

# Teacher Background

## Teacher Background Good and Evil- Core Content Areas One and Three.



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## Unit: Good and Evil

### Defining good and evil

The good is the foundation and the goal of all moral striving. The convictions of philosophers about the good have long influenced moral dispositions and actions. For Aristotle, the good is happiness: for hedonists it is pleasure; for Utilitarians it is in what is most useful. The Catholic Christian Church teaches that the nature of the good is the full actualization of any being's potential, or achievement of perfection. To be good is to be all that one can be. With faith informing reason on the nature of the good, the believer sees God as the fullness of being and sees God's actions as good because they flow from the divine nature-which is love. (Richard M. Gula, 1989, *Reason Informed by Faith*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press )

### Evil, good and love

Evil is not some impersonal force that is outside human control; it is the result of an abuse of our free will. Free will, in itself, is a gift and is necessary for a proper response of love. Our choices have a moral dimension that involves individual responsibilities and concerns our relationship with God, others and all of creation. At a basic level, the choice for evil is a rejection of the demands of love. A choice for good is derived from and directed towards love. Jesus' great commandment of love for God and neighbour is central to the work for peace in our world. Its demand is far reaching – "the inner logic of Christian love, which in the Gospel is the living source of moral goodness, leads even to the love of one's enemies".

Everybody has a part to play in overcoming evil and bringing about good in the world. The expression of neighbourly love in all aspects of our lives is a great force for peace. So is the operation of social and political structures that are guided by charity. Pope John Paul II said, "When good overcomes evil, love prevails and where love prevails, there peace prevails". (World Day of Peace Message 2005) **Back to lesson**

### Freedom and responsibility

The Catholic Christian Bible views the human person as a creature of God, as an animated body. Our *bodiliness* is the basis of our relationship with one another. Human existence is *co-existence*. Human existence is at once responsible, sinful, hope-filled and graced. Grace allows us to respond in love; this is, to be "responsible". Catholic theology focuses its attention on the consciousness of the human person, on the person's freedom and responsibility, not only to co-create himself or herself, but to co-create the world and its history under God. A mature understanding of freedom is integral to a person's capacity to orient themselves on a daily basis to good or to evil.

The Second Vatican Council's insistence on the importance of conscience, freedom and the innate desire for higher life reflects this modern shift in the Catholic Church's thinking. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* of Vatican II (1965), states that only in freedom - not from blind internal impulse, nor from mere external pressure - can we direct ourselves towards goodness. But since our freedom has been damaged by sin, only with the help of God's grace can we bring our relationship with God and thereby with the whole of creation to full flower (n. 17). Freedom enters into the very definition of what it means to be human. To be free is to be present to oneself, to be in possession of oneself, to be conscious of oneself as a distinct, responsible being.

Freedom does not so much allow us to do something as to be someone. Such freedom is not absolute, however. Human freedom is limited from without and from within. From without, our self-understanding and therefore our freedom, is shaped by our place in history and mediated through our experience e.g. what our parents tell us we are, what our friends and relatives and neighbours tell us, what society tells us, how our institutions, including the



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church, define us, what our economic and social status permits us to be. From within, our freedom is qualified by the fact that we can never be fully present to ourselves. There is a psychic universe, described in different ways

by various psychologists, which remains hidden from our consciousness and yet influences profoundly our awareness, our vision and our sense of personal responsibility.

Freedom is a transcendental capacity to orient ourselves beyond ourselves and to shape our entire life (not just to do this or avoid that categorical act) according to that self-consciousness of who we are in the presence of God. This is what contemporary moral theologians mean by the *fundamental option* for God and God's dream. As fallible human beings, we will occasionally act against this fundamental choice for God. No single act by itself represents a canceling of that choice unless it is an act of sufficient depth and magnitude to constitute a fundamental repeal of the conversion experience. Such a *mortal* sin should be a rare occurrence for one committed to the values of the kingdom of God.

If we are not free, we are not responsible. And if we are not responsible, human existence is reduced to mechanical existence. Without freedom and responsibility there is no love, no faith, no hope, no trust, no compassion, no friendship, no justice. Everything is calculated, predetermined, subject only to accident and or miscalculation. (McBrien, 1994)

*Freedom is exercised in relationships between human beings. Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. This right must be recognized and protected by civil authority within the limits of the common good and public order.* CCC1738

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## Conscience

### What conscience is NOT:

Conscience is not a feeling, whether good or bad. One can feel guilty about a whole range of things which have nothing to do with conscience. Similarly, the fact that one does not feel guilty about an issue does not make it right. Feelings are not indicative of moral rectitude or deficiency. It is also not making up one's mind **by oneself** about what ought be done. (Gula, 1989)

### What conscience IS:

Conscience is the radical experience of ourselves as moral agents. Only when one decides to do, or not to do, something, is one acting out of conscience. Conscience is the radical experience of being *other Christs- disciples-acting in his name to further the kingdom of God*.

But, as noted above, we can never know ourselves completely and so decisions of conscience are necessarily incomplete and partial. And because our own circumstances are always historically, socially and culturally defined, decisions of conscience are necessarily fallible and subject to correction and change.


Conscience is not infallible.

Conscience is the act of moral judgement. (Aquinas)

Conscience is what summons us to love good and avoid evil. (Vatican II)

Gula describes three senses of Conscience:

1. Capacity: an innate sense of the fundamental characteristic of being human which makes it possible to know and do good.
2. Process: searching for what is right through accurate perception and analysis making use of sources of moral wisdom wherever they may be found.
3. Judgement: of what I must do in the situation based on my personal perception and grasp of values.



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The primacy of the individual conscience is strongly rooted in Catholic theology and is now taken for granted. Catholics are bound to follow their conscience in all activities and one should not be prevented from following even an erroneous conscience. (Vatican II)

Ultimately conscience is the person's commitment to values and the judgement one must make in light of a commitment to apply those values. Natural Law operates as a dynamic reality that helps us understand what it means to be human. Faith shapes our reason; human reason shapes our faith. According to the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, we discover the natural law in the depths of our conscience. It is a law, which we do not impose on ourselves, yet it holds us to obedience. It summons us to love the good and avoid what is evil. It is written in the human heart by God.

### Catholic Moral Decision Making

The greatest assistance for one's conscience is the gift of discernment. It presupposes the following qualities:

- Knowledge of moral principles
- Experience and the ability to profit from it
- An ability to learn from others
- An ability to make rational inferences
- Inventiveness and creativity, vision & foresight
- An ability to see and weigh circumstances
- An ability to anticipate and weigh circumstances
- An ability to anticipate obstacles and plan to surmount them
- An ability to decide in the light of the preceding.

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### Evil and understandings about sin.

Any explanation of good and evil is inextricably linked to the Church's teaching about sin. No human being is capable of being perfectly good all the time, nor absolutely evil all the time. *Venial* sin is a human act that is not fully consistent with a fundamental orientation toward God. In venial sin, there is a genuine decision to do a particular action, but there is no decision to become the sort of person who does that action all of the time. In every venial sin, there is a contradiction between the act and the person doing the act.

On the origins of sin Gula says that though humans may be 'broken' we are not disasters. We can still become who were made to be. The reason for this is that the power of original sin is in tension with the power of God's love and redeeming grace, which enables us to grow towards wholeness and in communion with ourselves, others, and God.

*The narratives of Genesis 1-11 portray the origin of the strife and suffering that mar the world. Though created to enjoy intimacy with God and the fruits of the earth, Adam and Eve disrupted God's design by trying to live independently of God through a denial of their status as creatures. They turned away from God and gave to God's creation the obedience due to God alone. (Par 33, Economic Justice for all.)*

The Catholic Church describes several types of sin:

**Venial sin** admits degrees of seriousness. Some actions are objectively more serious violations of Gospel imperatives than others. Some circumstances make an attitude or deed more serious than others.

**Serious sin** is even more inconsistent with our fundamental orientation towards God's kingdom than venial sin. Contemporary Catholic theology has differentiated between serious sin and mortal sin.



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**Mortal sin** Mortal sin is a serious break in a relationship of love with God, neighbour, world and self. It is an act which fully engages the person. The person chooses not only the act (the categorical dimension), but also the kind of person he/she wants to become in and through the act (the transcendental dimension). Determining what is a moral action must also take into account the motive and not solely the act itself. To be moral is to be true to oneself, to be seeking always to be the one who responds to the call of God and to act in ways consistent with that vocation. To be immoral is to refuse to be that kind of person (responding to the call of God) and therefore to refuse to act in ways consistent with that being.

Since early Christian times the “seven deadly sins” have been used to educate and instruct believers concerning the human being’s tendency to sin. The “seven deadly sins”, according to the Catholic Church, are a kind of summary of all human sin. They are metaphorical rather than categorical. When we sin, the sin can be described as *like* envy or *like* pride. A contemporary lens expands the view of the sin to include its effects on the other.

1. Pride is at work when we are unable to celebrate another’s good fortune or find it hard to face our own imperfections. National pride in excess leads to racism, terrorism and even genocide.
2. Envy serves as the basis for our consumerist society – we buy because we want more in order to be satisfied. Envy means never being happy with what you have.
3. Gluttony is self-absorption and the inability to recognise the needs of others. Destroying and polluting the environment for economic gain, economic policy that keeps the majority of the wealth in the hands of the few whilst millions are in poverty, and increasing levels of obesity are all evidence of gluttony.
4. Lust is an inordinate craving for the pleasures of the body. It may lead to extra marital affairs, sexual abuse or rape. However it is not just sexual sin. Gollum in *Lord of the Rings* has an inordinate craving for the ring and its powers.
5. Anger, when it arises from inordinate and uncontrolled feelings of hatred and fury can lead to crimes such as assault, murder and acts of vengeance. Anger when it is appropriately expressed can be a force for change – it is how we express it that may cause problems.
6. Greed is the desire for material wealth or gain. Amassing large amounts of wealth, land, and resources with a disregard for how this leads to less being available for others characterises greed.
7. Slothfulness is the avoidance of physical or spiritual work including not acting when one should. Allowing bullying to occur and not acting to do something about it is an example of the vice of slothfulness. Choosing to avoid work, spending long hours playing games on a computer leads to health problems including depression.

## Virtues

Just as calculated acts permeated with malice are evidence for the human capacity to say “No” to God, acts of heroism and extraordinary generosity are evidence for the human capacity to say a radical “Yes” to God. Possession of such virtues

The Seven “Heavenly Virtues” consist of the three Theological Virtues and four Cardinal Virtues.

### The Theological Virtues: (*Faith, Hope, and Love/charity*)

1. Faith is concerned about things *revealed* by God which exceed the ability of human reason to grasp. Faith is a gift, a supernatural virtue that people cannot acquire naturally on their own initiative.





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2. The supernatural virtue of **hope** (a gift as well) looks expectantly to the future. Through the virtue of hope, a person awaits the fulfilment of the promises of God.
3. The most important of the virtues and the one most important for the development of the human person, is the virtue of **charity**. Charity is the love of God **under the aspect of friendship**. That is why human friendship is the best way of explaining humanity's relationship to God brought about through charity.

## The Cardinal Virtues

The four cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.

### 1. Prudence

Prudence makes it possible for people to choose that act which here and now best helps them to move in the direction of their final end. The parts of prudence include reasoning, understanding, circumspection, foresight, docility, caution, and memory. But the entire process of prudence has its source in understanding. Without understanding human nature and the fundamental precepts of natural law, prudence is not possible.

### 2. Justice

Justice is the virtue that perfects the will. Unless all people are by nature equal before God, there is no natural requirement on humanity's part to be just. Justice regulates the voluntary actions whereby one person is brought into contact with another. Justice is divided into distributive, commutative (particular) and legal (general) justice.

### 3. Fortitude

Fortitude is a general virtue in that it implies a certain firmness of mind, which is necessary for the practice of any of the virtues. Fortitude is the virtue that enables us to curb our fears and to moderate our daring. It is the virtue that binds the will to the good of reason in the face of the greatest evils.

### 4. Temperance

Temperance is principally, but not solely, concerned with the pleasures of food and drink and about sexual pleasures - those pleasures connected with the preservation of human life. The use of such pleasurable things must be judged according to the needs of this life. This calls for prudence, above all.

The majority of this Teacher Background material is synthesised from a number of chapters in McBrien, R.P., (1994). *Catholicism*. North Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove and Gula, R.M. (1989). *Reason Informed by Faith*, Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press. At times it has been significantly simplified. For more detail, or if clarification is needed, the texts themselves should be consulted.

## Contemporary theology regarding sin

Richard M. Gula, American Franciscan theologian describes a new look at the moral life informed by the biblical renewal in the Church and by some philosophical shifts within the Church and society. For example, the biblical renewal has placed covenant, heart and conversion—not law—as primary moral concepts. Responsibility has replaced obligation as the primary characteristic of the moral life. Shifts in philosophy have emphasized the dignity of persons and the value of sharing life in society. Together these shifts in theology and philosophy support a *relational* model of the moral life. The relational model emphasizes personal responsibility for protecting the bonds of peace and justice that sustain human relationships.

Far from doing away with sin, contemporary theology admits that sin is very much with us and touches us more deeply than we realize. Greed, violence, corruption, poverty, hunger, sexism and oppression are too prevalent to ignore. *Sin* is just as basic a term in Christian vocabulary today as it has been in the past. Its root sense means to be disconnected from God through the failure to love. In sin, we simply don't bother about anyone outside ourselves. Sin is first a matter of a selfish heart—a refusal to care—before it shows itself in actions.

Because loving God and loving our neighbour are all tied together, sin will always be expressed in and through our relationships. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that, just as the least of our acts done in charity has some benefit for all, so every sin causes some harm. The *Catechism* quotes Scripture to make this



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point: "None of us lives for oneself, and none of us dies for oneself" (Rom 14:7); "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:26-27); "Charity does not insist on its own way" (1 Cor 13:5; see 10:24). In this solidarity with all people, says the *Catechism*, "living or dead, which is founded on the communion of saints, the least of our acts done in charity redounds to the profit of all. Every sin harms this communion" (#953).

One of the most obvious changes in a contemporary approach to sin is the emphasis given to how sin affects the quality of life and love in our relationships. *Sin is any action or omission that hinders, violates or breaks right relationships which support human well-being.*

### Social Sin

Gula describes the occurrence of social sin as human-made structures that offend human dignity by causing people to suffer oppression, exploitation or marginalization. These include educational systems, housing policies, tax structures, immigration policies, health-care systems, employment policies, and could even include smaller institutions such as clubs, schools and families. Once established, social structures and customs seem to take on a life of their own. New members of the group fall in line with current policies and practices. For example ongoing 'initiation' cultures in the defence forces.

We learn to live in a world with these structures. We presume that the social customs which they hold in place are good, traditional customs. That is what makes social sin so difficult to recognize and to change. Yet the evil of sinful social structures abounds in all forms of discrimination; processing practices of refugees; in the illiteracy and homelessness of the poor; in unequal access to health care; in the manipulation of consumers by the manufacturing practices, in abuse of the natural environment; in physical and emotional abuse and in many other practices which we continue to support more out of ignorance than meanness. Gula asks: Why does social sin prevail? Largely because we fail to name social evils and seek to correct them.

*"Sin" and "structures of sin" are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us. John Paul II Sollicitudo rei socialis 36.3*

When we become aware of structural evils, we should not be paralysed by the guilt of self-condemnation, but moved to conversion. Conversion from social sin involves, at one level, changing our own lifestyle in ways that will help reform society. We cannot do everything to end the structures which support sexism, for example, but we can do some things, for instance, curbing our use of exclusive and insensitive language. We can influence others' attitudes through the ways we talk to and about one another. At another level, conversion from social sin involves examining existing regulations and practices, reforming those that offend human dignity.

Most of this commentary on social sin is paraphrased from Richard M. Gula, 1989, *Reason Informed by Faith*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

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## Suffering and Injustice

St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas attempted to show that ultimately evil is not caused by God. Allowing free will meant that humans had and have, the genuine option of choosing evil over good. Choosing evil leads to our own suffering and the suffering of others.

Pope John Paul II wrote in *The Meaning of Suffering in the Light of Christ's Passion* in 1988 the following:

*In the Old Testament, suffering was considered as a penalty inflicted on humans for their sins by a just God. However, within this perspective, based on an initial divine revelation, it was difficult to explain the suffering of the innocent. Thanks to Christ, the meaning of suffering changes radically. It no longer suffices to see in it as a punishment for sin. One must discern in it the redemptive, salvific power of love. The evil of suffering, in the mystery of Christ's redemption, is overcome and in every case transformed. It becomes a force of liberation from evil, for the victory of the good. In the New Testament, according to Jesus, suffering should impel in a special way to love of neighbour and to the commitment of rendering to that neighbour all necessary services. Such a love and such services, carried out in every way possible, constitute a fundamental moral value which accompanies suffering. When speaking of the last judgment, Jesus set out with particular clarity the idea that every work of love performed on behalf of a suffering person is directed to the Redeemer: "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me" (Mt 25:35-36). The whole Christian ethic of service, even social service, is based on these words, as well as the definitive turning to account of suffering accepted in the light of the cross.*

## Why Suffering?

Suffering and evil present challenges for those engaging in theological discourse and in understanding the image of loving God.


The following is a paraphrasing of Ronald Rolheiser OMI Easter reflection on God and suffering in April 2011.

We can let ourselves be perpetually scandalized by the seeming triumph of evil, pain, and suffering in our world. God's silence can forever scandalize us: in the Jewish holocaust, in ethnic genocides, in brutal and senseless wars, in the earthquakes and tsunamis which kill thousands of people and devastate whole countries, in the deaths of countless people taken out of this life by cancer and by violence, in how unfair life can be sometimes, and in the casual manner that those without conscience can rape whole areas of life seemingly without consequence. Where is God in all of this? What's God's answer?

God's answer is in the resurrection, in the resurrection of Jesus and in the perennial resurrection of goodness within life itself. But resurrection is not necessarily rescue. God doesn't necessarily rescue us from the effects of evil, or even from death. Evil does what it does, natural disasters are what they are, and those without conscience can rape even as they feed off life's sacred fire. God redeems, raises us up afterwards, in a deeper more lasting vindication.

This does not make God a disinterested bystander throughout our lives who waits until the end to put things right. As Richard Leonard says *God accompanies us at every moment of our short or long life and has ennobled humanity with an extraordinary resilience, so that at every moment of every day, God does what God did on Good Friday, not allow evil, death and destruction to have the last word. God does not send natural disasters to kill us off. Jesus did not enter our world to die but to live and to be our Way, Truth and Life. Jesus meets us where we*





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*are, embraces us, and holds us close when the times get tough. Through prayer, both personal and communal, as Christians lament their suffering, Christians ask their holy, loving and unchanging God to change them and thereby change the world.* R Leonard (2010) Where the Hell is God? , Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring/Paulist Press.

Mohandas K. Gandhi once wrote: "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been murderers and tyrants, and for a time they seem invincible. But in the end they always fall. Think of it, always."

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