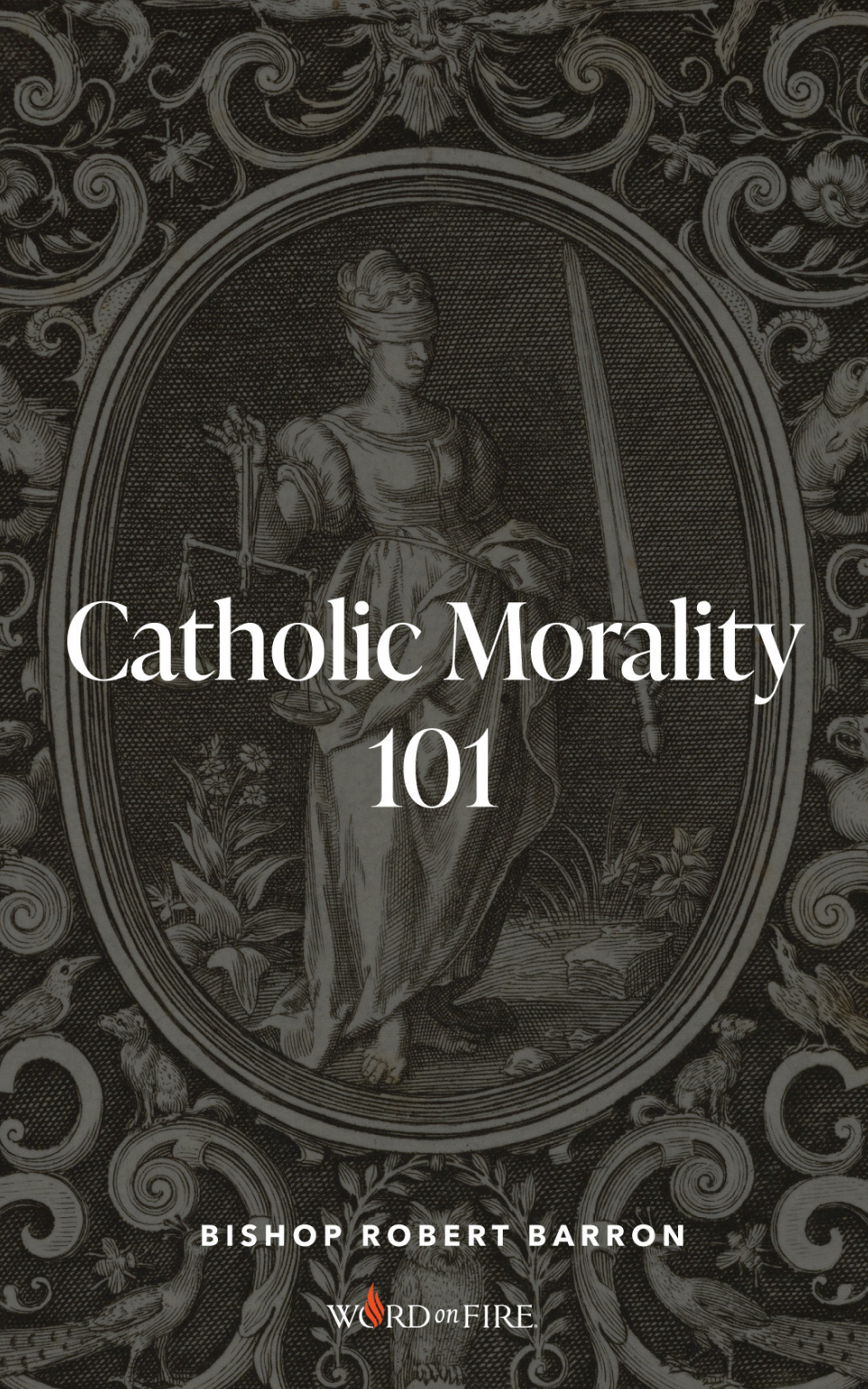

Catholic Morality 101

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD on FIRE

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Transcript taken from an interview between Brandon Vogt and Bishop Robert Barron.

Cover image: Nicolaes de Bruyn, Frederik de Wit, *Justice, from the Cardinal Virtues*, 1648, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Brandon Vogt: What are the main moral systems people accept today? How should Catholics understand them? Which ones are acceptable, which ones aren't? Our culture holds a wide range of different moral views and systems. We're going to look at three of the major ones, three that I think have the best representation in our culture today. The first one, perhaps the most prominent one, is consequentialism. Consequentialism holds that the moral worth of an action should be judged by its consequences. So a good or a right situation is one that produces mostly good consequences and vice versa. The best-known form of consequentialism is known as utilitarianism, where actions are judged based on how much happiness they procure for sentient beings, the number of beings that can think and reason and feel and experience. The goal is to maximize happiness for those types of beings. Bishop, maybe give us a little more background on consequentialism and then, especially for Catholics, what are some problems that we see with this system.

Bishop Robert Barron: As you suggest, it's an old system. It goes back a long way, and if you think about systems that endure over a long period of time, there's something right in them, or they wouldn't have endured that long. So I would never want simply to dismiss a system that I find inadequate. They've got something positive and that's why they've endured. I

would say, too, a lot of people instinctually think along consequentialist lines. Even if they're not reflecting on how they're doing moral philosophy, they probably instinctually follow that sort of model, like "I do this and this happens, and I do that and that happens, and which one is better?" The basic problem with that is it brackets the category of the intrinsically evil act. When I was going through school, what was dominant even in Catholic circles was a form of consequentialism called proportionalism. The idea here is that you perform an act that has both good and bad consequences, and what you do is you try to find the relationship between those consequences. Is there a proportion between the good to be attained and the evil that happens? You weigh them and say, "If the good outweighs the evil, then that's a morally legitimate act. If the evil outweighs the good, it's a bad act." We think instinctually that that statement is true. The problem, though, is that there are some acts that are simply wrong no matter what the consequences are.

An intrinsically evil act is an act that, by its very nature, is so repugnant to the good and to human flourishing that it can never be justified by appeal to any consequences. Catholic moral theology, as we'll see, insists upon this. Without the category of the intrinsically evil act, the moral project goes adrift. If someone is clever enough, they can justify pretty much anything. Why couldn't you say, for example, to attain the goal of a political

revolution, a million people have to die, but that's the price you pay because the good of attaining the revolution outweighed the evil. A second problem is, who's making these judgements? Who's deciding what the right relationship is? And then another problem is the incommensurability of these consequences. How do you measure the value of this versus the disvalue of that? You look at incommensurable consequences and it's like apples and oranges. How do you possibly make that adjudication? But the basic problem, I would say, is the suspension of the category of the intrinsically evil. Once that goes, the moral enterprise becomes very, very unmoored, and therefore dangerous.

Brandon Vogt: Let me throw at you the age-old scenario that college students taking Ethics 101 receive mostly on day one: the trolley problem. A trolley train is on a runaway track, and it's heading toward a group of five people who are tied to the track. It's going to run them over and kill them if you do nothing. But there's a lever you're standing next to and you have enough time that if you pulled the lever, the train would be diverted to another track, and there's only one person on that track. If it runs over that track, it'll only kill one person. So what do you do? Do you do nothing and let the train kill the five people? Do you pull the lever and kill the one? Both seem like bad options. What does a Catholic priest and philosopher say to this situation?

Bishop Barron: Well, you have to assess first the nature of the act. Are we dealing with an act that, by its very nature, is intrinsically evil? In that case, we'd have to do a little more thinking through it. There is a category within Catholic moral theology called the double effect. The double effect would allow for an act that does have a negative consequence, and it would be permissible under certain circumstances: namely, if the act in itself is not intrinsically evil, if the evil effect is not intended, and if there is some proportion between the evil consequence and the good consequence. So in that sort of scenario, one could allow for an act that produces certain negative consequences, but only under those strict conditions.

There's an example of that that I've always found intriguing as a film buff in the movie *Master and Commander*. The crew on a ninteenth-century British ship are in a storm and one of the masts breaks and falls overboard, and there's a sailor clinging to it. For navigational reasons, it becomes clear that unless they cut that mast free, the whole ship's going to go under. The captain also knows that if he does that, that sailor's going to die. There's no way he can be saved. They end up cutting the mast free. How would you analyze that act? Cutting the mast free from a possibly sinking ship is not intrinsically evil. The captain didn't intend the death of the sailor. If he cuts it away, this one sailor will die. If he doesn't cut it away, the entire ship will

go under. And so there is indeed a proportion there of good versus evil. In that scenario, that act would be seen as permissible. But in a strict consequentialism, you bracket the question of the intrinsically evil. You simply look at the calculus of good and evil consequences, and that has all the problems we just named. Catholic moral theology does, if you want, include a kind of consequentialism, but only under that rubric of the double effect.

Brandon Vogt: Let's move from consequentialism to another major prominent form of morality: deontological morality, sometimes called legalist morality. It comes from the Greek word, *deon*, which means obligation or necessity or binding. Generally, these words refer to duties. This would be a moral system where you have a long list of moral duties, things that you should do, and then concomitantly things you should not do. So here are all the good behaviors, and here are all the bad behaviors. Sometimes this gets caricatured as just legalism. All that matters is just following those lists. How should Catholics understand this type of morality?

Bishop Barron: The great figure here is Immanuel Kant, the best representative of a deontological ethic. Kant says famously that the only thing that's good in an unqualified way is the good will, and that gives away the game for Kant: it's the will that has properly ordered

itself toward the moral good that is unqualifiedly good. Any other circumstance is finally irrelevant to that fundamental interior move of the will. So Kant would say, in the famous categorical imperative, that the maxim of your will should always be congruent with a universal law. As I'm about to perform a moral act, I must act in a way that the maxim for myself should be a universal law. It would apply to everybody. What I can't do is say, "Lying is wrong, but under these circumstances, I will lie because it'll have these effects, or because I'm under this pressure or because it'll produce these good consequences." No. You must always act in such a way that the maxim of your will should become a universal law. That's a formulation of a purely deontological ethic. Now, there is something noble and austere about deontology. What's the concern? There's also something that's so abstract and inhuman about it, because it abstracts from the particular situation as though anything like circumstances or consequences are irrelevant to moral determination. Catholic moral theology would not move in that direction. What it has in common with deontologism, I think, is the stress upon the intrinsically evil act, but it doesn't do it in this austerely abstract Kantian way that completely marginalizes circumstances and consequences.

Brandon Vogt: Let's move to the third and final system I want to talk through with you. It's known as virtue ethics, and it's tied closely to natural law morality.

Would you give us a definition of both of these things, natural law and virtue ethics, which flows from natural law?

Bishop Barron: I think natural law ethics are grounded in a sense of the basic goods. I'm using a term from John Finnis there. When I was going through school, there were competing approaches to morality, but we read John Finnis' famous book *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. And Finnis, basing himself on Aquinas in the great natural law tradition, articulated seven basic goods. These are values, to use Dietrich von Hildebrand's language, that appear within nature and human experience. They are life, knowledge, play, religion, sociability, practical reasonableness, and aesthetic experience. Seven incommensurate, irreducible, basic goods that appear within the framework of our experience. What's a good act? A good act is one that achieves or integrates one of the basic goods.

Thomas Aquinas said, "The first principle of the moral life is do good and avoid evil" (*Summa theologiae* 2-2.92.2). Most might say that is rather obvious, but like the principle of noncontradiction, in which a thing cannot be and not be at the same time in the same respect, it forms the foundation for all reasoning. If you don't accept the principle of noncontradiction, you can't reason mathematically or in science or any other

way. In a similar way, Aquinas says that the foundation for moral reasoning is do good and avoid evil. Seek one of the basic goods and avoid a violation of the basic goods. Thomas names them (and Finnis is based on this) as existence, life, society, and God. Finnis expands Aquinas a little bit and calls God "religion."

Now if the point of the moral life is to seek the basic goods and to avoid violating them, here's where virtue ethics comes in. Inculcate those habits that will become so ingrained in yourself that the attainment of the good is first possible and then effortless. This goes way back to Aristotle. Habituate yourself and others to the good so that these now become ingrained habits, dispositions. Those ingrained habits and dispositions toward the good we call virtues. A whole theory of virtue ethics coming up out of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas now has been re-expressed. Think now of someone like Alasdair MacIntyre in our time, very much co-related to the natural law.

From a theoretical and practical standpoint, it's a very useful way to think about the moral life. Parents are very interested in the proper inculcation of habits in their kids that are not meant to oppress them but ingrain in them the habits that will make them happy. I'll give you one example. John Finnis will claim that knowledge is a basic good. For all kinds of reasons, I personally got habituated very well toward the basic

good of knowledge. I love to read. I love to have intellectual conversations. I love writing. I love the life of the mind.

Where did that come from? That came from parents and teachers when I was a child learning how to read, and then putting in me the disposition toward achieving that good. I have that virtue in me, if you want, so that attaining the good of knowledge becomes something easy for me. And that's true. I don't fight that at all. I don't struggle against that. I happily do that. Now, take all the basic goods—toward God, toward friendship and sociability, toward the arts—and place in us and in our friends and children those habits that create the virtues that make the attainment of those goods possible. That's a natural law virtue ethic, if you want.

Brandon Vogt: It seems to me, both as a parent and just in my own life, that virtue ethics is more attractive and effective if our goal is to condition kids or ourselves toward the good. With your example you just gave of reading books, on the consequentialist system, you would think, "If I learn to read heavy books, what are the benefits? What are the drawbacks?" And maybe you'd weigh those proportionally and make a decision. Or on the deontological view, you might think, "Here's a rule. You should read books." This is what our teachers and schools tell us, and look how many kids rebel against that sort of demand. But then virtue

ethics says, "The kind of person that I hope to become requires stimulating the mind and the intellect and reading books." I think parents get that more deeply, that flat rules don't really work. Helping a young child to weigh future consequences is never going to work, but helping them to become the person they want to be is more attractive.

Bishop Barron: I'll say something else too against the consequentialist view. Finnis, for example, will say that one may never intentionally attack a basic good. That's his way defining an intrinsically evil act. Let's take the basic goods of life. Are the basic goods to some degree in competition? Yeah, but what can't you ever do? You can't intentionally and directly attack a basic good. For example, it is incoherent to abort a child because you think certain goods are going to come from making that decision. I don't care what goods could possibly come from it, you can't directly attack the basic good of life. I'll give you another example from the realm of the basic good of aesthetic experience, which Finnis recognizes. A couple of years ago, the Taliban was in charge in Afghanistan and they were intentionally destroying ancient works for the sake of, in their words, achieving their goals, making their country more authentically religious, and so on. What were they doing though? They were intentionally and directly attacking the basic good of the beautiful. I think here

of Malcolm Miller, the great tour guide at Chartres, whom I heard many times. Miller said one time in a lecture, "I get that all religions need to be reformed. They all do. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. But the clearest indication that a reform has gone off the rails is when people start destroying beautiful things." Destroying beautiful things on purpose, directly attacking them, is intrinsically evil.

World War II was a terrible thing. To bring the Germans to their knees, we firebombed Dresden and Frankfurt and Cologne. Look at those photographs sometime: an entire city leveled, hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children killed. Justifiable? No way. Even if you say, "Think of the lives we saved. Think of the good of the war coming to an end." Sure, but you directly and purposely attacked the basic good of life. So that is very much missing in a consequentialist form of moral reasoning, but very much present in a basic goods or natural law approach.

Brandon Vogt: It's hard to identify one Catholic moral system. But I think it's safe to say that natural law virtue ethics is the most consonant with Catholic morality, at least more so than the other two systems we've discussed. And we've certainly seen a revival of virtue ethics after the Second Vatican Council. I'm thinking here especially of Pope John Paul II and his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. His writings on moral theology all

but endorse this system. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* seems pretty explicitly in favor of it as well. It says, "Virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself" (CCC 1803). Talk a little bit about this revival of virtue ethics over the last 50 years, and some of the key figures writing about it today.

Bishop Barron: Start with John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor*, in my judgment, is the greatest of his encyclical letters and the enormous magisterium of his papacy. Stanley Hauerwas, the Methodist theologian, said when he read *Veritatis Splendor*, "How wonderful that a Catholic pope is beginning an encyclical on the moral life with the Bible." John Paul begins not with abstract principles but with the story of the rich young man. It fits perfectly because the rich young man is someone who's seeking the good. "Good teacher, what must I do to attain eternal life?" (Luke 18:18). John Paul takes that as the beginning of his reflection on the moral life. Someone who influenced him very much and, in my judgment, is the greatest moral theologian since Vatican II, was a Dominican priest named Servais Pinckaers, who taught at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Pinckaers, in his wonderful text *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, recalls that Thomas Aquinas in the *prima secundae* of the *Summa*, dealing with the

moral life, doesn't get to law until question 90. So in a way, take that Immanuel Kant. Aquinas doesn't get to law until question 90. What does he begin with? *Beatitudo*. Happiness. What makes me happy? What are the goods that will make me happy? He begins with the attitudes of Christ. Then, he moves to the habits and the virtues that orient the person toward those goods that will make him happy. Then, he gets to law because law is meant to give form to the habits, which then give form to the virtues, which then allow me to attain the good.

But don't begin with the law. How many people say, "The Catholic Church imposes all these laws on us"? No, the Catholic Church begins with joy. *Beatitudo*. It then moves to habit and then to virtue, and then it gets, finally, to law. That's a good way to approach it. Begin with the rich young man. Good teacher, what must I do? I'm seeking the good. Show me how. And Jesus says, you know the commandments, the laws which are meant to habituate you toward virtue, toward the good. The rich young man does, and he has followed them all since he was a kid. And he has no reason not to believe them. Now he's ready for the high-octane stuff.

What are the Ten Commandments? Those are the basics. What is going to orient you toward the good? Well, you have to stop some of these egregious

violations of love. Of course you have to honor your parents, and of course you have to stop stealing, and of course you can't be murdering people. The Ten Commandments are the bottom line in a way. It's like the three-point stance when learning football. It's how to block and tackle. It's the fundamentals. Or you're at basketball camp as a sixth grader and you're learning how to dribble and shoot. Now we're ready for Michael Jordan. Now we're ready for the serious stuff. And that's why the Lord says to the rich young man, "Go and sell your possessions and give to the poor . . . and come follow me" (Matt. 19:21). Now you're ready for the serious life of real discipleship. And, famously, the rich young man balks because he was very rich. That's how John Paul begins that encyclical. Begin with the desire to be happy, the desire for the good. And the Church, which is, as Paul VI said, an "expert in humanity," has 2000 years of reflection on what helps you to attain that good. Then off you go. And don't settle for following the Ten Commandments. Hitch your wagon to a star. Try to live as a saint. Now we're talking. So I would put Catholic morality in that framework. It's trying to orient us toward being a saint.

Brandon Vogt: I've often liked the analogies you've used to sports and music when talking about virtue ethics. So with sports, you used the baseball analogy. When you're trying to get a young kid to fall in love with baseball and then develop the habituated skills

that are needed for baseball, you don't give them the 300-page rule book of all the ins and outs of baseball.

Bishop Barron: Quite right. The coach knows how to draw a kid into the world of baseball, into the moves of baseball, and helps the kid to see that the rules are his friend, not an imposition; the rules are what free him. Think of young Michael Jordan when he was learning basketball and coaches, good coaches clearly, were placing within his body the moves of the game. Now in time, he became a Rembrandt, a master that redefined the rules in some ways. But he began with the inculcation of habits, which led to virtues, which led to the attainment of the good. And then in his case, he's a saint of basketball. Now, I'm not making Michael Jordan a saint. Don't misunderstand me. He's a hero of the basketball world.

Now, put it in the moral framework. Teach kids the basics. And that's where, again, the Commandments come in. You don't steal. One of your kids stole something from his sister—come on, son. Don't do that. Now, he might not understand all the implications of what you're trying to do, but you're trying to place in him habits that will eventually lead him to a great act of self-surrendering love. But you're not going to get anywhere near that if you're doing things like stealing from your innocent sister or if you're badmouthing your friends.

I remember my basketball coach when I was a little kid, putting this device that stuck out under our eyes so we couldn't see the ball. It was meant to inculcate the habit of dribbling without looking at the ball. That's what the Commandments are like, aren't they? They're these restrictions that are not meant to limit our freedom but open up our freedom.

Brandon Vogt: Well, to use a Bishop Barron phrase, we've barely scratched the surface here. This would require a full graduate course to get into all the details of Catholic morality. But Bishop, if people want to go a little further, at least read the Servais Pinckaers text, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, and then John Paul's *Veritatis Splendor*. Anything else you'd point people to?

Bishop Barron: Start with those. Start with *Veritatis Splendor* and then go on to Pinckaers's text. You want to go really high-octane? Start looking at Alasdair MacIntyre. Look at Stanley Hauerwas, who's doing virtue ethics too, not from a Catholic perspective, but in that school.

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