

Supplemental Information for  
*Why Catholic? Journey through the Catechism*  
*Life In Christ – Walking With God*  
To group leaders of  
Christ the King Parish, Springfield, Illinois

By Deacon Al Laabs  
September/October, 2010

Session 2: “Freedom and Responsibility of Human Acts”

### **Suggested Environment**

Note again that we are reverting to the table arrangement suggestion from year one but I would continue to make the *USCCA* a part of each table arrangement since many of you who used it think highly of it.

### **Lifting Our Hearts**

Notice how we pray “Teach us...Help us...Teach us...We ask for your help...” So in a session that begins to explore our human freedom, we humbly admit and ask for God’s help in using this freedom of ours. We freely admit we need God’s help if we are to use this free ability we have to choose to follow a model of Gospel values.

### **Sharing Our Good News**

It might be interesting if someone in the group zeroed in on the first bullet point under the Sharing our Faith section of our first session (see p. 6). I mention that because discussing cultural values that oppose Gospel values in terms of how they have affected someone is actually a good lead into the idea of how our freedom is affected by secular or cultural influences.

### **Exploring the Catechism**

Paragraphs one is fairly straight forward and I would encourage you to suggest everyone underlines the last sentence: “Freedom and responsibility always go together.” I might just remind everyone of the discussion we had last year since at times I’ve heard individuals question what exactly it means to be made in God’s image and likeness. We have to remember that our words about God and our relationship always are metaphorical in a sense because God is really beyond our limited understanding. The best “image and likeness” metaphor comes from the recognition that God, out of pure love, freely choose to create the universe and all it contains. Within it mankind as Genesis tells us holds the highest place in creation and we

reflect in our nature freedom to love and create in a limited sense. So in our freedom and our ability to love, love even to the extent of laying down our lives for another, we share an after image as it were of God's creative act—when we act as humans in creative love we resemble our maker.

That second paragraph might need a bit of emphasis. It copies CCC 1745 word for word. The point of emphasis that ties together the idea I suggested underlining (Freedom and Responsibility always go together) is that we "own" our actions to the extent that we will face God himself at our final judgment. While not making a big issue of it here, God's "justice" is really based on what we have chosen for ourselves. We may choose values that actually move us away from God and a "Life in Christ" which, as we know, is the title of this year's book.

While I wouldn't encourage a big departure on the third paragraph, I'd make certain that everyone is together on the limitations that are part of our human freedom. After all, while we share the image of true freedom from our maker, it resides in a limited, human being. We are all aware of the many limitations we experience in our freedom and the way those limitations reduce our responsibility.

I would encourage you to be careful with the question: "What makes an action good or evil?" The temptation always present is to substitute the word "sin" for actions which are not good ones. This section of the Catechism is focusing our thoughts on the value of human actions themselves, from a human perspective. Notice also that there are three factors necessary to examine in determining whether an action is considered good or evil. I'd suggest that you read CCC1757-1761 for a bullet point summary of these factors. The general idea here is that we can discuss or look at our human experience over time and find almost universal agreement on courses of action that have been identified as "good" or "evil" and hence to be avoided. The following is a short section from a longer article on the subject of morality that you can find by following this link: [Morality](#)

"It is [necessary](#) at the outset of this article to distinguish between *morality* and [ethics](#), terms not seldom employed synonymously. Morality is antecedent to [ethics](#): it denotes those concrete activities of which [ethics](#) is the [science](#). It may be defined as human conduct in so far as it is freely subordinated to the ideal of what is right and fitting.

This ideal governing our free actions is common to the race. Though there is wide divergence as to theories of [ethics](#), there is a fundamental agreement among men regarding the general lines of conduct desirable in public and private life. Thus Mr. Hobhouse has well said:

"The comparative study of ethics, which is apt in its earlier stages to impress the student with a bewildering sense of the diversity of moral judgments, ends rather by impressing them with a more fundamental and far-reaching uniformity. Through the greatest extent of time and space over which we have records, we find a recurrence of the common features of ordinary morality, which to my mind at least is not less impressive than the variations which also appear" (Morals in Evolution, I, i, n. 11).

Plainly this uniformity regards principles rather than their application. The actual rules of conduct differ widely. While reverence to [parents](#) may be universally acknowledged as [obligatory](#), certain savage tribes believe that filial [piety](#) requires them to dispatch their [parents](#) when the infirmities of old age appear. Yet making allowance for all such diversities, it may be said that the common voice of the race proclaims it to be right for a man to reverence his [parents](#); to care and provide for his children; to be master of his lower [appetites](#); to be honest and just in his dealings, even to his own damage; to show benevolence to his fellows in time of distress; to bear pain and misfortune with [fortitude](#). And only within comparatively recent years has anyone been found to deny that beyond this a man is bound to [honour God](#) and to prefer his country's interests to his own. Thus, indeed, the advance of morality lies not so much in the discovery of new principles as in the better application of those already accepted, in the recognition of their [true](#) basis and their ultimate sanction, in the widening of the area within which they are held to bind, and in the removal of corruptions inconsistent with their observance.”

The above is from the New Advent online edition of the Catholic Encyclopedia, the older edition. Note also that the colored and underlined links will take you, if you are on line while reading this, to other sections of the Encyclopedia. I included it because the remainder of this first section on exploring the Catechism leads to a discussion that I think is important. Hopefully, it will seem almost common sense to say that society is impossible without a moral code or that a world without limits is a world of chaos and misery. It's important for your group to have this sense of moral order kind of implicit in our human nature to have a sense of what the term natural law implies. This section would like us to be able to look back at the history of our beginnings and appreciate that even early societies had structures and rules that were necessary for living together as “civilized” beings. So that last sentence in this section could be prefaced with the words, “Just at the human level,” no mention of God just yet, “We need personal and social morality translated into ethical laws in order to live together in peace.”

This should make sense to everyone and let me tell you a brief story of what I learned from watching “*Finding Nemo*,” a delightful cartoon movie about a little lost fish, with my granddaughter. It seems that whenever the sea gulls are together, they always cause a problem and are fighting. Interestingly, the only word the gulls always say is: “Mine, Mine, and Mine.” In other words, if everything is mine and nothing is yours, we have no such thing as private property and no reason to respect you or your “things.” I don't know how really clever the writer of that movie is, but there is an absolute truth there that is the basis for private property, social order, and respect for another person and hence a beginning of an ethical framework often referred to as natural moral law.

### **Scripture: Pondering the Word**

This reading from Exodus begins to introduce the idea that we discover moral living not only by looking at our human experience but listening to God's revelation to us.

### **Exodus 20: 1-17**

1 <sup>1</sup> Then God delivered all these commandments:

2 "I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery.

3 You shall not have other gods besides me.

4 You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth;

5 <sup>2</sup> you shall not bow down before them or worship them. For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation;

6 but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation, on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 "You shall not take the name of the LORD, your God, in vain. For the LORD will not leave unpunished him who takes his name in vain.

8 "Remember to keep holy the sabbath day.

9 Six days you may labor and do all your work,

10 but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD, your God. No work may be done then either by you, or your son or daughter, or your male or female slave, or your beast, or by the alien who lives with you.

11 In six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the LORD has blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

12 "Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you.

13 "You shall not kill.

14 "You shall not commit adultery.

15 "You shall not steal.

16 "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass, nor anything else that belongs to him."

This scripture is taken from the USCCB web site and the footnotes (small little numbers in color) are an access back to their site. For another place in the OT where these commandments are mentioned, look at [Deut. 5: 6-21](#).

### **Sharing Questions**

This can be a very productive discussion since what is being introduced at this point is the idea that our sense of natural moral law is supplemented by God's freely revealed truths about His creation, namely, about the way we are to live and relate. So how do those commandments not only allow me to live in harmony but create a structure that makes possible order and life in peace with those around me? You might try to lead the discussion towards how those commandments play a key role in supporting a "family" environment and make possible that essential element which builds society.

### **Exploring the Catechism (continued)**

This second section, to summarize, transitions from a sense of natural moral law (sometimes felt as an imprint or mark of our Creator upon us) to a realization of God's revelation through the Old Testament and New Testament of the truths of who we are and how we are to live. That third sentence in the second paragraph is a great summary of what this section is trying to crystallize: "God has given us rules for living, writing these in our hearts, giving us the Commandments, and instructing us gradually, as our minds and hearts grow more sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church." That example of an awareness of the evil of slavery is a wonderful point illustrating how our awareness of what it means to be truly human has grown and developed over time as is the example of our understanding of capital punishment. Similarly, you may want to point out that our science and technology is always bringing new challenges to the issue of how we live and act.

The third paragraph has a very real challenge that everyone I am certain will understand. The "whatever works for you mentality" or a denial of objective norms such as the natural law can lead to a very dangerous position sometimes called "relativism." Under a relativism mentality, power decides what is right, whether that is by simply voting or polling the population to see what is legal and "good." On an individual basis the "what feels right for me" or if no one else is hurt approach similarly presents an attack on either objective reality or revealed truth. A good example of the point made on the top of page 11 is found in North Korea. There the will of one man, who incidentally just promoted his son to be heir apparent, decides the law of the land and what is acceptable behavior in their totalitarian state. And in totalitarian regimes, notice that over time (e.g.: Russia, Nazi Germany ) God and religion is either outlawed or marginalized through persecution.

You may find that some of your group wanting to talk about ideas and issues behind the words "the autonomy of the individual." In the West, especially in the U.S. we have made personal rights and the idea of personal freedom an inalienable quality of our society: hence the need early on in our constitutional history to adopt the "Bill of Rights." Without going into this at great length, just remind those who want to press this issue that there is always tension

between individual rights and the common good. I can share with you my experience representing hospitals with emergency services as we lent support to a retaining the bill requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets only to see our legislature throw out this law on the basis of “individual rights.” In the same way, this refusal to look at objective norms of truth leads legislators and proponents of abortion to argue for a “woman’s right to choose.”

Second paragraph from the top of page 11, however, for Catholic Christians reinforces the Church as commissioned by Christ to give us guidance and direction on moral issues. Those sections from the Catechism (2048-2051) while presented as bullet points “in brief” are very important. I would really encourage you to gauge the level of acceptance of this core idea since this is a building block for all the next sessions we will study. The *USCCB* (the Red Book) has a great section that covers very well this session on pages 310 to 312. I would urge you as a group leader to read those pages before you begin your session and you might even recommend their reading to the group as follow-up after your session.

The last part of this section centers on Christ’s example of “unconditional love, sincere giving, and selfless loving” as the model for each of us in our moral lives. Quite nicely it highlights how important is the grace we receive from Christ himself, through Word, but especially through sacrament to enable us to live that life of his. As the ending paragraph points out, our faith can elevate us above our sometime feelings of failure. I think all of us and everyone in each group can testify to moments when we have been able to grow or endure hardships or challenges when we have turned to our Lord and put our confidence in Him. I think it is simply reassuring to emphasize how our “Life in Christ” is always a project under “construction” and that we are pilgrim people as individuals and as Church.

### **Sharing Our Faith**

These are some great questions to discuss. Let me suggest that in keeping with the ending of the discussion in that second section “Exploring the Catechism” you might want to point out the third bullet point under this section. I would hope that someone would be able to give examples of “grateful guidance” from the Church. As an example, as a former CEO of a Catholic hospital, I can testify to the many, many individuals who were grateful to the guidance provided by our Medical Moral Committee when it came to issues about prolonging life in the face of technology.

### **Living the Good News**

I can’t help but point out the challenge of the first bullet point under this section. Forgiving someone who has hurt us can be one of the greatest challenges we all face but also one of the most wonderful ways we make “Our Lord’s Prayer”—forgive us trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us—into a reality in our lives. I would also point out the fourth point that centers on organizing a letter writing campaign around some moral issue. Since most of us will be doing this session in October perhaps the issue of supporting life would be a good issue to write to our elected officials and express our beliefs.

## **Lifting our Hearts**

You will find me encouraging each group to open up the closing to spontaneous prayer for all the variety of intentions that we always do carry in our hearts so suggest going around the room/group to ask each person present to pray for a specific intention. Notice that this ending prayer is already right in that format. May I suggest several intentions of a personal nature: For the grace to accept the moral voice of the Church as the voice of our Lord, let us pray to the Lord; For all of us present this evening/this day that by living a life centered on Christ's Word and example we may experience true peace, let us pray to the Lord.

Addendum Note: Any feedback you would like to give is most welcome. Please reply to [allaabs1770@gmail.com](mailto:allaabs1770@gmail.com)