

A moral compass (Nov. 19, 2017)

At the Council of Trent in the 16th century, Catholic teaching about moral rightness was typically related to a worthy reception of the sacraments. The world was growing through exploration and commerce. Morality as a field of study began to break away from sacramental theology as modern problems arose. One classic case, now hundreds of years old, asked whether a sick person in Italy was obligated to move to the better climate of southern Spain in order to prolong her life. Some of us are old enough to remember people who wrestled with moving to Arizona for the same reasons. Is it wrong not to relocate?

Gradually, moral reasoning aimed toward choosing the lesser of two evils, or toward neutrality — I don't want to get involved, it's not my problem, and so forth. At this crossroads it helps to re-read the fourth chapter of Genesis where Cain asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Things got interesting when morals no longer related to an ultimate concern: heaven or hell. Some feel more modern in holding that humans hold no privileged status among all species. One of the paradoxes of some Catholics' lives is that as educational levels rose, references to holiness and the Lord diminished.

It became enough for people to want to be "not so bad," nice or good. These were never our baptismal vocation. We are called to be holy, to live on a path to holiness.

In my role as teacher, I try to lead people to generate their own questions that will help them to discern a correct solution, or a respectable (not just reasonable) direction. If we want to aspire to moral lives as Catholics, we must factor in the holiness question: Am I aware of choosing things that give glory to God and that honor the God-given dignity of other human beings? The call to holiness is perhaps the single most important teaching of the Second Vatican Council which shaped the Catechism long after the council ended.

We inevitably return to our relation with the sacraments. Do my moral opinions and actions reflect what baptism says, and what Mass participation implies?

I can string together all sorts of doctrines and arguments, but do my moral conclusions make sense with my hand on the altar at my church? Think about standing next to the main altar at your parish (your pastor will recommend not doing this during Mass), and pledging your choices about access to health care, immigration legislation, the protection of the unborn, recreational marijuana, physician-assisted suicide, or public regulations for firearms and ammunition.

Standing at the altar is more than a sign that I am willing to make moral and even sacrificial decisions. It is about being open to grace. It is about calling grace into the summation of our situations and values before we push the "equals" button for our moral equations. It is about asking if our opinions and conclusions reflect a witness to the Gospels (as Pope Francis continually reminds), or if they are pragmatic and passable as any decision that an unbeliever can

make. It is about testing whether we are a believer in the Lord's assistance to his disciples. Some people's moral beliefs seem to make sense in their kitchen or at a tavern, but will fail the test of Gospel witness. It is hard to imagine that a Catholic could promote legalized recreational marijuana with one hand on the altar, and seriously propose that Indiana needs increased access to another intoxicant. If you dislike this example, maybe texting-while-behind-the-wheel-with-the-motor-running would be a useful one.

I am not at all downgrading high-level moral and ethical debate, nor their help in untangling real problems. All I am saying is that using the sacraments to test our consciences is not unsophisticated at all, if we remind ourselves that a dialog with the sacraments is a conversation with Christ the teacher who cannot deceive us. There is no need to settle for less than the best.