

## Leader's Guide for MAKING SENSE OF CHRISTIAN MORALITY

### Christian Moral Living

#### Suggestions for Reflection and Discussion

- Write your own one-sentence definition of *morality*. If you're in a group, take turns reading your definitions aloud and explain why you defined *morality* as you did.
- Do you think Fr. Sparks is correct when he says *morality* "makes sense"? Why or why not? In what way does or doesn't morality make sense?
- If Christians, Buddhists, Moslems, Jews, Hindus and even atheists can all figure out right from wrong simply by thinking and talking about it, then what good is religion? What, if anything, does your faith tradition "add to" or "do for" your ethics or morality?
- Spend a few minutes thinking about how you would tell the "Christian story" to a visitor from another planet or to someone raised with no knowledge of what Christians believe or who Jesus was and is. If you have pen and paper handy, write down the key ideas or events that you would relate as essential to being a Christian. If you are in a group, take turns reading and sharing your own distinct version of the "Christian story."
- When you say that a person is virtuous or is of "good character," what do you mean? What are the key "virtues" or "characteristics" of a good or virtuous person? Are we born with these traits or patterns or do we learn them?
- What do you think is really going on when you hear the voice of conscience in your head saying "do it" or "don't do it"?
- What is the "Triple Font Theory" and does it make sense to you? Why or why not?
- Does the objective vs. subjective distinction ring true for you? If so, what's the matter with the statement, "He is objectively wrong, but subjectively right"? Why might it be better to say, "While he is objectively wrong, subjectively he may not be fully to blame"? It's a tricky concept, so feel free to discuss and refine the distinction in conversation with one another.
- Why do you think Fr. Sparks suggested that we leave the final judgment about a person's subjective culpability (i.e., praise or blame) to God, to that person's own conscience, and maybe to that person in conversation with a trusted confessor or confidante?
- What are some of the ways that a prudent friend, mentor, or parent can help someone else to make a good moral decision?

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### **Bioethical Issues: Ethics at the Edge of Life**

#### **Suggestions for Reflection and Discussion**

- Which of the seven core Christian bioethics principles strike you as most important? Are there any with which you disagree?
  - sanctity of each human life
  - principle of stewardship
  - principle of totality
  - the direct/indirect distinction
  - creative tensions: individual vis a vis community, autonomy vis a vis patient's best interest
  - pain and suffering are inevitable, but not obligatory
  - principle of cooperation
- When do you think "the sanctity of each human life" begins? At birth? Before birth? At conception? At viability (i.e., when the fetus/baby can live outside the mother)? Or when?
- Can you think of an example or two from your own life where the direct/indirect distinction or the principle of cooperation is operative and makes some sense?
- Have you ever been involved in a medical decision "to treat" or "not to treat" for yourself or someone close to you? If so, what was the decision and how was it arrived at? Did everyone agree? If not, what were the tension points? How were those resolved?
- Think of an example where someone whose life could be saved and prolonged (i.e., the physiological aspect of life), need not be saved or even ought not be prolonged, based on an application of the principle of totality (i.e., the mental, social, and spiritual dimensions of life). If you are discussing this in a group, be sure to allow room for different people to weigh their "totality" or "holistic best interest" differently.
- What is the difference between an ordinary and an extraordinary medical treatment? In light of Fr. Sparks' presentation, is heart bypass surgery always ordinary or extraordinary? Is dialysis an "ordinary" treatment for someone with kidney disease? Is artificially administered fluids and nutrition (i.e., tube feeding) ever "extraordinary"?
- Name and briefly explain the three different kinds of "advance directives." Which do you think is most preferable?
- Do you have a written advance directive? Why or why not? And if you do, which of the three kinds did you choose?

- Without getting too political or partisan, spend about ten minutes sharing your own concerns and possible solutions to the health care finance and access crisis. Be sure to include at least these concerns: (1) escalating health care costs and premiums for all those insured; (2) access to health care for those unemployed or disabled, particularly children; (3) transferability of coverage if one moves or changes jobs; (4) ability to choose one's own physician or to consult specialists vs. the need to monitor or limit access to futile or wasteful resources; (5) rationing or limiting access despite the availability of some new cutting edge technology.
- While few question Dr. Kevorkian's subjective sincerity, what do you think about his solution to terminal illness, morally speaking? Is "physician-assisted suicide" or "euthanasia" morally justified according to the Christian tradition? According to your own morality? Why or why not?

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## **Leader's Guide for MAKING SENSE OF CHRISTIAN MORALITY**

### **Human Sexuality: Wonderful Gift, Awesome Responsibility**

#### **Suggestions for Reflection and Discussion**

- When you were growing up, what messages did you receive about “sex” and “sexuality” from your parents? Your teachers? Your older brothers and sisters? Your peers? Your church?
- If we view Saints Paul, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas each in the context of his own century and times, what do we learn positively and negatively about their views of human sexuality?
- What is the difference between “sexuality” and “sex”? Is this an important distinction to make? Why or why not?
- Explain the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning of sexual activity. Are these two meanings adequate or sufficient as principles for determining sexual morality? Why or why not?
- What do you think about formal or classroom sexuality education for children? Are you supportive, skeptical or opposed? Explain your viewpoint.
- What do you think of the idea that sexuality is both a “wonderful gift” and an “awesome responsibility”?
- Spend some time discussing what you believe is morally right vs. wrong in terms of sexual activity for married couples. For single people. For gay or lesbian people. Explain your moral reasoning for the position you hold in each area. Is your viewpoint consonant with the Christian Scriptures or tradition?
- Fr. Sparks quoted the Catholic bishops as saying that homosexual persons “have a right to respect, friendship and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community.” How do you feel about this as a Christian? Do gay and lesbian people have “an active role” in your own parish or church congregation?
- What are your views on the rights and role of women in the world and in the church? Where possible, draw on the Scriptures and the Christian tradition in explaining your viewpoint.
- Comment on Fr. Sparks’ closing discussion of the virtue of “fidelity.” How does it apply to your own life, relationships, and commitments?

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**The Gospel Is a Social Message: Justice in the Christian Tradition**

**Suggestions for Reflection and Discussion**

- Do you think it is appropriate or inappropriate for preachers to discuss social issues like racism, peacemaking, violence, and economic justice from the pulpit? Why or why not? Are there any boundaries or “rules of thumb” that you would suggest?
- How do you respond to the quote from the first letter of John: “Those who do not love a brother [or sister] whom they can see, cannot truly say they love God, whom they cannot see”?
- Please read the Gospel of Luke 10:29-37. If we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind *and* to love our neighbor as ourselves, then “who is my neighbor?” Who counts as our neighbor in our 21st-century world?
- What is meant by “social sin” and who ought to be held accountable for it?
- How well are we doing as families, communities, churches, nations and world at living according to the common good? (Remember the definition: common good = “the good of all, is tied up in respecting the dignity of each member of the community.”)
- Do you think it is feasible for the business world to conceive of labor or the workforce as more than a commodity to be marketed in the economic equation? If so, what are some ways that a reasonably profitable business can keep its approach to “labor” humane and virtuous?
- Which dimension of justice speaks most to your own ethic and lifestyle: commutative justice, distributive justice, or social justice? Are there any practical ways that you might incorporate the other two dimensions of justice into your life and work habits?
- How do you respond in theory and in practice to the statement: “Wherever life and human dignity are threatened, there Christ and his followers ought to be present and active, with both immediate aid and long-term reform”?
- Spend a few moments thinking about your moral approach to these four life issues: abortion, physician assisted suicide, capital punishment, and war. Do you think you are “consistent” in your respect for life and life issues?
- Do you have any suggestions for how we, as a society, might turn down the heat and turn up the light, allowing for greater dialogue and consensus building around life, justice, and human dignity concerns?

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