
1. What Is the Moral Law?

We call humanity's common, shared understanding of right and wrong the moral law. It exists among all people of all different times and places. Everyone's God-given conscience is based on this law. In addition, God has revealed much of the moral law in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. That is why studying our Catholic faith is one way of deepening our knowledge of the moral law.

God gave all of us the gift of free will. This means that we are free to choose between right and wrong. We are responsible for our own actions. But because Original Sin has wounded us, we tend to make bad choices. We do wrong even when we know better.

Sometimes, we cannot be held fully responsible for our sins. A sinner with a sick mind, for example, is less to blame than another who commits the same sin but has a healthy mind. A boy who sins because a bully threatens to hurt him if he doesn't is less to blame for the sin than the bully is. Other factors may also lessen a person's responsibility for sinful behavior.

There are some acts, however, that are seriously wrong no matter what the sinner's circumstances are. Murder is always a sin. So is doing something bad in order to get something good out of it. It is wrong to steal money so you can buy something you want.

2. What Makes a Well-Formed Conscience?

Conscience is a judgment of what is right and wrong. Sometimes your conscience tells you not only that an act was evil, but also that you must try to make up for it. You must try to return to God.

Everyone is born with a desire for happiness. This desire is fulfilled by making good choices and becoming closer to God. Because the judgment of conscience is necessary to making good choices, each of us is called to form a correct conscience.

Conscience is formed by taking time alone to think and pray. It is also strengthened by reading Scripture, seeking advice about right and wrong from others, and learning the teachings of the Church. Each of us is called to form a good conscience by using these helps. Then we are called to follow our conscience.

3. What Is Virtue?

When you choose to do what is right over and over, you are on your way to developing the habit of doing good. The habit of doing good is called virtue. Moral virtues are developed by choosing good acts and, at the same time, moral virtues make choosing good acts and living a moral life easier. God's grace helps us to develop the moral virtues.

Four moral virtues are so important that all the other virtues depend on them. They are called Cardinal Virtues. They are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Prudence helps us to decide what is good in a particular situation and then to choose the right way to accomplish what is good. Justice helps us to give what is due to God and to our neighbors. Fortitude helps us to resist temptations and overcome obstacles to doing good. Temperance allows us to control our desire for pleasure so we can live well-balanced lives.

All of these are called human virtues because we can develop these virtues through our own efforts. But what makes it possible for us to develop moral virtues are the Theological Virtues given to us by God. The Theological Virtues lead us to want to live the kind of lives that will bring us into a good relationship with God and lead us to eternal life.

There are three Theological Virtues—faith, hope, and charity. Faith is the virtue by which we believe in God and in all he has revealed to us. Hope is the virtue by which we trust in Christ's promises and the Holy Spirit's help to gain eternal life and happiness in the Kingdom of God. Charity allows us to love God and our neighbors.

4. What Is Sin?

Sin is disobedience. It is any word, deed, or desire that breaks God's Law. A serious act of disobedience is called a mortal sin. Three things make a sin mortal. First, the sin concerns a serious matter. Second, the person recognizes how serious the sin is. Third, the person freely chooses to commit the sin anyway. An example is taking weeks to plan a murder, then carrying it out. Committing a mortal sin in effect is choosing eternal death. If the sinner does not repent, he or she cannot enter into eternal life with God.

Venial sin is a lesser offense against God's Law. While it is also wrong, it does not bring eternal punishment. That does not mean, however, that venial sins are not dangerous. Repeating the same venial sin over and over can put a person at risk of falling into mortal sin. For example, it is a venial sin for someone to want revenge when he or she has been hurt by another person. But thinking every day about ways of getting even can lead to planning an actual attack and even carrying out



Photo credit: P. Razzo/CIRIC