

If it feels good, don't do it: stereotyping Catholic morality

In a review for a book on Catholic orthodoxy, the skeptical reviewer offered a gross oversimplification of Catholic ethics: "If it feels good, don't do it." I am not sure why it disturbed me so much, but it did. Perhaps, it was because I heard similar generalizations a million times or that it depicts Catholics as a puritanical and miserable bunch or that it reminds me of a high school taunt: Catholics cannot do anything fun.

Within this context, I interpret "fun" or "feels good" to refer to sensual indulgences, including premarital sex, binge drinking, drug use, viewing porn, and the other usual suspects, all condemned by the church. I have been quizzed by secular friends who enjoy these activities. Does not God want us to do things that are enjoyable and make us feel good? I assume their vision of Catholicism's God is a grumpy, old man, repeatedly proclaiming, No! It is hardly an appealing representation of an infinitely perfect being.

Fortunately, Catholic ethics offers a different vision of God, one that most people do not know. The key to understanding this view of morality is not to determine what is right and wrong, but why something is right or wrong.

One school of Christian ethics holds that only love of God is an intrinsic good, and subsequently, turning away from this good is the only intrinsic evil. Other evils are universal and eternal, but they are contingent on God's command. At first, this appears to reinforce the perception of God as an arbitrary Ruler.

Why then does Catholicism have so many restrictions? God ultimately wants us to love Him, and He knows that certain activities, while not inherently connected to His love, will make loving Him more difficult. This protection from potential harm is why God prohibits certain actions. God is a loving father guiding us, rather than a grumpy killjoy.

Likewise, ethics is not a stifling list of restrictions but a dialogue of love. God commands out of love, and we obey out of love. The former proposition sounds great, but it also feels too much like a finely worded, retrospective justification for the commandments, a good PR slogan but distant from the reality of difficult moral choices. This cynicism, however, dissipates when we are placed in God's role.

As every parent knows, God is not the only one accused of being a grouch. Being the father of a 2-year old, I feel like a broken record. Do not do that! Do not do this! My constant correcting casts me as a mean individual, and I can only imagine my son complaining: "My Dad does not let me do anything. When I grow up, I am only going to eat chocolate, watch TV and never sleep."

I cannot explain to him my reasoning, but it reminds me of Catholic ethics. I do not believe standing in the road is an intrinsic evil, but I know it is not a safe place for a 2-year old. Hence, I prohibit him from going into the road, out of love and concern for his safety.

We eventually grow out of our 2-year-old desires and acknowledge that our parents were right. Naps are good, actually really good. Soon after, new desires replace the old ones, but this time our parents are not there to warn us. We have to rely on God and His church.

The more I reflect on the silliness and narcissism of adults, the more I see a toddler and parent parallel between us and God. As I am perplexed by my son jumping on the couch right after banging his head, God must be infinitely more hurt when His children continuously break His rules. Similarly, we will grow older and realize that our parents were actually right. One day also we will learn that God was correct, hopefully not too late. Furthermore, just as parents embrace us after our mistakes, God will likewise welcome us back to the fold.

Next time you wish the church would allow something that feels good, examine the element that feels good. Is it really good? Will it truly satisfy? Probably not.

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