

## Discussion Questions *A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology*

### Introduction

1. What do you understand by the terms “morality,” “moral,” “right and wrong”? How can we know when something is morally right or wrong? How would you give some concrete examples to illustrate your answers?
2. What does it mean to get our moral questions adequately framed? What would be some practical examples from your own life and/or contemporary issues facing us?
3. What do you see as the proper and improper roles for moral authorities, such as the Church’s Magisterium, in giving concrete moral guidance for contemporary ethical issues? Can you give some examples to illustrate your answer?
4. What would you list as the top five moral challenges or issues facing the world today?
5. What would you list as the top five moral challenges or issues facing your local community (e.g., work-place, neighborhood, parish, school, etc.) today?
6. What would you list as *your own* top five moral challenges or issues facing you personally?
7. What do you see as the major challenges in the present world, and in your own personal life context, to responding well to coming to good moral decisions and putting them into action? In other words, how do your answers to questions 4, 5, and 6 come together in your own eyes?

### Chapter One: Mapping a Moral Methodology

8. What is your understanding of the task, methodology, and sources for “moral theology”? How does “moral theology” differ from “morality”?
9. In your own approach to moral theology what would be your “ultimate” moral sources when there may be conflicting views, or in other words, what do you hold as the “norming norm” (*norma normans non normata*)?
10. What are the key aspects of “deontology” and “teleology” and how do they differ from one another? How might they complement one another?
11. Could you give some good examples which would illustrate the contribution of each of the four moral sources (Scripture, Tradition, Human Experience, Rational Reflection on the Normatively Human) in a couple of concrete contemporary moral problems or ethical issues? Which of these sources would you hold as privileged in relation to each of the

ethical issues you give and why? In other words, how do you use the five source content questions of What is Used, Ignored, Rejected, Reinterpreted, and Decisive?

12. What is meant by “paradigm” and how does a “paradigm” relate to the claim that there is an objective moral order?
13. What are the key strengths of the physicalist paradigm?
14. What are the key strengths of the personalist paradigm?
15. What are the chief weaknesses of the physicalist paradigm?
16. What are the chief weaknesses of the personalist paradigm?
17. What is your reaction to the analysis of contraception given by Paul Quay on p. 37 and why?
18. How would you judge the moral similarities and critical differences in the cases of Bob and Carol Greene and Teodoro and Alicia Marrone? How would you personally judge each couple and why?
19. What do you understand by the notion of “moral discernment” and how have you used this in your own life?

## **Chapter Two: The Natural Law and Moral Norms: Moving Along the Rational Claim Axis**

20. What would be your own working definition or description of what the “natural law” is?
21. What are some of the reasons that many people (e.g., classic Protestant theologians) are uneasy with reliance on the natural law?
22. What are the basic positions of the Moral Autonomy School and the Faith Ethic School (*Glaubensethik*) in Roman Catholic moral theology and which position would you personally favor, and why?
23. In your own words how would you explain to someone in your parish what is meant by the six claims of the “draft blueprint” for the natural law (ontological, epistemological, normable, normative, universalizable, and universal)? Can you give some examples or illustrations of how this blueprint might work in relation to some concrete moral problems or contemporary ethical issues?

24. What is your understanding of the traditional concept *contra naturam* (against nature), and how does it relate to deontology and teleology? What would be some examples of a genuine *contra naturam* act in the contemporary world?
25. What are some of the important similarities and differences in Thomas Aquinas' concepts of speculative and practical reason and how do these relate to our understanding and application of the various levels of moral norms?
26. What does Thomas Aquinas mean by saying that certain moral norms or "laws" do *not* hold in every situation, but only "in most cases" (*ut in pluribus*)? How can this assertion be reconciled with a belief in an objective moral order? Can you provide any concrete examples from your own life which might illustrate this truth?
27. What is meant by the term *epikeia* and what would be some contemporary examples of its application in your own life?
28. A key distinction in Thomas Aquinas' theory of moral action is the moral evaluation of an action as seen from the perspective of the act itself (*finis operis*) and from the perspective of the person performing the act (*finis operantis*). How do you understand these two terms and can you give some illustrative examples from your own life?
29. What is meant by the term "intrinsically evil act" and what are the major point of the debate over this term in contemporary moral theology and the Magisterium of the Church (such as Pope John Paul II's *Veritatis splendor*)?

### **Chapter Three: Scripture and Ethics: Moving Along the Sacred Claim Axis**

30. While Scripture contains divine revelation the Church would hold that God's definitive revelation of God's own self is not found in this or that biblical book or verse, but rather in the person of Jesus Christ. What does this affirmation mean for us as we seek to employ Scripture ethically in our everyday lives?
31. What would be your response to someone who argues that Scripture must be read and applied literally since this is God's revelation, and that attempts to "exegete" and/or "interpret" Scripture are really just devices to blunt the "plain sense" of the biblical message and the obedience to that message commanded by God?
32. Discuss some of the issues as well as both positive and negative aspects of using a slogan such as *WWJD?* (*What Would Jesus Do?*) as the primary guide for applying Scripture to our moral decisions and daily life.
33. Discuss how the multi-strand double helix model of Scripture and ethics works by using an illustration from your own life.

34. Briefly describe and give examples of the terms “core, context, and coherence” in applying the Bible to moral issues.
35. Discuss some of the biblical and ethical issues and difficulties inherent in using a verse such as 1 Corinthians 6:9 as a proof text to show that gay men and women are unable to be saved for God’s Kingdom.
36. Discuss some of the biblical and ethical problems associated with the judgment that Scripture supports the contention that AIDS is divine punishment for personal sin.

#### **Chapter Four: The Sanctuary of Conscience: Where the Axes Intersect**

37. What do the terms “primacy of conscience” and “sanctuary of conscience” mean? Give some examples to illustrate your answer.
38. How does a proper understanding of autonomy relate to the notion of the sanctuary of conscience?
39. How do we understand the proper role of the Church’s Magisterium in the informing of our conscience and as a detailed guide in concrete ethical decisions?
40. How did the manualist tradition of moral theology understand conscience?
41. What do the terms “vincible and invincible ignorance (or error)” mean in relation to conscience? How are we to understand the imperative to always follow one’s conscience, when we recognize that this conscience may be in error regarding to objective moral rightness or wrongness of a given act?
42. Discuss some of the problems of conscience formation and information, including the tendency towards rationalization. Give some concrete examples to illustrate these problems.
43. Explain the notion of the “objective” and “subjective” poles of conscience and show how both of these poles exist within the individual.
44. What does Thomas Aquinas’ notion of the *lex indita non scripta* (the law inscribed, not written) mean in regards to conscience? How does this concept relate back to Thomas’ understanding of the natural law as expressed in the objective moral order?
45. What does it mean to call “conscience,” “sexuality,” and “culture” basic “modalities” of being human? How does a more nuanced understanding of these basic human modalities

affect our understanding of the term “human nature” and related ethical expressions such as *contra naturam* (“against nature”)?

46. How can culture both help and hinder our individual efforts to see the morally right thing to do and to act accordingly? Give some examples both from history and the contemporary world to illustrate your answer.
47. Illustrate the model of the spiral of conscience development with some examples of your own.

### **Chapter Five: Modes of Moral Discourse: Navigating toward a Common Ground**

48. Take the 6 C’s of moral discourse (comprehensiveness, comprehensibility, consistency/coherence, credibility, convincing, and Christian) and apply them to some hot-button issue *other* than the example of abortion used in the chapter.
49. How might St. Ignatius of Loyola’s notion of the *Presupputio* (Presupposition) be used in contentious moral debates?
50. Give a brief description, including both strengths and weaknesses of each of James Gustafson’s “varieties of moral discourse” (prophetic, narrative, ethical, and policy). Use these varieties of moral discourse to probe in greater length some current ethical issue or debate, noting how the various varieties of discourse are both used and/or ignored by various sides of the debate.

### **Chapter Six: Navigating in the Morally Complex World: Casuistry with a Human Face**

51. What are the distinctions between the following pairs of terms: “presuppositions” and “further information needed,” and “morally relevant features” and “morally relevant principles”?
52. How is the “pastoral response” related to “pastoral strategies” and *vice versa*?
53. What are the ramifications for our understanding of moral theology come from calling “reconciliation” as one of the most crucial pastoral response issues in concrete cases?
54. What is meant by the term “empathetic listening” and why is it important for pastoral counseling?
55. What is meant by the caution to “track the problem-solving tendency”?
56. What is meant by the term “casuistry” and what are both the positive and negative aspects of doing moral theology through casuistry?

## Chapter Seven: Sin and Failure in a Morally Complex World

57. What would be the inter-relation, as well as the distinction, between “sin” and “moral failure”?
58. What would be the main biblical themes from both the Old Testament and New Testament which shed light on God’s understanding of sin and moral failure? How do these themes intersect and/or diverge with our own contemporary reactions to sin and failure?
59. What is the theological significance for ourselves of the Old Testament practice of the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) and the Jubilee?
60. How does the New Testament vocabulary for “sin” (*hubris* [pride] and *hamartia* [missing the mark]) help us in a fuller understanding of this reality?
61. What are some of the different layers of meaning concerning the biblical words which are usually translated as “temptation” and “testing” (*peirasmos*)? Why is a fuller understanding of this term important for our comprehension of perfection and virtue, as well as sin and failure?
62. What is meant by Jesus’ oft-repeated call to *metanoia* (conversion)? How might this better inform our own responses to sin and failure?
63. How do we understand the relationship of God’s grace working in our lives which are so often marked by sin and moral failure? How might Martin Luther’s concept of humanity being both “sinners and justified” (*simul iustus et peccator*) help us here?
64. What is the role of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as both an ecclesial and divine response to the role of sin and moral failure in both individuals and the community?
65. What is meant by the terminology of “mortal and venial sin” and how have these terms been used in the history of moral theology?
66. What is meant by the terminology of “social sin and structural evil” and how does this terminology help us to understand better the reality of sin and moral failure in our personal lives as well as the larger world?
67. How do the traditional moral principles of compromise, cooperation, and tolerance of evil help us to understand how to live in a sinful and imperfect world?

68. What might be the contours of your own spirituality for living your own life in a morally complex world?