination is the most powerful teacher of morality. The reason why every culture, including ours, has taught morality through media is that we learn through data, through experience, through example and induction. That’s why Jesus taught in parables, instead of philosophy. Chesterton says there are only two things we never get bored with: persons and stories. Hell wins more citizens through boredom and indifference than through rebellion.

Three popular alternatives to a morality of concrete characters with moral character are (1) legalism, a simple “obey the rules”; (2) relativism, a simple “feel your way along as you go, create your own values”; and (3) abstract formalism: “have a good will, good intention, be sincere, and try to do the right thing” but without any concrete information about what things are the right things (i.e., intrinsic goods).

The Christian, now, is in an incredibly privileged position to learn morality because he has not only many good examples—the saints—but the supreme example of God himself in the flesh! Christ and the saints teach us morality by a kind of

mutual reinforcement: on the one hand, we understand Christ through his saints, but on the other hand, we also understand the saints through Christ. Without reading the Gospels and meeting Christ there, without experience of his personality, we would not understand similar personality traits when we meet them in the saints—for instance, their strange blend of very tender compassion and very tough courage, their tremendous concern with and sensitivity to suffering in others, and their almost fanatical unconcern with and insensitivity (as it seems) to suffering themselves.

If all I have said is true, no more catastrophic error in teaching morality could possibly be perpetrated than the neglect of direct immersion in the four Gospels and in the lives of the saints. Young people respond to heroic challenges. They are often idealistic, open, generous, and eager for adventure, even sacrifice, if only they see the beauty of the ideal. They do not see that beauty in abstract principles; they see it in concrete examples, above all in Christ himself. They are not willing to live and die for abstractions, but they are willing to live and die for persons (not for abstract personhood but for persons).

Meeting these persons—above all Christ—is the end as well as the means to morality. We become moral by meeting Christ, and we meet and understand Christ better the more moral we are. Christ is much more than moral example and teacher; He is assuredly not less. Christ teaches us what morality is, and morality teaches us who Christ is. Immoral people do not understand him. They may wonder what he thought he’d get out of it, or wonder whether he was a masochist. Only the pure in heart see God, and only the pure in heart understand God incarnate. So, we need to be moral before we can understand Christ as supremely good. But we also need the perfect example of Christ to truly teach us morality. It works both ways.

And the Christ of the Gospels is the same one who as the Logos—“the true light that enlightens every man who comes into the world” (John 1:9)—has already been teaching us morality from within, as our “interior master” (Augustine) from our earliest days. When we meet him in the Gospels, we do not meet a stranger. It is like an amateur chess player meeting the world’s champion or a surfer meeting a wave. The God-shaped hole in our heart is confronted with the missing piece, the keystone, the Cornerstone. And when He is let in, He reshapes all the other stones of the building that is our personality, into his image. The most important way Christ teaches morality is not only by word or even only by example but by present power, by real presence.