



# What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ in the world today?

By Jackson Saunders



One of my favourite subjects in my seminary formation has been Moral Theology. I don't know about you; however, my first impression of Moral Theology was that it was all about rules and regulations. While these are important in all aspects of life to maintain law and order, Moral Theology is much more life-giving and exciting. Quite simply, Moral Theology is about exploring what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in the world today. It is practical and responds to the challenge St Paul presents to us of having the same mind as Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5).

The Second Vatican Council in its Decree on Priestly Training, *Optatam Totius*, emphasised the central role of Scripture in seminary formation and a seminarian's study of Moral Theology. The aim is to "draw more fully on the teaching of holy



scripture and should throw light on the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world.”<sup>1</sup> Kevin J. O’Neill and Peter Black explain that Christian morality flows from faith in Jesus as the Son of God revealed in the Scriptures.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the Christian moral life is interpreted “by using the words, deeds, and stories of Jesus and about Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> The call is to love God and neighbour and to be prepared to lay down our lives, as Jesus has first loved and died for us (John 15:12-17). John Paul II in his encyclical letter, *Veritas Splendor*, explains that “Jesus’ way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life. Indeed, his actions, and in particular his Passion and Death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others.”<sup>4</sup> In daily life, this might mean making small sacrifices to put other people’s interests ahead of our own, or it might mean doing the job no one else wants to do at our workplace, sporting club or community organisation. This can create a buzz or sense of relief providing life and gratitude to others. These are all ways in which we can die to ourselves and share in the life of Christ through the paschal mysteries of his passion, death and resurrection.

Moral Theology has a clear link to daily living and becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ in the world today is a lifelong journey. It is a journey of discovery to “come and see,” as was the case for Philip and Nathanael when they decided to follow Jesus (Jn 1:43-51). Gula suggests that to be a disciple of Jesus today means to be “faithful to the Jesus revealed in the New Testament and mediated by the church, and ... to be creative in our response to the challenges of life today.”<sup>5</sup> This recognises that we live at another time to when Jesus did and that the challenges today are different.<sup>6</sup>



Our human response in the Christian moral life is informed by our conscience. This impels us to listen to

<sup>1</sup> *On Priestly Training* (28 October 1965), n. 16, in *Vatican II: The Conciliar Flannery* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> *Essential Moral Handbook: A Guide to Catholic Living* (Liguori: Liguori

<sup>3</sup> *Grace and Holiness: A Spirituality for Pastoral Ministers* (Collegeville:

<sup>4</sup> *Apostolic Letter* (1993), n. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Grace and Holiness*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Grace and Holiness*, 10.



the voice of God and to “do good and avoid evil.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the Christian conscience is “the most secret core and sanctuary” of the human person where we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths.<sup>8</sup> The Christian conscience is informed by a variety of moral sources including Sacred Scripture, the Tradition of the Church, liturgical prayer, the Sacraments and Moral Norms. Patricia Lamoureux and Paul J. Wadell explain that we are responsible for continuing to develop our Christian conscience.<sup>9</sup> While we have a natural desire and attraction to the good, this love needs to be continually deepened.<sup>10</sup>

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that there are three moments in the exercise of conscience; firstly, a consideration of the principles of morality (synderesis); secondly, discernment on how to apply them in the current situation based on the reason and goods available; and thirdly, a judgement on the concrete act to be performed or already performed.<sup>11</sup> O’Neill and Black add a fourth moment of conscience, which is in line with the Church’s Tradition; firstly, they speak of conscience as desiring and knowing the good;<sup>12</sup> secondly, as discerning the particular good;<sup>13</sup> thirdly, as judgement for right action;<sup>14</sup> and lastly as self-evaluating.<sup>15</sup> This fourth moment seeks to “confirm the sensitivity to good and evil present in that judgement of conscience.”<sup>16</sup> To live as a disciple of Christ in the world today and to bring forth charity for the life of the world will therefore mean to use one’s conscience responsibility so as to move closer to God and to experience the fullness of life.<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, our conscience helps us to be faithful to our baptism. The study of Moral Theology shows that we have “put on Christ at baptism and promised to live in Christ and according to the ways of Christ.”<sup>18</sup> To live as a disciple in the world today means to

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<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English translation. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1997), n. 1778.

<sup>8</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965), n. 16, in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Lamoureux and Paul J. Wadell, *The Christian Moral Life: Faithful Discipleship for a Global Society* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 163.

<sup>10</sup> Lamoureux and Wadell, *The Christian Moral Life*, 164.

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1780

<sup>12</sup> O’Neill and Black, *The Essential Moral Handbook*, 60.

<sup>13</sup> O’Neill and Black, *The Essential Moral Handbook*, 65.

<sup>14</sup> O’Neill and Black, *The Essential Moral Handbook*, 77.

<sup>15</sup> O’Neill and Black, *The Essential Moral Handbook*, 82.

<sup>16</sup> O’Neill and Black, *The Essential Moral Handbook*, 82.

<sup>17</sup> O’Neill and Black, *The Essential Moral Handbook*, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Lamoureux and Wadell, *The Christian Moral Life*, 175.



think and act like Christ, so as to “bring the goodness and compassion and mercy and justice of God more fully to life in the world.”<sup>19</sup> The result of this is that our Christian life will be one of virtue and freedom where the dignity of all is respected. As such, our human response to God’s call will show forth our Christian identity and the call we have embraced to be a disciple of Christ in the world today.

*PICTURES: Jean-Sebastien Gery.*

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<sup>19</sup> Lamoureux and Wadell, *The Christian Moral Life*, 177.