

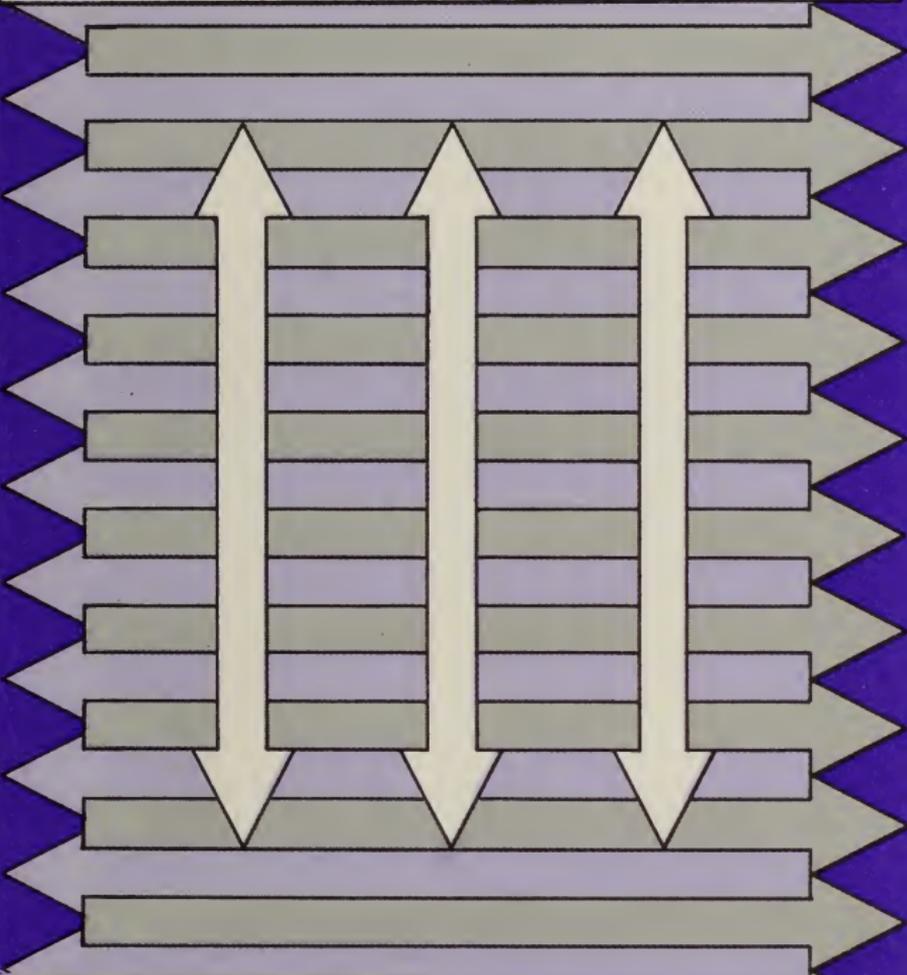
Jacobs, William J.

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MORALITY FOR THE NEW AGE

William J. Jacobs

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NEW VISION SERIES

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NEW VISION SERIES

MORALITY FOR THE NEW AGE

By William J. Jacobs

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About the Author

William J. Jacobs is Executive Secretary, Extension Society Volunteers for the Home Missions. He has taught and been active in catechetical and Newman work for many years. His articles on various phases of theology, liturgy, catechetics and the apostolate have appeared in many publications in the United States, Canada and Germany.

The New Vision Series

This excellent new series has been prepared and edited by Ronald Wilkins, Director of Teacher Training for the Chicago Archdiocesan Confraternity of Christian Doctrine for ten years. Co-author of the popular TO LIVE IN CHRIST high school religion series, he has also written TEACHING IN THE C.C.D. HIGH SCHOOL and TRAINING LAY TEACHERS FOR THE PARISH HIGH SCHOOL OF RELIGION.

INTRODUCTION

“Cash-Register Conscience”

It is a sad but undeniable fact that our traditional teaching of morality has tended to result in what might best be termed a “cash register conscience,” a terribly mechanical, action-by-action analysis of life for the purpose of a regurgitative recital of offenses, real or imagined, in the confessional, with the idea of obtaining some magical cleansing which will in turn enable the recipient to receive some sort of magical benefit from the sacrament of the Eucharist.

This kind of teaching and the results it has brought border on the sacrilegious in that it has warped human beings instead of leading them to the love and service of God. It is a sad commentary that this is so in spite of the fact that even our traditional moral theology, if properly understood, would in no way impose this terrible kind of mentality on anyone.

About two years ago I became interested in reasons why people of college age seem to be leaving the Church either temporarily or permanently. It would be possible to cite many reasons and impossible to give an explanation that would cover all of the cases. However, I am absolutely convinced that the major reason is an inability to cope with the tensions which result from improperly formed consciences which, in turn, are the result of poor teaching of morality.

Young people often leave the Church claiming some kind of intellectual dispute or an inability to live with the extremely authoritarian structures which the Church im-

poses. Certainly there are possible intellectual conflicts and it is entirely possible to rebel against authority. However, in most of the cases where I have had a chance to talk with young people who have left the Church or were contemplating leaving it, the intellectual disagreements were really only surface things and the true explanation often was found in the fact that they were simply unable to live with the kind of moral standards they thought the Church set for them. These standards very often are the complete reversal of what good Christian teaching would demand.

Late Start for Moral Theology

Moral theology has run somewhat behind in the renewal of theology, and is only now beginning to come into its own. Even so, it will be a long time before we have anything that will thoroughly replace the old structures of moral theology that we have known over the years. About the best we can do now is try to find some attitudes which will allow better ways of teaching morality. In doing this, we are not rejecting the older teachings completely, but are merely trying to find a better way of presenting them. One of the reasons that they are so frequently misunderstood is that they have not been completely taught. The most rigorous old-time Catholic morality would still result in considerable freedom of conscience and action if it were thoroughly understood.

Search for Positive Attitudes and Insights

In this pamphlet we will try to combine some of the more important insights from the fields of psychology, sociology, philosophy, and mystical and ascetical theology along with some of the ideas of the more current moralists in an attempt to lead to a set of positive attitudes which can be

applied rather easily in the home and in the classroom.

Please note the word *attitudes*. While we can provide some pedagogical insights, we are unable to provide firm pedagogical methods. These have not really been developed and, in my own opinion, a terribly structured teaching of morality, even the most modern views of morality, would be the worst one imaginable.

In the final analysis, no one can teach anyone the answer to each and every moral situation that he will face in his lifetime. What we are trying to do is to cultivate in young people a good reliable conscience which is a function of judgment informed by knowledge, but in no way confined to knowledge. A fine judgment of conscience can best be expected from one with a well-developed set of positive and healthy attitudes in moral matters. Such attitudes in the student must be the product of the correct attitudes in the teacher, attitudes of respect for the person, of respect for the common good, attitudes of an all-consuming love for God directed toward continuing creation and redemption through a good Christian life.

One of our mistakes has been a failure to realize that in teaching the newer things in the catechetical field the moral conclusions that come from them are not automatic. We have been entirely too conscious of morality in our older teaching, and we probably haven't been conscious enough of it in our present teaching. The ideas that we will advance here are closely related to the over-all development of modern catechetics. They are based on consideration of the four bases or signs of modern catechesis, Bible, liturgy, doctrine, and witness.

Not a "New Morality"

It is very important that we make it plain at the beginning that the contents of this pamphlet are not to be lumped under the heading of "the new morality." This is one of the more unfortunate terms of our time, since its

use in popular journalism has made the term quite meaningless in that it is a sort of umbrella for any relativistic or situational ethical thinking that happens to be going on, as well as things on such an exalted level as the philosophy of Hugh Hefner. The result has been that the average Catholic is apt to equate anything new in an approach to teaching morality with what he has come to know in its loaded-term form as "the new morality."

What is offered here is certainly not a "new morality," but rather ideas based on the conviction that the function of religion is not to cripple a unique creature of God, a human person. Its function should in all cases be to free one so that he may love and serve God and love and serve his fellowman for the sake of God with the freedom of a child of God. By this, I certainly don't mean freedom to do anything that comes to mind, but a freedom to love God with a clear and healthy mind, a relatively stable set of emotions, a good clear perspective on life in all its human dimensions and a positive outlook toward creation by which we mean all of the people and all of the things which the good God has made.

The Christian teacher should be one who teaches love in love and with love, using love as not only the primary subject that he communicates but the method by which he communicates. Any deviation from this norm, particularly in the teaching of moral behavior, may very well be the most immoral thing of which a teacher is capable.

PART I

IDEAS OF MORALITY PAST AND PRESENT

A Sticky Heritage

Lest there be any doubt about what we mean by the unfortunate and incomplete moral teaching of the past, let us review briefly some of the things that have gone before us. One of the worst is what Father Charles Davis calls "announcing mortal sins."

To announce that doing a certain thing is a mortal sin, rather than saying that it is matter for mortal sin or grave matter, or objectively gravely sinful, shows a complete misunderstanding of the most traditional teaching about sin in the Church. However, this is done all the time, from the pulpit, in the confessional and in Sister's classroom. Obviously, we cannot be concerned only with subjective guilt or innocence; actions which are objectively sinful do harm whether the person is morally guilty of them or not. However, to give a child the idea that anytime anyone does certain things he is automatically placing himself in a position where he will be condemned to hell if he doesn't repent in time is a gross misstatement of the teaching of the Church.

Too-Early Confession

Our insistence on having little children run to confession before they are psychologically capable of moral judg-

ments, has also led to a great deal of difficulty. It is pretty generally conceded now that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a child to commit grave sin much before his teen years. There are many who hold that confession should not be forced upon a child under the age of nine, many others who feel that 14 is soon enough. In any case, little children, seven, eight, nine, and 10 years old cannot commit some of the sins that we are so busy warning them about. In fact, they very often have no concept of sin except that it is something Sister wants them to avoid and if they don't avoid it, there will be terrible consequences.

One of the results is that children go into the confessional and make up things to tell the priest. Many confessors can tell you of having nine-year-old girls confess to the sin of adultery. Boys have told me of making up stories of stealing bicycles so that they will have something to say in the confessional. The worst case I have ever heard of was one of a little girl who confessed that she had committed "piracy on papal waters." Apparently she had a particularly thorough teacher.

A result of some of our unfortunate teaching has been not only a confused and tormented conscience in many persons, but a highly distorted notion of God Himself. Given as most people are to anthropomorphism, they are inclined to see God as a judge sitting on a throne with a hammer in His hand ready to whack them over the head for each little offense they commit. This is particularly sad when you consider that the offense involved may be of the kind we just mentioned, something taught to the very young under the title of a sin which it could not possibly be and which the young could not possibly commit.

Let it be plainly understood that our purpose here is not to criticize what has gone before, but to recognize it and evaluate it and try to improve upon it for the good of us all. We will not save souls by trying to scare people into heaven. A certain amount of fear of the Lord is a good thing. An obsessive or neurotic fear of the Lord is in

no way guaranteed to provide salvation and is almost certainly guaranteed to provide hell on earth.

Tragic Results of Improper Teaching

One possible result is scrupulosity, another is a tormented conscience, another is the mechanical cash-register performance we referred to that is so well known to us. Another is the rejection of most ideas of sound morality in favor of a notion of a God who is not concerned with justice and who will overlook practically anything, this being as wrong as anything else we have discussed.

To repeat, another grave result of poor teaching can be rejection of the Faith. Often the rejection is made under the heading of denial of authority or intellectual conflict, but we submit that in most cases it is simply a refusal to live within a moral system which one finds humanly intolerable. Our thesis is simply that this moral system *as often taught* is intolerable and in no way correct.

Having stated the problem and outlined the general direction I propose to take, and having considered the mistakes of the past, with a view to making fewer mistakes in the future, let us now consider some of the positive moral attitudes which we should develop in ourselves and communicate to students in order to lead them to fuller Christian life.

POSITIVE MORAL ATTITUDES

Value of Self

Sometime ago a highly intelligent young woman, referring to a priest who had taught her religion in high school, remarked: "He certainly failed us." I finally worked up enough nerve to ask her what she meant. She was referring primarily to the area of purity. She thought about it

for awhile and finally replied: "He didn't teach me that I was important."

It isn't sinful and it takes nothing from the glory of God for an individual to recognize his own importance. Our ascetical teaching in the past not only tended to exaggerate the difficulties of nature, but even called on us to almost annihilate human nature. In any case, under the heading of avoiding pride and cultivating humility, we have taught each other that we are worms. We are not. It doesn't seem too surprising to me that a worm may indulge in all manner of acts of impurity and dishonesty or any other kind of immorality. What does a worm have to lose? It may very well be a disservice to God, even an insult to Him, to refer to His creatures as something less than they are.

A human person is first of all a unique creature of Almighty God, one who, as Father Bernard Häring says, "God calls by his own name." Each of us, in addition to being a unique creature of God, is a brother of Christ, an adopted son of God, a member of the People of God, a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. As a member of the Mystical Body of Christ, each of us shares in the priesthood, prophecy and kingship of Christ. It would be very hard to list these things and then look back and say that an individual is not important.

Furthermore, every action of every person has an effect not only on the Mystical Body of Christ but on all of creation, on the whole cosmos. Therefore, there is nothing unimportant about anything done by the least important person. If I realize my own value, if I realize that for me salvation history is now, that I am in the process of living out the very special plan that God has for me as a part of His over-all plan for the People of God, it seems to me that I am going to place a very special kind of value on my ideas, attitudes and actions. I am not going to cheapen myself, harm myself, or take away from myself because I have a value which comes from God and which may be quite properly cherished so long as I refer the glory to God.

It's only when I love myself simply for myself that I get into the sin of pride and take away from God what is truly His. If I see my own value properly, if I understand my identity as a Christian, I am going to be careful about anything which detracts from that value. This isn't an attempt to place morality on a purely personal level because the value of my person derives from God and if I serve the value of my person, I am serving God and serving is an expression of love.

Value of Other

By the same token, if I look at other persons in terms of their value in the eyes of God as described above, if I remember that they often have the same qualities which I have, the same basic Christian roles which I have, that they always possess the same essential and primary importance that I have in the sight of God, then I must of necessity put a very high value and exercise a very great deal of sensible caution in my relations with them, whether it be in speech, touch, thought, or in any dealings that I may have with them in any phase of life.

The only difference between others and myself will be one of vocation, state in life, strength, weakness, physical and mental attributes. In truth God may give me more than He gives another. He may expect more of another than He expects of me. I have no way of knowing what the case is in each instance. I do know this, that before God, in the primary sense, all men are equal and are to be treated equally.

Now then, if my approach to others is based on this full realization of their value, I am going to be very careful not only of what I do as regards myself, but of what I do as regards others . . . careful or cautious, not in rigidity or fear, but in having a genuine sense of my own worth and the worth of every man, every woman and every child.

Principle Applied to Dating

Apply this if you will to the situation of a teen-age date. I don't pretend for a moment that all the possible problems of impurity which may occur under the circumstances of a date will be solved by the attitudes just described, but I submit that there is much less chance of things going wrong if a young man is taught to appreciate himself and his own God-given value as well as the God-given value of the self of the person he is dating, than if he is merely given a bunch of prescriptions and prohibitions and obligations and rules which tend to incite passion rather than to diminish it, which tend to increase curiosity rather than to increase respect.

Respect is a fundamental element of love and love is the fundamental element of morality. It has been said that there is no sin except the failure to love. It is a traditional teaching that any sin is a violation of charity, that is, of love. Therefore, if attitude and moral approach are based on recognition of value which leads to respect which leads to love, it would seem to me that we are a lot farther ahead than we would be by trying to measure hemlines or time kisses.

Person or Object?

In this respect a very common and valid criticism of some of the ideas being put forth in newspapers, magazines and some popular novels is that the conduct which would be derived from following the inference of the authors would tend to reduce a woman from a person to an object. One's partner on a date could become an object of one's physical and emotional satisfaction, thereby being deprived of her personhood. Although this is the way in which the matter is usually phrased, it is obvious that the

reverse may also be true, that a woman may use a man as an object rather than regard him as a person.

If we could begin by teaching the value of self and the value of others, and then take a step beyond to teach that much immorality lies in a reduction of a person to an object, we may have come a long way indeed.

I have picked the area which most commonly concerns the young people I talk to and which, for reasons which I will not try to analyze, seems to be of primary concern to those who teach religion. Obviously, there are realms of immorality other than the sexual.

However, the principles will stand. If I conduct business in such a way that I treat a unique creature of God as an object, I am being immoral. If my speech toward another person fails to regard his fundamental dignity as a child of God, I am immoral. If I attack or diminish his reputation, failing to see his value in the sight of God, I am immoral. If I take his goods, I fail to see his rights which stem from his basic dignity, and, again, I am immoral. In fact, if I fail to love him in any way, I am immoral.

Now we are discussing primarily, and again out of habit, sins of commission. We should not overlook sins of omission, which may be just as grave, in fact, much graver. The only possibility of our escaping from full guilt might be that we talk about sins of omission so rarely that we might claim some ignorance of their existence, or at least lack of full realization that we are guilty of them as often as we are.

Also, in considering sins of omission—and sins of commission, too—we must look beyond the purely individual sense of sin. There is such a thing as social sin. A group or society may sin. We very rarely communicate this idea to the young. Perhaps we should let them know that all of us, as Catholics, could sin against others by failing to do as we should and failing to avoid the things we should avoid. Certainly our nation might ask itself some very grave questions so far as social sin is concerned.

Relationship to Persons

I see a man hungry and let him remain that way. I see someone in danger and fail to offer him aid and protection. I hear calumny against a man and I do nothing about it. I know of conditions which are ruining whole families and whole communities, and my voice remains silent. I say I want peace and wish it would come, but I think in terms of war. All of these things are sinful, all have one thing in common. In addition to representing a failure to see my own value and the value of others, there is a failure to appreciate the value of my relationships to others and to God.

Because I am a Christian, mine is a covenanted relationship whether this is true of the other person or not. I am bound to God in the new and eternal covenant. This places my whole relationship above that of creatures who lack it. It can best be compared to the change that takes place when a man and woman are married. Their relationship to each other exists from that moment on at a different level.

If I may be permitted to be a little Oriental and not precisely scholastic, I might say my very level of being changes when I enter into a covenanted relationship. My failure to recognize this relationship is a very important species of immorality. I fail to realize who I am. I fail to realize my baptismal obligations as an apostle. I fail to realize my strength as a confirmed Christian. I fail to realize my vocation fully, and I fail men as a result because I fail to see their value.

This phase of morality is something we have neglected very, very shamefully. We have been so busy keeping people out of back seats and dark roads, that we have led them to cheat and ignore others under bright lights on main streets. We have been so busy avoiding proximate occasions of sin, that we have led people to watch others starve . . . for food or just for simple kindness. The more one considers the subject, the more one begins to wonder

who the real sinner is, the student of religion or the teacher of religion.

Teaching Approaches

I would have preferred to have begun from another position, that is, the basic consideration of God and the broad general relationship of man toward God upon which all morality must ultimately be based. However, we are dealing with ordinary human beings, and they tend to think in terms of themselves and people with whom they deal in concrete situations, rather than in abstractions. While God Himself is not an abstraction, notions of God and relationship to God are usually abstractions in the minds of most of the people we come in contact with. Therefore, it would seem to be of utmost value to approach morality from the standpoint of dignity, worth and value of each person as an individual, and then to explore the area of relationship of person to person.

This is in no way a disservice to God, this takes nothing from God. Again, we have been taught that the great virtue is love and love exists between persons, not between abstractions and persons or not between persons and aspects of reality which they do not fully comprehend.

If we can begin by teaching high school students, for example, to see their true value and the value of others, I believe we will be heading in a much more fruitful direction than if we try to use an approach which might be more desirable from the point of view of the theologian.

On the other hand, in approaching moral matters with younger children, we might do well to begin with the idea of the fatherhood and goodness of God, which the child will probably see in terms of his relationship to his own parents, if that relationship is what it should be. If nothing else, we can plant the idea young and well that God is good, not a fearful judge with a big whip. We can teach the idea to young children, and ultimately to those who

are a little older, that religion is primarily a matter of saying "yes" to God. The "yes" however must be motivated by love and not by fear, nor by the command of an authoritarian teacher.

About Obedience

The word "obedience" is not especially popular among most of us today, and yet it seems to me to be a rather fundamental error to use it lightly. The difficulty is not in the term itself, but in the exaggerated and warped sense with which it has been used, particularly in the religious life. In the sense that we use it here, we mean obedience as saying "yes" to the will of God, as we understand it, and doing this because we love God who has first loved us. Looking at it that way, we might refer to our failure to love God as a failure to love back.

There is no sense in avoiding the inevitable. The child and the adolescent must both know that there is such a thing as obedience and that it is an important part of life. The important thing is to explain obedience in terms of a necessary response of love to a legitimate authority, ultimately to God. In no case is this a blind, animal, non-rational reaction. The Christian obeys because he understands the value of obedience as an expression of love.

I spent an unhappy couple of hours during a retreat conference trying to convince a nun of the rather advanced and rebellious sort that the word "obedience" was necessary. She wanted to limit the concept to the word "response." Finally, I said, "Sister, the most obedient guy in the world is the guy in love." The kind of obedience we are talking about is the kind that one undertakes because he loves and because he wishes to do what the person he loves wishes. In the broader, theological sense, we might say he wishes to return love to the personal God who has manifested love for him.

Another important point is that we must make very plain to students that a moral life involves unpleasant, sometimes painful, choices. There will be a certain amount of tension, anxiety and unpleasantness no matter what we do. It is very poor teaching to give a student the idea that a truly moral Christian life will automatically result in a state of perpetual serenity. This is just not so. In fact, living according to the will of God may lead to a much more unpleasant existence, at least for the time being, than going against the will of God. Ultimately, it is probably safe to say, however, that one who does his best to live a full Christian life will be happier, even on earth, than one who makes no such effort.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Do you think the "cash register conscience" is an accurate description of what results from a mishandling of the traditional teaching on morality?
2. In light of your experience, do you think more young people leave the Church because of moral problems than do for intellectual reasons? What, therefore, is the path indicated for a religion teacher?
3. Why is the teaching of morality at the present time still somewhat vague in comparison with the "answer-to-every-question" approach of the recent past? What are the disadvantages of a rigidly structured teaching of morality? Are there any advantages?
4. How does one develop a set of positive and healthy attitudes in moral matters?
5. What is the so-called "new morality"? How does it differ from a right understanding of freedom?
6. How does one avoid the practice of what Father Charles Davis calls "announcing mortal sins" when there is a necessity to impress upon children the seriousness of certain actions? Do you think it is a good practice to, as the saying goes, "put the fear of God into them" by stressing hell?
7. What can be said for and against the practice of having small children go to the sacrament of Penance before they are psychologically capable of moral judgments? When do children become capable of sin? Mortal sin?
8. How do such positive moral attitudes as "value of self" and "value of other" help us to gain a greater appreciation of what God has done for us in creation and in grace? How do these attitudes help us to be moral? Illustrate by an example.

PART II

MORALITY AS MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO A PERSONAL, LOVING GOD

What is God Like?

It is said that one of our better-known American writers on moral matters once asked one of the world's leading theologians in Rome how many mortal sins he thought were committed in the world each day. As the story goes, the Roman moralist answered: "About three."

Recalling the story, I can remember my own shock when a very holy priest told me during my first year of college that he really didn't think that very many people went to hell. His thesis was so simple that it escaped me at the time. He merely reviewed the traditional conditions for moral sin and said he really didn't think that many people managed to fulfill them very often. Over the years I have repeated his ideas, but always with a certain sense of fear, which can be related to my own rather formal background. Yet, the essence of what he had to say has been repeated quite recently by some very reputable and highly orthodox theologians working in company with modern psychologists.

That is one side of the coin. On the other, we have the more common attitude, which is phrased to perfection in a Jonathan Winters routine. Mr. Winters is interviewing a typical, vapid housewife, asking what kind of man she would like to see as President of the United States. She answers: "A God-fearing man. He's not afraid of God,

but if he does bad, God will get him." In this bit of comic byplay, Mr. Winters has managed to put his finger on the way altogether too many of us look at the relationship between God and man. "If we do bad, God will get us."

We are not denying that our God is a God of justice. We are not denying the existence of hell. We are not saying that no one goes to hell. We are not advocating a purely subjective morality. We are certainly not telling people to go and do as they please.

What we *are* trying to say is that it seems inconceivable that God made man in order to "get him." This is perhaps even more insulting than the notion that "God is dead." Our God is a God of love. A God who gives. A God who gives life to man. A God who extends mercy and forgiveness, help and salvation.

Man is Redeemed

God made man. God gave him the earth. Throughout salvation history we see cycles of man's failure to respond to God's love. This failure to respond is sin. But with the cycles of sin, we also see cycles of repentance and forgiveness. This is the Old Testament history of the People of God . . . election, vocation, presence . . . a constancy and faithfulness on the part of Almighty God in spite of the inconstancy, weakness and failure of mankind.

God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, who redeemed all men and took away their sins. At the very heart of the Gospel message are the words: "Your sins are forgiven." We talk about the "Good News of the Gospel," but do we really want to admit the news is good? The news is that Jesus saved us. God raised us up from sin.

True, our final salvation is not determined until we die. We face both particular and general judgments. However, we, as Christians, are saved, are redeemed (bought back) by the very blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus

Christ, by His Resurrection, Ascension, and by His continuing presence with us through the Mass, Bible, sacraments, teaching of the Church, and Christian witness. Let us never forget it.

But What About Hell?

As we said, certainly there is sin. Certainly some actions render man less pleasing to God in that they fail to show a response in love to the love which God has first given him. However, the fact that some objective actions may be less pleasing to God than some other objective actions does not necessarily mean that these actions are sins which cause one to forfeit all claim to heaven, sins which automatically condemn one to hell.

To teach children that they or their parents are going to burn in hell's fire forever because of some small infraction, is to me an outrage, a sin and insult to God. How can you expect them to respond in love? How can one love a God who is ready to strike him down and to strike down those who are dearest to him and burn them for all eternity? When we speak in this manner, we do not speak in the name of the Lord. We speak in the name of our own twisted guilt.

One of the most important tasks of the teacher of religion in the years to come will be to stay on top of the new ideas that are developing in theology about the meaning of redemption. Having grasped the ideas, the teacher will have to go into the classroom and communicate as fully as possible with students so that they will have the greatest possible sense of the value of redemption. If one realizes what it means to be redeemed, he will love more and he will sin less, because he will realize that he has been freed from sin and that to live in sin is utterly inconsistent with his life as a Christian. If we teach him how really wonderful life as a Christian is, he will not want to throw that life aside carelessly.

When Do We Sin?

We have already mentioned the opinion held rather widely now that it is not possible for children to sin as young in life as we have formerly believed. Another idea which is becoming more commonly accepted every day is that it is quite difficult for an adult, for anyone, to commit a mortal sin, one which would be of sufficient magnitude to merit the punishment of hell. As noted, it is possible to say this even in terms of the traditional moral teaching of the Church, when that is considered in its fullest. If we really consider the makeup of man, his psychological constitution, his physical weaknesses and difficulties, his total environment, his whole self, we will realize that it is quite hard for him to willfully, knowingly, fully, in total freedom reject Almighty God.

We might even go so far as to say that it is almost impossible to reject God to the extent of deserving eternal punishment by a single action out of context of one's whole life, that it is probably only as a result of a long and sustained attitude of rejection toward God that one could ultimately arrive at the point of total rejection.

There is an unhappy converse to this, of course. Just as we might say that it is very difficult to commit a mortal sin, we must admit that having committed one, it is very difficult to reverse course. True, a perfect act of contrition will do the job, so will the sacrament of Penance. But the person who has really and truly totally rejected God of his own free will, one who has chosen hell in the sense of self-imposed isolation from God and the People of God, is not going to find it very easy to turn back, in spite of the grace and the mercy which God always extends freely.

Broadening our Sense of Sin

Again, we might take a moment to reflect on a few things and clarify our terms. There is a tendency among Cath-

olics to think too much in terms of external actions and to see a sin as an external action of which one is also subjectively guilty. Obviously, there are actions which are offensive to God and to the People of God, but many recent writers maintain that we lose our whole moral perspective by concentrating too much on individual external actions and not enough on the broader sense of sin.

You will recall that St. Paul usually refers to sin rather than sins. The attitude of the Pauline Epistles would seem to indicate that he had a notion of sin as a state rather than an action. Of course, St. Paul mentions many things which are sinful and that would take care of the actions, but basically he seems to see two possible states for the Christian, one living in Christ-life, the other living in sin.

As we have already noted, there was rather a plain idea among the early Christians that sin and Christian life were simply incompatible. This is brought out by the history of the sacrament of Penance, which in the early centuries of Christianity was held to be a thing that could be administered only once and, even after that, was a sacrament usually received only once during the life of most persons. The thinking behind this was that the sacrament of Penance was like a second Baptism. That is, after being baptized, the early Christians felt that a person would avoid sin and that it was only in an extremely grave case that he would reject God sufficiently to require a readmission to Christ-life through the sacrament of Penance.

We referred to sin as self-imposed isolation. Of course, this is a traditional way of describing hell. It points to a rather interesting parallel. In modern theology we often talk about a future now present to us. That is, we consider there to be an eschatological dimension in the liturgy, for instance, in that the oneness in Christ to which we are destined is already achieved in the Mass, in the reception of the Eucharist and so forth. The glory of heaven is said to be present to us now to some extent through Christ-life. Another expression is that grace is the seed of glory. In

other words, in our present life we are capable of experiencing something of the eternal life which is promised us as Christians.

By the same token, we could say that since hell is self-imposed isolation from God, and sin can be described the same way, sin is, quite truly, a foretaste of hell. Hell is the eschatological dimension of sin.

TEACHING APPROACHES

How can one explain the true nature of mortal sin and sin in general to a student? One young priest-teacher I know has a good approach. He talks about the relationship between man and wife, which is in line with what we discussed previously under the heading of a covenanted relationship with God.

A man and wife may have many little spats and disagreements during their lifetime together. They may have many arguments, may fail each other in many ways. Rarely will one of these failures or disagreements or even a clear-cut offense against one another lead to a complete disruption of their life together.

They are inclined to forgive each other and try again, perhaps a million times. The atmosphere will not always be warm. It will not always be full of open and obvious love, but it will not, as a rule, include a total rejection of one party by the other.

On the other hand, if the relationship between a man and wife deteriorates long enough, the time may come when the man or woman or both may place themselves in situations where it is almost inevitable that they will commit some offense against themselves, against others and against God. For example, a man may as a result of an unpleasant marriage, place himself in a situation where adultery becomes all but unavoidable.

If the man should commit this kind of offense, the moral situation is not to be seen as one action in his marriage,

but as the culmination of an attitude of rejection, based on the cumulative effect of a failure to love fully.

So, if a man sins against his wife, we must realize that in the sense we have described it here, it has taken him a long time to do so, and it is something which has resulted from a sustained attitude rather than being simply an impulsive action. All of this being true, it is going to take him a very long time to achieve reconciliation. In fact, that may never occur.

Of course, this is only an analogy, but if you think it through you begin to get a little idea of what the relationship of God to man is, and perhaps a little clearer idea of the real nature of sin, at least the kind of sin which could lead to eternal punishment.

In the normal course of life there are big offenses and little ones, and there are failures and weaknesses which could hardly be classed as offenses at all. Let enough of these little things crop up in a relationship over a long enough period of time and the result may be either an action so serious or an attitude so bad that it would cause a real disruption, a violation of a covenant. In a case like this, it is very difficult to go back, to rebuild.

Still, it *is* possible, and we should always be very sure that we make this plain, because there is a psychological state, which resembles despair, into which many persons fall. This condition, while it isn't conscious despair, may keep one from returning to the healing mercy of almighty God which, of course, is always present. We can also learn from what we have been talking about here that little failures are to be avoided, to be recognized when they occur, and to be corrected. However, we are not going to prevent little sins, let alone big ones, by scaring people.

Fundamental Option

What we are talking about could be called a *fundamental option* for or against God, an orientation of the whole per-

son toward or away from God. If we teach youngsters to direct their whole lives to God who made them and loves them, and if their response to this is sincere, not mechanical or the result of formalism; if the love is real and open and honest, and if there is a real choice to love and live for God, then sin is not going to be very easy for students to commit. They can, in truth, live free from the law, not in the sense of living against the law, but in the sense of living above and beyond its letter . . . in love, with, in and through Christ. And isn't that an awful lot better than going around counting up little failings?

The job, then, is to teach who God is, who man is and what their relationship is. It is first and foremost a relationship of love and mutual giving. We don't generally give very freely to those we hold in terror.

I don't want to sin, but if I avoid sin it is because I do not want to offend God who has been good to me and who has given me so many good things for such a long time, has given them to me as gifts. Certainly I want to avoid hell. I want to go to heaven. But I have experienced, as I said, a foretaste of heaven here and now in Christ.

Therefore, if I avoid sin, it is because I do not want to displease God who has done so much for me. Furthermore, if I should sin, I am sorry because I love God who first loved me. I want to reunite myself with Him fully, to restore the relationship of love that existed between us before my sin. I want to be fully reunited to the People of God, to the Mystical Body of Christ.

It is not a matter of deep psychological guilt, or a matter of mechanical, sacramental washing. It isn't a matter of pride, of being overwhelmed with shame because I have managed to act in an unworthy manner.

Contrition Vs. "Sick" Guilt

We must be very careful to distinguish between contrition and guilt in the sick sense of that word. Contrition is

sorrow for our failure to love, or better yet, sorrow for our failure to love back . . . for the love of God is always with us and never leaves us no matter what we do, no matter how long or how badly we sin.

At my most loathsome, God loves me. This is true of all sinners, and we must teach this to everyone. We must teach them first of all that they are very worthwhile, that they are not easily condemned or rejected. Above all, we must teach them that if they fall, they can rise, not through their goodness or strength, not even through merit of their own, but through the help which God has promised them, through the redemption which Jesus Christ has brought about for them with His own blood, with His Resurrection and Ascension, and with His continuing presence among us.

When you consider the life that we have, the good things that God has given us, how is it possible that we have sunk to the state we have in teaching a terribly mechanical, mathematical, rigid, legalistic morality which says to a child: "Don't turn the corner at a 90-degree angle but at a 63-degree angle or you will be slammed into hell, there to burn for all eternity"? How have we managed to do this? Again, who are the sinners?

How can I be afraid of God in a false, unhealthy way? I can fear almost anything else or almost anyone else around me. I live in a very frightening world. But how can I be afraid of God? Once I lose my infantile terror of God, my fear of all these other things fades because I know that whatever their appearance may be, God has made them. They are good. They can be used for good. I am firm and safe. I am loved by almighty God and "if God is for us, who will be against us?"

How to Teach Morality

There isn't time in this pamphlet to dwell at great length on pedagogical methods, and we have already noted that

there are not many methods to talk about in the area of morality as seen today. Nevertheless, the reader must be asking just how we go about teaching what we have been discussing beyond simply repeating the general ideas or even the words that we have presented here.

The answers, as noted in the beginning, are in the four signs of catechetics that have been recognized for some time, that is, Bible, liturgy, doctrine (when thoroughly understood and understandably explained) and through our own Christian witness, through lives which are based on faith and filled with love and which testify in their every aspect that Jesus is the Lord. In the final analysis, the value of the living teacher, the witness in whom faith lives, is probably the key factor in communicating attitudes of positive morality to the student.

It is neither necessary nor desirable to try to give a young child a complete moral system. He doesn't need it. In fact, there are moralists who maintain that it is not too good an idea to try to provide a teen-ager or even an adult with a complete moral system, since in the final analysis, this is impossible.

Rules and Freedom

Another thing that needs to be noted is that in the case of adults and even some teen-agers, there is a genuine "flight from freedom." That is to say, many people do not want real freedom and liberty. They would prefer an authoritarian handing down of precise rules to be followed on all occasions.

They even wish to have their sins labeled as sins plainly and boldly, even if perhaps the situation is not plain and bold to begin with. One of the more interesting insights into the modern Catholic mind in the United States comes from reports from priests who have tried to eliminate heavy stress on confession for young children. In many cases parents have screamed to high heaven that this is

all wrong, that the children need to go to confession. "Of course, he has sinned. Of course, he is condemned. Of course, Jesus must forgive him or he will burn in hell's fire." This, of course, referring to an eight or nine-year-old who at the most has talked back or has been five minutes late for dinner.

If we are going to help to form Catholics who are mature and responsible, we must communicate better attitudes than this, and that will probably be done by getting away from casuistry and some of our other old-time moral approaches and communicating Christ-life in the best sense by our own lives and the way we size up situations and act.

But What About Law?

It is very important to realize that in what we are saying here we are not in any way denying the law or saying that the law is unimportant. The thing to be remembered is that the law gives us the minimal prescription. As Christians we want to go beyond that and live lives of love which are not normally concerned with minimal prescriptions but with the maximal way of pleasing the beloved.

It might be said that the law is something that the good Christian bumps into occasionally when he strays a little from full Christian orientation. A constant dwelling on the letter of the law is a suffocating thing in terms of the life of the spirit.

There are psychological difficulties here because we live in a world of laws and many people are extremely conscious of all the kinds of laws and regulations and prescriptions that they have to follow in connection with every phase of life. This is probably necessary and good for the most part, but we have to get across the idea that the life of the Christian does not end with knowing what the law is and observing it, that his life must go way beyond that.

It seems that we have trained whole generations who think that the role of a child of God is to avoid sin and observe the mandates of compulsory worship. Obviously, we must avoid sin and it is in the nature of man to worship God. However, man is a long way from loving God if he merely avoids those things which are generally held to be gravely sinful and worships when he is ordered to do so in order to avoid sin.

Again, basically we are talking about the difference between a life in religion lived out of fear and one lived out of love. It probably is possible to be saved by following the road of fear, but it is a long way from the road that the Bible, liturgy and doctrine would indicate to us.

LOVE, FREEDOM AND THE FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

Just as we have had in the past some unfortunate errors of a rigoristic nature, we now have some unfortunate errors of a simplistic nature. They are connected with vaguely understood and vaguely applied terms such as "love," "freedom," "community," "encounter," and "relationship."

Of course, it would take volumes to explore the meanings and ramifications of these terms, but let's take a little time to deal with a couple which have tremendous meaning for us when we think about teaching morality. The first is the word "love." What does it mean?

Love is a difficult word to define and understand because of the close association between love and romance in this country as propagated by motion pictures, television, popular music and all the rest. A technique I used in former times to get away from the overly flossy use of the word "love" was to refer to it as an act of the will.

This is a correct notion, but a rather cold one. On one hand, we should not think of love in its religious sense as

a glowing emotional state, but it would be equally wrong to rule out the occasional value of feeling in the realm of love in its best religious sense, even though feeling is a transitory thing and rarely a very good criterion of anything. I may do something for the love of God and feel very little doing it. I may, on the other hand, feel a great surge of religious sentiment which has very little to do with love of God.

It is worth noting here parenthetically that the same could be said of contrition. I know of many unfortunate cases where people have postponed receiving the sacrament of Penance until they "felt" sorry, or suspected their confessions were invalid because they lacked an adequate feeling of sorrow for their sin.

As I said, feeling is a perfectly good thing. It comes from God. However, it varies a great deal from person to person and from time to time and should rarely be used as a standard of much of anything.

To return to love itself, perhaps the best way of describing what we mean by it is to say that if we love someone we want to be pleasing to him, we want to do things for him, we want to give as much of ourselves to and for him as we possibly can. This is a very simple way of looking at it, but it comes closer than any way I know of describing what I mean by love when I refer to love of God and love of man. One teacher of religion and catechetical writer for whom I have great respect uses the word "concern" in this context. If we love someone, we will be concerned for him and show it by action.

For purposes of our discussion here, then, we will use love in the sense of wanting to be pleasing to a person whom we love and wanting to do things for that person, of having concern for him. In the case of God, of course, we are talking about three persons, but rather than get into a Trinitarian discussion, let us say that we want to show our love for a personal God.

Many times I have encountered people with badly confused notions of morality, and when this happened, the

real answers seemed to come from the fact that they hadn't fully understood the notion of a personal God, a God with whom one has a person-to-person relationship, a God who cares about us, a God who respects us . . . rather than a distant, omnipotent, fierce ruler.

Freedom and Confusion

The word "freedom" has been batted about rather badly. Within the Church we tend to use the term more and more, yet often we seem to be afraid of it when it comes down to practical application. Recently, there has certainly been a tendency to confuse freedom with anarchy, subjectivism and a total or near-total rejection of all legitimate authority. Certainly that is not what we are talking about here.

Freedom to me means freedom to love and serve God and man the best way that I know, without undue influence from any person or institution. It allows me considerable latitude in making up my mind as to what the best ways for me may be to express my love and to give my service. It means that I must have a great respect for the same kind of freedom in others. It in no sense simply means that I can do as I please and remain moral.

We used to say, "error has no rights," and I'm sure there are many who would still say that, although it would have to be carefully qualified in view of modern theology and conciliar teaching. However, I have been guilty in the past of reducing that statement a little and saying there is no right to be wrong. I don't really believe that is so. I have a free will and I have, in the broadest sense, a right to be just as wrong as I want to be. However, if I use my freedom in such a way that I wind up wrong, what I have really done is abused one of the greatest gifts that God has given me.

Perhaps the most direct way of summing it up is simply to say that if we study recent theological writers in

any depth, we ultimately come to the conclusion that while we may move with much greater freedom, particular morally complete actions which were sinful before are still sinful and just as sinful. Beyond that, we wind up with a conviction that we must do much more, not less, because of our freedom. Our quest for sanctity in its truest, broadest, community sense must be a much more intense one than our old-style minimal morality which too often started with a question: "How far can I go before it becomes a mortal sin?"

It is important to note that in talking about freedom and freedom of conscience, we are talking about notions that are not at all new within Christianity. The Church has fought very strongly in the face of very heavy opposition to defend the thesis that man has a free will, a freedom to choose between good and evil and the ability to make such a choice.

Certainly, most of us would hold that this freedom is not an absolute in an existential sense. That is to say, we probably would hold that there are fewer times in a man's life when he can make a clear, unaffected choice between good and evil than we used to think. This is especially true when we think in terms of his heredity, his environment, and all the factors which make him what he is and influence him in a given place at a given time in making a particular choice. Nevertheless, the Church has stoutly held out for freedom and freedom of choice, and when you think about it, this is an excellent way of backing up the statements which we made a little while ago, which is to say, that one must choose evil fully and freely, and it must be grave evil if it is going to send him to hell. In other words, one must *will* his way to hell.

Freedom of Conscience

Freedom of conscience is a very ticklish area. If we concentrate on only one side of its meaning, we can get

ourselves into a great deal of difficulty. One of the reasons that I am altogether too slow to discuss it with students is that I would hate to be guilty, even though I were not fully aware of it, of misleading anyone in the formation of his conscience. I don't want to give anyone the idea that he can do anything he chooses and remain in perfectly good shape with the Lord. On the other hand, there has been what I believe to be a great interference with the development of true sanctity because we have not discussed freedom of conscience enough.

Let's put it this way. I have a particular God-given faculty by which I judge whether an action which I am contemplating is good or evil. One of the first things that must be taught to a young person in connection with formation of his conscience is that it is the judgment he makes *before* the action which determines his guilt. How he sees the thing afterward does not affect guilt.

Now we can fall back on some very ancient principles and say that one must follow a certain conscience, one must never follow a doubtful conscience, and one has an obligation to resolve doubts of conscience wherever possible. Having arrived at a good conscience which is certain for all practical purposes in a given situation, one may follow it in perfect freedom. In doing this, it is impossible for him to sin gravely. However, he may still do things which are displeasing to God, which cause great social harm, and which may bring great harm to himself. Therefore, we must be concerned with a great deal more than his guilt in the purely legal sense when we teach him about freedom of conscience.

Toward Understanding the Problem

Recall what we said about the bad consequences of certain actions which are objectively sinful even though in given instances the person committing the actions might not be subjectively guilty of any sin and, therefore, would

be morally innocent of grave sin, perhaps morally innocent of any sin. A Buddhist publication I know which uses the term "venial sin," maintains that this is more serious than grave sin on the grounds that the grave sin is usually recognized and having been recognized, the person may make some effort to see that it doesn't happen again. The sin which lacks full advertence may happen many times without anyone realizing it sufficiently to take action to prevent its reoccurrence.

An example used by the Buddhist publication is that of a person whose improper use of his intellect and prejudice allows him to block certain plans that might provide many good things for the common good. In this case, the man who is a little dull and who is prejudiced is not fully guilty of blocking the good effects of these plans. Therefore, he probably won't do much to overcome his prejudice or his dullness and will continue to block plans which could have served his fellowman very well. It is an interesting notion, but one we had better not teach without very careful explanation.

Forming One's Own Conscience

To get back to the immediate subject, while we must point out very carefully that one must consider a great deal more than his own subjective guilt or innocence in a given situation, the fact remains that each of us has an obligation to form his conscience on any matter of any moment in life. In this area, there is no human authority beyond one's own conscience. It may actually come to pass that I may find myself in a situation where I have a certain conscience which tells me that I must disagree with the Pope. To do less than that would be to violate my conscience. It has been taught for centuries that if one has a certain conscience which tells him he must reject the Catholic Faith, that his moral obligation is to reject the Catholic Faith. Of course, the converse of both of

these would be true. Normally my conscience will tell me that I must go along with the Pope and that I must accept the Catholic Faith. In this case, my obligation is rather plain.

I think we fail students very badly when we do not inform them of this freedom, when we don't inform them of the scope of conscience. The only way we can go wrong is if we fail to get across a corresponding notion of the importance of forming a good, solid conscience, one which is not founded in error, one which is not bent to whims of the moment, one which searches for truth, one which is rightly motivated...which takes us right back to our idea of fundamental option or total orientation of the person toward God and the People of God.

Providing Answers

Again, we have tried too much in the past to provide answers for every possible situation in life and I am convinced that the most immoral thing I can do in religious education is to give pat answers. No matter how hard I try, almost any student is bound to face situations outside of the classroom for which my pat answers won't suffice. What I must do is lead him to the formation of a conscience which will allow him to make good sound judgments as to the goodness or evil of the alternatives he faces.

We have already indicated what some of these attitudes are; concern for the value of his own person, concern for the value of other persons, individually and in groups, consideration for society as a whole, for the overall welfare for the People of God, concern for the good in its fullest sense. No authority on earth can provide him with every single answer.

Let's repeat that even after one has received an answer from a confessor or spiritual director or from any other source, he still, strictly speaking, has the obligation of

forming his own conscience on the matter.

Great stress should be placed on the tremendous importance of formation of conscience, not in a fearful, negativistic way, but in a positive way which leads to maturity, to responsibility. In this respect, it is important to point out to any student that formation of conscience is a more or less continuous process through life as his state in life changes. As his professional life changes, as the circumstances under which he exists change, he will have to broaden and deepen his conscience. It should develop to degrees of maturity which will ultimately allow him to lead others, at least those in his own family, to the formation of good consciences.

So, obviously, we shouldn't start out by scaring him to death about what will happen if he doesn't develop a good conscience. We should teach him how important it is for his own good and for the good of all men and as an expression of love for God to form the best conscience that he can, one which is rarely involved with ignorance, error, self-deception, or confusion.

At the same time, we should not ever let this become a binding or constricting thing which will cause him to refrain from taking action when he really should take it. Prudence is an active virtue. It is doing the right thing in the right way at the right time. Our older notions of prudence often suggested that the best thing for one to do is to sit on one's hands and avoid action when there is any doubt at all. If we were to make any kind of universal out of this, Christianity would come to a screeching halt. One priest for whom I have the greatest respect has gone so far as to say: "This is an age in which we must be prepared to make mistakes in public."

Dealing with Children

When we are dealing with young children, we have the rather special privilege of working almost entirely in

terms of the positive. We can teach love. We can teach when one is loved, one responds with love. We can teach the child to ask himself simply: "Is this action which I am thinking about one which shows my love for God and Man?" We can teach him to ask himself: "Is this what Christ would do in this situation?"

We can make the student very conscious of the importance of little things in his life, of daily small acts of charity, mercy and goodness. We can also point out the importance on the social and religious scales of minor acts of disobedience, lying, stealing, and so forth, not in the sense of telling him that he is going to hell, but in the sense of these things being failures to respond in love to God and man, and of failing to fully appreciate himself and the people and things which God has placed around him.

Ideally, as he grows and gets a broader, more mature idea of religion through exposure to Scripture and liturgy, through understanding of doctrine and through the teaching of Christian witness, he will strive more and more to form a positive conscience, one in which he does not function as a little moral shyster, but as a lover.

A Guide

Perhaps the best advice I can think of for a teacher of religion approaching instruction in morality would be this: "Before you teach about the law of God and about sin and punishment, reflect on your own experience of God. Recall that the experience of God is an experience of love, of mercy, of forgiveness. God is just, but above all, merciful. God is not a petty haggler about petty rules. Men have tried to make Him seem that. But God is a loving father. Morality is remembering that the answer to love is love."

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. If, as the psychologists say, children obtain their ideas of God from their relationship to their elders, what can the teacher of religion do to help a particular child get the right ideas if most of the people the child has to identify with are not at all like God? What is your own idea of what God is like?
2. How would you explain to a class of somewhat rebellious youths the importance of "obedience"? The limitations on individual freedom? The necessity to be "committed" to something or someone?
3. What is your notion of sin? An infraction of a law, or the breaking of a trust? How would you explain real "mortal sin" to a young person just beginning to understand what it means to be concerned about other persons and God?
4. Some authors speak of the choice of grievous sin as a "fundamental option." Could you give some examples of such choices, indicating the state of mind and conscience of the person making the choice?
5. What does "conversion" mean? How often do you think this happens in the life of an ordinary human being?
6. What do modern writers mean when they say our relationship to God should be one of love rather than law? Is there such a thing as the law of love?
7. What does "freedom of conscience" mean to you? If one has an obligation to form his own conscience, what happens when one's own conscience thus formed conflicts with the law of God? Of man?

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