

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 6: “Moral Law, Grace, and the Church”

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

You may want to draw the group’s attention to the words “...grant us a share in the energy and peace of your eternal plan.” We will find ourselves praying for the energy to “effect” the plan of God on earth by building His kingdom through the moral law that allows us to live in community and hence live in the “peace of Christ” we wish to each other when we celebrate liturgy. Much, much more could be said about his in a meditative way, especially when tying the sense of the opening Psalm 119 into this prayer. In so many parts of the Old Testament, one finds the Jewish people expressing their gratitude for the Lord’s gift of the Law to them. “You have not done this for any other peoples,” runs one of the comments, expressing how God’s love for them is seen in the gift of Torah. Do we see God’s commands and his love for us in the moral law and in the great law of love Jesus has given us?

Sharing Our Good News

Perhaps this week’s session, following as it will just after the elections, will prompt some discussion of the issue of justice I mentioned near the end of last week’s commentary. You may want to remind everyone in the group that our commitment to social justice and the common good is inherently tied into our love of neighbor. Remember that important line from last week: “Jesus teaches us that loving our neighbor is inseparable from loving God.”

Exploring the *Catechism*

This first paragraph begins with an interesting sentence, “The moral law is the work of God.” You might begin a good discussion with the question, “In what sense is it the “work” of God?” As a hint, you might point out that we have discussed in session two the idea of natural

law as something written in our hearts and an “objective source” (see page 11) we find present in the hearts of men and women. I would suggest that the moral law is work in the sense that God’s creation was “work” and the moral law is truly the work of his hands as written in our hearts. It also may help to understand that the “plan” of God for us is “work” we do as we shape our lives to follow that life of Christ. So there is a connection between what we prayed for and this opening line.

The next three paragraphs touch on the idea of natural law, an idea that can be a three credit course in itself. Let me encourage you to have your group read CCC1954 and 1955. The key to understanding the idea of natural law is the statement that the “natural law is written and engraved in the soul of each and every person,” meaning that it should be found, or traces of it should be found, in every culture and age. From a Christian perspective, the second bolded area in the first paragraph acknowledges the law as something we know and something we must do. You would find a tremendous amount written about the content of the natural law but I think St. Thomas Aquinas got it right when he said the following, and I quote the old Catholic Encyclopedia:

“The exposition of [St. Thomas](#) is at once the most simple and philosophic. Starting from the premise that good is what primarily falls under the apprehension of the practical reason—that is of reason acting as the dictator of conduct—and that, consequently, the supreme principle of moral action must have the good as its central [idea](#), he holds that the supreme principle, from which all the other principles and [precepts](#) are derived, is that good is to be done, and [evil](#) avoided (I-II, Q, xciv, a. 2). “ If you wish the link to the entire article on natural law, [here it is](#).

This may sound a great deal familiar since we have touched on this idea of being drawn to doing good and avoiding evil in session two.

For two other worthwhile articles on natural law, follow these links:

[“An overview of natural law theory”](#) by Jonathan Dolhenty

[Natural Law-Wikipedia](#) (see esp. section 1.4 “Christian Natural Law”)

So paragraph two of these three mentions in the first sentence, suggestion—underline it, that natural law is the foundation of both rights and responsibilities that marks us as free human beings. This law then becomes the foundation upon which society is possible; again, you might mention the discussion that arose when we talked about the necessity of a moral code for there to even be a social order. The last part of this section leads quite naturally to an understanding of the “Old Law” of the Old Testament (that is, the Commandments as its summary) as the beginning of our loving God’s revelation to us, more particularly, to our Jewish brothers and sisters in faith. CCC1965 quoted in part in bold carries through with God’s further revelation through Jesus of the New Law and the Gospel summarized by our opening session in which we discussed the Beatitudes (from the Sermon on the Mount).

I think you will find it helpful to have the group read and discuss CCC1972. The sentence the authors use, referring to the New Law, “It is a law of love, of freedom, and of grace...” does not do this idea really justice. I think you will find the *Catechism’s* words breaking open each of these words, “love, freedom, and grace,” in relation to the law in a very meaningful way. For example, why would we call the new law of the Gospel the Law of Love? So I quote, “...it is called the *law of love* because it makes us act out of the love infused by the Holy Spirit, rather than from fear.” In other words, our love for the person of Christ leads us to act out of that love rather than any fear of punishment. It really will be worth the time to read and discuss this specific section of the *Catechism*.

Scripture: Pondering the Word

Colossians 1:3-11

3 ² We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,
4 for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the holy ones
5 because of the hope reserved for you in heaven. Of this you have already heard through the
word of truth, the gospel,
6 that has come to you. Just as in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, so also among
you, from the day you heard it and came to know the grace of God in truth,
7 as you learned it from Epaphras ³ our beloved fellow slave, who is a trustworthy minister of
Christ on your behalf
8 and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.
9 ⁴ Therefore, from the day we heard this, we do not cease praying for you and asking that you
may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding
10 to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing, in every good work
bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God,
11 strengthened with every power, in accord with his glorious might, for all endurance and
patience, with joy

Footnotes

² [3-8] On thanksgiving at the start of a letter, see the note on [Romans 1:8](#). The apostle, recalling his own prayers for them and the good report about them he has received ([Col 1:3-4](#)), congratulates the Colossians upon their acceptance of Christ and their faithful efforts to live the gospel ([Col 3:6-8](#)). To encourage them he mentions the success of the gospel elsewhere ([Col 1:6](#)) and assures them that his knowledge of their community is accurate, since he has been in personal contact with Epaphras ([Col 1:7-8](#)), who likely had evangelized Colossae and other cities in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor (cf [Col 4:12, 13](#); [Philippians 1:23](#)). On faith, love, and hope ([Col 1:4, 5, 8](#)), see the note on [1 Cor 13:13](#); cf [1 Thes 1:3](#); [5:8](#).

³ [7] Epaphras: now with Paul but a Colossian, founder of the church there.

⁴ [9-14] Moved by Epaphras' account, the apostle has prayed and continues to pray fervently for the Colossians that, in their response to the gospel, they may be filled with the knowledge of God's will ([Col 1:9](#); cf [Col 3:10](#)). Paul expects a mutual interaction between their life according to the gospel and this knowledge ([Col 1:10](#)), yielding results (fruit, [Col 1:10](#); cf [Col 1:6](#)) in every good work: growth, strength, endurance, patience, with joy ([Col 1:11](#)), and the further giving of thanks ([Col 1:12](#)).

Note that these are from the USCCB website for the Bible and the small colored footnote numbers can serve as links to the footnotes applicable to each of these quotations from scripture. I have copied several of the most important of those footnotes for you to review. Note the reference to Paul praying that the Colossians will follow and know God's will. There is an between knowing the will, the "work" of God, in our lives and living that moral life which should bring all those "fruits" mentioned (joy, strength, patience, etc.).

Sharing Questions

If the message of truth has taken hold of us, has become a part of our lives, then how do we relate to one another? Do we really look at those beatitudes as guiding? Are we peace makers, hungering and thirsting after justice? I like the thought suggested in that last question, "Was I conscious of God's presence in this action?" A more general question might be simply, are we aware of God acting through us?

Exploring the *Catechism* (continued)

There are four major ideas I think you may want to stress that flow from these first three paragraphs in this section. First, that **Grace is warmly personal**. It is personal in the sense that we have received this presence of God in our lives through our baptism and faith in the person of Jesus Christ. Bishop Lucas always said we do not gather on Sundays around a set of equations or edicts but around the person of Christ in Word and Sacrament. We are "justified" not by what we have done but what Christ has done for us....see CCC1987, 1988.

Second, incorporated into the life of the Trinity through baptism, **this life of the Spirit living within us, Grace**, is the dynamic foundation of the Christian moral life. Through the eyes of faith we see the world differently and all things in it in relation to a loving creator.

Third, the **Grace gives us the strength to die to ourselves**. For we have as a model that very person whose example of selfless love lead Him to the cross for our sake. It is this gift of self, this grace we receive especially in Eucharist that allows us to overcome the affects of sin in our lives.

Fourth, I would suggest underlining that very last sentence on the bottom of page 35: **"Grace describes the relationship between God and us in which God's love for us draws us**

into new life, to a life of charity and justice.” Of course, we ourselves have to be drawn by our own love of Christ to shape and to conform our will to that life of the Spirit within us.

The remainder of this section is well done and helps to broaden our understanding of Grace. Sanctifying grace as that permanent presence we have received at Baptism is God’s life, the life of the Spirit in us, and can only be lost through a very positive and serious act on our part. The most serious we discussed last session involves a sin against the Holy Spirit, “...a belligerent refusal of God’s loving mercy, CCC1864.” See page 27 at the top for further discussion. When we are very consciously in this saving presence and awareness of God (the sanctifying presence) and approach the Eucharist with this openness, we so often are blessed as we pray and meditate to experience those gentle promptings or “nudges” from our God. In those quiet moments we can truly experience actual grace as we listen or perhaps understand more clearly our God’s love for us.

Sharing Our Faith

Good question and what is it that almost always simply prompts us to an attitude of gratitude when we think about the grace of God in our lives?

Exploring the *Catechism* (continued)

This is the section that begins on the bottom of page 36. That second one line paragraph may bear some addition thoughts. Not only is it “consoling” to learn that the Church safeguards the fundamental rights of the human person but it should be a source of pride for us as Catholic Christians. Despite the action of some very few bad priests who have caused people to look down at the Church, the Church still commands by her essence and by her long history a presence of being a light to the world. Even in the darkest of ages, the Church has been drawing mankind towards a higher calling, both on earth and towards its final calling. It is amazing, as I think I observed in an earlier commentary, that you will find in the 1948 Declaration of the Rights of Man issued by the then newly formed United Nations so many of the Church’s historic teachings about the true nature of mankind. But it is also important to emphasize, as the reference at the end of that one sentence paragraph does, that the Church is about the “salvation of souls” and not merely some ancient and long lived social services agency.

I think it is important also to touch on the issue of infallibility. In that light I would recommend reading both CCC2034 and 2035. I have also included the following from a response that was made by Jeffrey Mirus through EWTN.

Papal Infallibility

by Jeffrey Mirus, PhD

(This is the response of Jeffrey Mirus to a question about papal infallibility addressed to him in the "Ask the Experts" section of EWTN Online Services.)

While the First Vatican Council defined papal infallibility in 1870, you must understand that the date on which a doctrine is officially defined is not the date on which it becomes true. Rather, it was always true. It's just that different aspects of the Faith are challenged at different periods of history, and when a challenge occurs or a serious concern or question arises, then the Church will settle the difficulty by formally stating what the truth of the matter is -- to end the confusion. So papal infallibility has always been true, and, moreover, was accepted and practiced from the earliest times.

The evidence that papal infallibility is part of the Christian Faith comes from three sources.

SCRIPTURE

First, Scripture. Such passages as: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church; to you I give the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven", and "Do you love me, Peter. Feed my sheep", and "I have prayed for you, Peter, that your faith may not fail. You in turn must confirm your brethren", have always been taken to refer to a special role for Peter in the establishment of the Church, and special divine protection for Peter in the exercise of his authority.

HISTORY

Second, History. From the earliest times we see the bishops of Rome acting as if they had special authority in succession from St. Peter, and we also see the rest of the Church accepting their authority as if they knew it was genuine. Thus Pope Clement wrote to settle a problem in the Church of Corinth before the end of the 1st century. During the first few hundred years of Church history, moreover, many who were accused of heresy appealed from every corner of the known world to Rome for vindication or condemnation. The Fathers too repeatedly attest to the authority of the Roman See. And the Popes always had the decisive word at general councils, as when the Fathers of the Council of Chalcedon said in response to the Papal definition of the two natures of Christ, "Peter has spoken through Leo" -- and accepted it unhesitatingly.

LOGIC

Third, Logic. There are only two covenants, the old and the new. But the first Christians under the New Covenant had a living and infallible guide to the truth in Christ himself. Surely the lack of such a guide in future times would constitute yet another covenant -- the difference would be so radical. The argument runs as follows:

It is clear even from Scripture that Peter had a special commission and special powers from Christ to care for the flock of Christ, to bind and loose, and to confirm his brothers in faith -- indeed he had the very powers of the keys to the Kingdom. Obviously, these powers were essential to the Church as constituted by Christ. And Christ promised to be with the Church always to the end of time, and said that the powers of hell would not prevail against it.

Now, clearly Christ knew that Peter would not live until the end of time, so he must have intended that the power he gave to Peter would be carried on until His return. After all, Peter was to feed "my" (Christ's) sheep, and so was serving as the vicar of Christ in Christ's absence. When Peter died, a new vicar would take his place, and so on, until Christ returned to claim his own. The parable of the steward awaiting his Master's return is very much to the point.

Just as clearly, Peter's authority also enabled himself (and his successors) to set forth the manner in which their successors would be selected, either by choosing the successor personally before death, or by setting forth some other means -- eventually, election by the college of cardinals.

Moreover, if these special and essential powers were to pass out of existence, it would be proof that Christ was no longer with his Church and that the powers of Hell had indeed prevailed. Therefore, again, Christ must have intended successors to Peter.

For this reason, we are not at all surprised that subsequent popes claimed to have the Petrine power and that the early Christian community accepted it without question. As I indicated above, this authority was exercised by the fourth Pope, Clement, while St. John the Evangelist was still alive. The earliest Christians were in a position to know Christ's will from other sources than Scripture (just as we today, under the guidance of the Church, are able to learn from Tradition).

INFALLIBILITY ITSELF

Now we come to the specific question of infallibility, by which the successors of Peter continue to confirm the brethren. Since the successors of Peter have the same Petrine authority, which comes ultimately from Christ, to bind and loose, they have the authority to bind the faithful in matters pertaining to salvation -- that is, in faith or morals. Now, if a Pope could bind the faithful to error, it would be a clear triumph of the powers of Hell, because the entire Church would be bound to follow the error under Christ's own authority. Obviously, this cannot happen.

Therefore, the logic of the situation demands that the Petrine power of confirming the brethren must be an infallible power. When the Pope intends by virtue of his supreme authority to teach on a matter of faith and morals to the entire Church, he **MUST** be protected by the Holy Spirit from error -- else the powers of hell would prevail.

This is the logic behind infallibility. But, of course, it is not based solely on logic, since it is attested in Scripture and was held by the earliest Christians and the Fathers and, indeed, by the vast majority of Christians from the beginning.

Further, it is not a new thing. It was precisely defined at Vatican I in order to clarify what was at that time a confusing issue, but this was by way of stating clearly what Christ's teaching was, not by way of adding anything new. Vatican I therefore carefully enumerated the conditions under which the Pope was in fact infallible -- the same conditions which logic demands, which Scripture suggests, and which tradition shows us in action down through the centuries.

When the Pope (1) intends to teach (2) by virtue of his supreme authority (3) on a matter of faith and morals (4) to the whole Church, he is preserved by the Holy Spirit from error. His teaching act is therefore called "infallible" and the teaching which he articulates is termed "irreformable".

A link to [Another excellent article on infallibility](#) from Catholic Faith and Reason

Vatican II also reflected on the doctrine in the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium*, the first document issued by the Council. The title signifies the Church is the "light of peoples" to use a

very loose translation or “light of all nations” with another translation. Here is the section from the document that is footnoted in CCC2034:

“And this infallibility, with which the Divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining doctrine of faith and morals, extends as far as the deposit of Revelation extends, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded. And this is the infallibility which the Roman Pontiff, the head of the college of bishops, enjoys in virtue of his office, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith,(166) by a definitive act he proclaims a doctrine of faith or morals.(42*) And therefore his definitions, of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are justly styled irreformable, since they are pronounced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, promised to him in blessed Peter, and therefore they need no approval of others, nor do they allow an appeal to any other judgment. For then the Roman Pontiff is not pronouncing judgment as a private person, but as the supreme teacher of the universal Church, in whom the charism of infallibility of the Church itself is individually present, he is expounding or defending a doctrine of Catholic faith.(43*) The infallibility promised to the Church resides also in the body of Bishops, when that body exercises the supreme magisterium with the successor of Peter. To these definitions the assent of the Church can never be wanting, on account of the activity of that same Holy Spirit, by which the whole flock of Christ is preserved and progresses in unity of faith.(44*)” LG 25

This section concludes with a powerful observation that bears emphasizing. Our active life as Christians must draw its sustenance from our spiritual life and that comes from nourishment through Word and Sacrament personally but also from participation in community. I hope we never stop underlining that real positive role that our life in community plays in helping us to lead a personal moral life.

Sharing Our Faith

I think I would add to those questions the idea of confirming a sense of gratitude for the role that the Church plays not only in our lives as Catholic Christians but also as a voice of conscience for the world. This does recognize that the Church truly does try to remain a prophetic voice for the kingdom of God on earth.

Living the Good News So what will be the result of these six weeks of *Why Catholic* on me personally and perhaps on all of my relations to those significant others in my life? What have I changed or will I change as a result of what I have now gone through these past six or more weeks?

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. You might model this session by praying “Lord, for the grace to continue growing in my understanding and appreciation of my faith, let us pray to the Lord.”

Addendum Note: Any feedback you would like to give is most welcome. Please reply to

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