Responding to Love in Love

Kevin O'Neil & Peter Black

The moral life is a response to God's initiatives of love. In many ways, the whole of life is about responses. The weather warms to the sunrise and chills at sunset. A plant moves in the direction of, and in response to, sunlight. A mother bear protects her cubs from danger. A watchdog responds to a suspicious person by barking or attacking. People smile or cry at the sound of joyful or sad news.

While all of these examples may be characterized as responses, a significant difference exists, we believe, between the last, a human response, and all the others. The first examples, while called responses, *must* be as they are. If the sun rises, the weather must warm; if the sun shines and a plant is in its path, the plant necessarily inclines toward the sun. A mother bear instinctively, as far as we know, protects her cubs from danger. Even an attack dog, as far as we know, responds, as Pavlov's dogs did, to a stimulus that it has been trained to "interpret" as threatening. One time, the trainer of our security dog explained what "goes on" in the dog's mind, as if we can even say that. He said, "It's not as if Bud has a nice personality and a mean one. He's always playing; but he responds in play that is violent and frightening when trained to do so. It's really all play to Bud." Intruders would have another opinion, undoubtedly. So, while all of these actions may be characterized as "responses," they are not like those human responses which ordinarily include some kind of awareness. As far as we know, the responses of these creatures are "automatic." They entail no feeling, thinking, or willing. Theirs are not conscious responses.

Human responses are different; they are conscious. Our level of awareness of them, however, may vary. We jump back "instinctively" from a hot stove or scream when frightened. We smile at the birth of a child and cry at the death of a friend. Tragedy and injustice anger us. We debate issues of public policy and argue in response to opinions that differ from ours. Science advances by reflection upon, and reaction to, competing theories. In these cases, our awareness of, and reflection on, how and why we are responding in a particular way will vary, but our moral responses entail some consciousness and freedom; otherwise, they are not moral.

In this chapter, we will examine the human response that is the moral life. We begin with the traditional requirements for a human moral action itself: knowledge and freedom. Then we move to an examination of other dynamics of the response, especially how our emotions and intellect are at work when we exercise our freedom. Next, we look at how patterned human responses, both emotionally and intellectually, shape our moral character; they are the emotional and intellectual dispositions that are the substance of virtue and vice. Finally, we discuss briefly the components of the moral act and under what conditions it may be termed good and virtuous.

1. The Human Act

Traditionally, Roman Catholic moral theology has made a distinction between a human act and the act of a human person. This distinction may sound like semantics, but it is important. If a driver of a car suddenly hits a patch of icy highway, slides and hits an oncoming vehicle, there is no question that a human being was behind the wheel of the car, but we would not call what happened a human act for which the driver is to be held responsible. Rather, we have observed an accident, something

completely unintended by the person driving the car. Traditional moral theology would call this accident an act of a human person, but not a human act.

The distinctiveness of the human moral response lies principally in the capacity of human beings to know what they are doing and to freely will to do it. If we took the previous example, but in this instance the driver intentionally crosses the highway lines and crashes into an oncoming car, we have a human act for which the driver may be held morally responsible. The driver knew what she was doing and freely chose to do it. So the human moral response will entail freedom and knowledge on the part of the moral agent.

HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

What does it mean to say that knowledge is a requirement for a human act? It means that the person is aware of the rightness or wrongness of what he is about to do and brings this knowledge to his action. For example, I might think, "I know that lying to my boss about why I will miss work on Friday is wrong, but I am going to do it anyway. If I wait until Friday to leave for my vacation, I'll hit that weekend traffic." If this person approaches his boss and gives a false reason for his action, he does so knowing that his action is wrong.

Suppose a woman meets a man at a work-related party and they hit it off. They begin dating, and the man conceals from her that he is married. She continues to date him, without the knowledge that he is married and only much later finds out about it. The man was clearly at fault for his double deception, to his wife and to his new friend, but the woman was doing something wrong but without possessing the knowledge to judge that it was wrong.

So, we might see human knowledge as that which is present or absent to the moral agent in moral action. We presume that when knowledge is present that moral consciousness of right and wrong is present as well. In the examples above, it seemed rather clearcut: either the person knew that the action was wrong or the person did not have the information to make that judgment. In this example, the rightness or wrongness of an action seems to hinge on a question of knowledge or ignorance. This clarity about moral matters, however, is not always present.

In our pastoral ministry, we have heard parents say something like, "I don't know why my son, John, doesn't go to Mass on Sundays. He knows it is wrong." How do we account for this kind of knowledge? John knows that he should go to Mass on Sundays but does not do so.

Sometimes we know things intellectually but we do not prize them in our hearts. We begin with the same example. John knows that he is supposed to go to Mass, but that knowledge does not compel him to act on it. So, even though he knows the third commandment about keeping holy the Lord's day, he does not attend Mass. John also knows that the fourth commandment is "honor our father and our mother." For the sake of this example, let us say that John is faithful to calling his parents, helping them in any way possible, remembering them on their birthdays, anniversary, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. In this case, John's knowledge of the fourth commandment compels him to act. What is the difference between the two examples?

The difference in these kinds of knowing, it seems, centers on the way in which the values that are proposed are personally esteemed by the moral agent. We do not suggest that we are in a world of moral relativism where rightness or wrongness depends on the whim of the individual. We only are attempting to understand how different ways of knowing may affect our moral action.

We suggest that these different types of knowing could be called "head knowledge" and "heart knowledge," but we do not want to infer, by doing so, that the head and the heart are disconnected.

The emphasis in "head knowledge," however, is on information that a person possesses, whereas "heart knowledge" focuses on what is valued.

Shortly, we will use the issue of capital punishment as a way to illumine our moral reasoning in feeling, thinking, and willing. Current Church teaching says that capital punishment is acceptable only in very rare circumstances. Because this issue has received considerable attention in the United States in recent years, we believe that Catholics in the United States are aware of the Church teaching on this matter; we presume that Catholics have "head knowledge" of Church teaching on capital punishment. Opinion polls, however, often report that more than 70 percent of American Catholics support the death penalty. "Heart knowledge" does not appear to be present in this instance. It is conceivable that John opposes capital punishment, although he does not attend Mass; and his parents attend Mass weekly but favor capital punishment. John could ask, "How can my parents support capital punishment? They know it is wrong." Perhaps this distinction in types of knowledge helps to explain what is going on in these instances.

A human act presumes some degree of "head knowledge" and "heart knowledge," even though we are aware that the former often precedes the latter. Moral responsibility and/or culpability is in proportion to the presence of "heart knowledge" because it indicates the moral agent's personal investment in the good or evil brought about by moral action.

HUMAN FREEDOM (CCC1731-1748)

The other distinctive mark of the human moral response is human freedom. As far as we know, there is no exercise of freedom in the examples from other nonhuman creatures. . . The weather, plants, bears, or dogs simply respond as they must; as far as we know, there is no deliberation or freedom in their response. This lack of deliberation or freedom is not so with human beings.

Human freedom is perhaps the most intriguing gift that God has given to us. Whereas all other creatures develop according to their genetic structure, subject to the circumstances of environment, human beings develop in large part due to the responsible exercise of their freedom. We, too, are certainly affected by our genetic makeup and environment, but our moral lives are marked chiefly by human freedom, our ability to shape our lives and to choose a course of action, for good or for bad

Freedom from vs. freedom for? A tension exists between the understanding of freedom in popular Western culture and the notion of freedom that is at work in Roman Catholic moral theology. Keeping the distinction in mind will help us to understand how we might use our freedom responsibly in the moral life.

Popular western culture suggests that the essence of freedom is the ability to do what one pleases within the confines of civil law. "I am free to do whatever I want as long as I don't violate your rights." So, freedom is marked by being untethered; it is freedom from constraints. Some might argue that the law is viewed as unjust or unreasonable. Examples of this view may range from the trivial, such as parking restrictions or "No turn on red" signs, to the more serious prohibition of gambling, prostitution, and the like. In the opinion of some, law cramps freedom.

Another central view of freedom in western thought is the ability to choose one thing over another. If I am buying a car and the only option offered to me at a particular dealership is a white Chevrolet Geo Metro, I might suggest that I do not have any freedom in the matter; there is no choice. I *must* buy a white Chevrolet Geo Metro if I am to have a car from this dealership. Similarly, elections of political representatives would be a farce if there were not at least two candidates running for office. We would say that our freedom is not really being exercised because there is no choice.

If we define freedom in the moral sphere as essentially a choice, we presume that one is free when one can choose between good and evil. I may choose to lie or not, to steal or not, to sin or not. Following the logic of this popular understanding of freedom, we are free as long as we are not constrained from acting and have a choice once we do.

According to the Roman Catholic Tradition, this notion of freedom is inadequate. As critical as human freedom is to humanity, it is not an absolute value but is given to us for something more. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* from the Second Vatican Council says that genuine "freedom is an exceptional sign of the image of God in humanity. For God willed that men and women should be left free to make their own decisions" (cf. Sir 15:14), so that they might of their own accord seek their Creator and freely attain their full and blessed perfection by cleaving to God" (17). Freedom, then, is not an end in itself, but rather a gift to direct our lives in accord with our meaning and purpose, that is, giving and receiving love and reaching fullness in union with God.

So, the focus on freedom is not "What am I free from?" where we concentrate on laws and other constraints on freedom, where authority and others are viewed as threats to freedom; rather the question is: What am I free for? Why was I given this freedom? The Council document suggests that it is precisely to shape myself into the image and likeness of God. The *Catechism* puts it this way: "Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude" (CCC 1731).

Pope John Paul II places the responsible use of freedom in the context of what is truly good for the person, what we call authentic human good. He writes: "Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are *in conformity with man's true good* and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person towards his ultimate end: God himself, the supreme good in whom man finds his full and perfect happiness" (*The Splendor of Truth*, 72). Put in a different way, freedom is used rightly when people choose those things that will contribute to their authentic human good, understanding this choice most fully as promoting right relationships with God, others, themselves, and all of creation.

In this light, any exercise of freedom that would hinder our maturity in truth and goodness would be done *not* in freedom, but in slavery. To put this more concretely, while a contemporary view of freedom might say that I am free to harm another or not, true freedom would say that to harm another is *not* an exercise of freedom but of slavery. I have used my freedom not for truth and goodness but to harm another person, to break human relationships. If we harm ourselves or others, we contradict the very meaning of our existence as people made in the image and likeness of God. Freedom, rather, is for love, a gift to shape us to love well. How does this happen?

Freedom of self-determination through moral choices. Human freedom, manifest in moral choices, affects us on two different levels, one somewhat superficial (but very significant) and the other more profound. Consider, for example, the choice to pursue medicine as a career. That choice has an immediate and long-term effect on the person who makes it. The immediate effect is that a person has chosen a particular course of studies that will make tremendous demands on her as she prepares for a career in medicine. On a more profound level, however, this woman is making a choice about what type of person she will be, one involved in medicine and the care for others. While the short-term effect of the choice for the study of medicine is the more obvious one, this act is also indicative of freedom working at a deeper level in this person. Presuming that she commits herself to medicine for the best of motives, she will become one who cares for others.

Consider another example. A family decides that they will dedicate one Saturday a month to distributing food at a local soup kitchen. On one level, their decision and action involves perhaps four hours on a Saturday afternoon, once a month. On a deeper level, however, the family is shaping

itself as people who care about the poor and the homeless, who care enough to invest time and energy to assist them.

We could go on and on with still other examples where abuses of freedom also shape a person. If someone finds it easier and easier to lie to protect himself from embarrassment, each lie is a choice in (or, really, abuse of) freedom, yet, at a deeper level, the man is shaping himself as a dishonest person, one who cannot be relied upon to tell the truth.

These examples simply point to the way that human freedom works in our lives. It has a twofold effect in that it brings about the particular choice of the moment (studying medicine, assisting at a soup kitchen, telling a lie) but also shapes our moral character for good or bad (fostering compassion for the suffering sick and for the poor, becoming untrustworthy, and so on). It is because freedom has such a determining influence on the type of people we will become that we must attend very carefully to its use. Unlike all other creatures, we were made in the image and likeness of God. The extent to which we actually mirror God to others is due in no small part to the way that we exercise our freedom in concert with God's grace, where our exercise of freedom should mirror God's freedom in loving as a community of persons within the Trinity and as a generous creative God. Freedom is not primarily about freedom from constraints, but the pursuit of excellence. It is not simply even about doing right and avoiding wrong, but becoming virtuous persons intent upon the good, being conformed to the person of Christ by the power of the Spirit.

2. The Virtuous Life: Gift From God and the Fruit of Freedom for Excellence (1803-1845)

Freedom, then, has as its goal the shaping of a moral character to be like Christ's. The *Catechism* describes the virtuous person as one who "tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete action" (CCC 1803). A virtue itself is described as "an habitual and firm disposition to do the good" (CCC 1803). We might think of the virtuous person as one who longs for the good in all aspects of his or her life and acts so as to achieve it.

A common human experience of longing, a very physical phenomenon, is hunger. Although most of us have not experienced the devastation of life-threatening hunger, we know what it is to feel our stomach growl for food when it has not been satisfied for some time. We know the physical symptoms and the process that ensues once we experience hunger. We search for a way to satisfy it.

The whole of human existence is not unlike the dynamic of hunger and satisfaction of need. Sometimes we get it right; sometimes, however, we get it wrong. Sometimes we hunger for that which is not really good for us; other times we take steps to satisfy legitimate hungers in ways which are not appropriate. We hunger for affection and are satisfied with the touch of a loved one. We hunger for affirmation and are heartened by public recognition for a job well done. We hunger for justice and petition our political representatives to take steps to right wrongs. We might also hunger for vengeance against someone who has wronged us. We sometimes hunger for a sense of superiority over others by fostering unwarranted biases and untruths about people. We could hunger for power over others and manipulate situations to achieve it.

There is a constant movement back and forth from experiencing our human need and responding to that need in ways to meet it. The hungers are of the heart and of the head, they are emotional and intellectual. The virtuous person's hungers are on target, longing for those things which will be truly beneficial to the person in relationship. So, too, are the actions which the virtuous person chooses to satisfy the hunger. In other words, the virtuous person is the one whose feeling and thinking "tend

toward the good" and move one toward right willing and choosing in concrete actions. At the same time, right actions (or wrong actions) reinforce good (or bad) dispositions in the person.

We will say a few words about how concrete moral actions tend toward the good and then highlight seven virtues which the Roman Catholic Tradition has emphasized as particularly critical for the virtuous person. Within that Tradition, the Scriptures themselves, instruct us on the virtues. Virtuous actions flow from virtuous persons, and virtuous persons are formed by virtuous actions. There is an ongoing process of reciprocal reinforcement between our character and our actions. Virtues make living the moral life "easier."

CONTEXT FOR THE EXERCISE OF FREEDOM:
RIGHTLY ORDERED FEELING, THINKING, AND WILLING/CHOOSING

A free response in the moral life is not a simple process. It involves the interplay of feeling, thinking, and willing or choosing. Some might suggest that the only important thing is that persons do the right thing; that they choose to do what is right. This is important, of course, but right feeling and right thinking behind a moral choice render it more completely good, reflecting and reinforcing the goodness of the person. Perhaps an example can help us to understand the process at work in the exercise of freedom, particularly this interplay among feeling, thinking, and choosing.

Let us suppose that your state has a referendum to employ the death penalty as a legitimate means of punishing criminals convicted of grave acts. The proponents of the death penalty have spent considerable time and money researching the most horrific murder cases in the state in recent years to arouse the sympathy of the voters and to move them to favor the death penalty. One case involves the cold-blooded murder of a police officer by a drug dealer in the midst of a police sting operation. The murdered officer left behind a wife and two children under the age of five. Proponents of the death penalty believe that justice demands that the condemned murderer should lose his life. Opponents have argued that there is no reason to justify taking someone's life, no matter how terrible his deeds have been. How one responds to this situation on election day is clearly a moral choice and will involve right feeling, right thinking, and, finally right choosing.

When feeling, thinking, and choosing are rightly ordered, freedom is exercised well. What do we mean by well-ordered feeling, thinking, and choosing? Expanding on Pope John Paul II's statement quoted earlier, we can say that these actions are well ordered and freedom is rightly used when they contribute to a person's authentic human good. That is, one's exercise of freedom indicates that one's feeling, thinking, and choosing are in conformity with one's true good "and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person toward" the ultimate end who is God. This freedom is freedom for excellence, for virtue. Let us take a moment to examine each of these: right feeling, right thinking, and right choosing or willing, in light of the example of the murder case outlined above and the death penalty as a response.

Right feeling: Conventional wisdom tells us that feelings, emotions, or passion are neither right nor wrong; they simply are. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that the passions are neither good nor bad, pleasurable nor hurtful, in themselves. They become so to the extent that they affect a person's reason and will and move that person toward action (CCC 1767). More commonly stated, emotions are not good or evil; it depends on what we do with them. Accepting the legitimacy of this statement, we might wonder whether or not what we feel is significant at all? Does this question mean that our emotions do not merit attention? Certainly not. Emotions play a critical role in moral choice, even if they have not always received the proper attention in moral theological reflection.

Love, desire, joy: How are the emotions at work in the moral life? Saint Thomas Aquinas said that three principal emotions, and their opposites, are evident in the exercise of freedom: love, desire, and joy. Love, he said, is the emotion which recognizes something as good, as lovable, potentially satisfying a human hunger. Desire is the emotion which moves us toward the good. Finally, we feel joy once the love is ours. For example, we may be attracted to someone (love), pursue them in friendship (desire), and delight in being with them (joy). We experience the opposites, hatred, aversion, and sadness, as well. Upon hearing the story of the murder of the police officer, we rightly would hate or abhor the act of murder, and avoid doing it, but experience sadness if and when it does occur. These emotions, we could say, are rightly ordered, loving what is truly lovable and hating what destroys love.

Disordered emotions or feelings: However, as our common human experience tells us, the emotions are not always properly ordered. At times, we love what is not right and good, and we hate that which should be loved. In the example that we have used, the criminal appears to have "loved," in a sense, taking the life of the officer because it is something that he, apparently, freely chose to do and saw as good, given his circumstances. Following the criterion that emotions are rightly ordered when they contribute to a person's authentic human good, we can reasonably say that the murderer's emotions were not ordered properly and moved him to an action that was fatal for a police officer and devastating for his family, to say nothing of the harm done to the criminal himself.

It is perhaps easier to understand and to evaluate the emotions of the convicted killer than our own. It seems perfectly clear that his loves, desires, and joys were disordered. What of ours, however? How do we account for the two positions on the death penalty? (Realize that we do not intend a thorough treatment of the death-penalty issue here but only use it as an example.)

Feelings and capital punishment: If we examine our own responses to the terrible murder outlined in the example, we can presume that both proponents and opponents of the death penalty experienced anger at the murder of the police officer. So, their emotional response to the killing was one of hatred, a rightly ordered response, hating that which is harmful to the authentic human good of another. What other emotions might be at work, however? What other hungers might be named in light of what we are feeling? Might there be anger and hatred not only for the act of murder but toward the murderer as well? Do our emotions of anger and hatred move from the act to the one who committed it, leading us to desire harm to the murderer himself, just as he inflicted harm on the police officer? Might there be fear that the murderer will get out of prison and kill someone else? In some cases where convicted murderers have been executed, it has not been uncommon to hear people express joy at the death of the criminal. "He got what he deserved," they might say. They appear happy to see the murderer dead.

As difficult as it may be to accept, according to the Roman Catholic Tradition, some of these emotions and hungers are properly ordered and some are not. The response of anger and hatred toward the act of murder is most appropriate precisely because the life of someone has been taken. However, the feeling of hatred toward the one who perpetrated the crime and a desire for his demise are disordered emotional responses—as understandable as they may be, humanly speaking. Accompanying them is a desire to harm another person. Thus, to act on those emotions either through violent personal acts on the murderer or through state-sponsored taking of life is a misuse of freedom. The only time that the Church in its teaching sees capital punishment justified is in cases where the state can no longer protect itself from a violent criminal (CCC2267). Pope John Paul II spoke to this subject when he visited the United States in 1999. He said:

The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone

who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitely denying criminals the chance to reform *see also, *Evangelium Vitae*, 27). I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary (John Paul II, "Homily in the Trans World Dome," *Origins* 28/34 [February 11, 1999]:660-601).

The same pope who summarized the purpose of life as giving and receiving love also reminds us of that vocation at the more difficult and heart-wrenching moments of our lives. As understandable as some emotions may be, they must always be examined in light of our call to give and receive love.

If our emotions were always and unquestionably directed toward giving and receiving love, we would have no need for further reflection on our moral action. There would be a simple movement from love to desire to joy, and from feeling to thinking to choosing. However, as the issue of capital punishment points out, as well as many other more ordinary examples from our daily lives, our emotions are not always properly ordered, and they must be evaluated in light of our understanding of who we are called to be as people made in the image of a Triune God revealed to us in Jesus, who is the Truth. It is through the use of our intellect that we attempt to grasp truth and to evaluate the rightness or wrongness of our emotional response to a particular situation.

Right thinking: The function of the intellect is to make certain that freedom is used to promote authentic human good. Remembering that authentic human good requires fostering right relationships between the moral agent and God, others, self, and Creation, right thinking ensures that these relationships are built up and not torn down. However, just as the emotions may be rightly or wrongly ordered, so too may one's thinking misfire in critical areas of moral reflection. Once again, when thinking is properly ordered, human life flourishes; when it is not, authentic human good is endangered.

In the example we have given of support for capital punishment, many ways exist to evaluate this action as a punitive measure for criminals. Many arguments may seem convincing. Some propose simply that justice demands a life for a life; there are no other ways to reason on the matter. In this case, thinking moves one to a particular concept of justice in which one life may be taken as a punishment for taking another's life. There are biblical foundations for this position in the Old Testament, yet the Church's developing moral teaching has moved away from this scriptural basis for capital punishment. Sometimes people argue that capital punishment serves as a deterrent for future crimes. Criminals will not pursue evil deeds, they claim, because they do not wish to die. In this case, the death of one person becomes a means to achieve the end of warning others of their fate should they commit the same crime. Others acknowledge that although capital punishment has not, in fact, proven to be a deterrent to future crime, it certainly prevents the executed criminal from future violence. Here, the death of the convicted murderer is used to protect the common good against future attacks, should the convict ever be released from prison.

Although each of these arguments may seem reasonable to some, they are flawed in their thinking process because they take for granted some premises which Catholic Church teaching opposes precisely because of its impact on the human person. We are stewards of human life, not its masters. Even though the Church itself has had a mixed teaching on capital punishment and still allows for it in theory, current Church teaching, expounded most clearly by Pope John Paul II, argues that there are practically no situations in contemporary society to justify capital punishment. We have neither the right to take life out of a certain sense of justice nor to kill one person to serve as a word of caution to others. We cannot make the life of one person a means to achieve a perceived greater end. These opposing arguments to the reasons justifying capital punishment must inform all other thinking and feeling.

In light of this example, there is also a conclusion about the function of right thinking in regard to the emotions. Emotions must be evaluated by right thinking. Feelings are spontaneous and not morally good or evil in themselves (CCC 1767). However, because of the impact that they have on people's lives, a judgment must be made as to their legitimacy. Should I feel hatred for this criminal? Should I want his death? The intellect must intervene, suggesting that while anger is a most appropriate emotional response to the murder of someone, hatred for the murderer, while humanly speaking understandable, is not right feeling and could move persons away from rather than toward the good.

We could give many other examples, such as racism, where disordered thinking and feeling can lead to actions that attack authentic human good. Wrong thinking strengthens wrong feeling and vice versa.

On the other hand, right feeling and thinking tend toward the good and promote actions which guarantee or at least dispose one toward fuller humanity, toward the virtuous life. Disordered feeling and thinking move one to reason toward courses of action that present obstacles to human flourishing, either in part or completely.

Right willing/choosing: Following closely on what we have said of right feeling and right thinking, right willing or choosing is summed up precisely in Pope John Paul II's statement that "acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are *in conformity with man's true good"* (*The Splendor of Truth*, 72). The evaluation of moral action, just as was the evaluation of the hungers expressed in our feeling and thinking, is to be made in light of this criterion stated by Pope John Paul II.

We mentioned earlier that there are times when we hunger for the wrong things and make choices to satisfy that disordered longing. The moral choices of the convicted murderer in the case above are examples of disordered longings. At other times, however, we may long for something that is appropriate, such as justice, but might choose the wrong means to achieve it. The Church teaches that capital punishment is such a choice. Right willing and choosing humanize us and all our relationships. Wrong willing and choosing hamper our growth in maturity and goodness.

ARTICULAR VIRTUES TENDING TOWARD THE GOOD: HUMAN (MORAL) AND THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

What we have outlined above is right-ordered feeling, thinking, and choosing as demonstrated in a particular act of voting for or against capital punishment. The ideally good moral act will embody all three aspects. What distinguishes virtue in the moral life, however, as the definition of virtue proposed earlier suggests, is an ongoing disposition toward the good. That disposition which is evident in a single act becomes habitual in a person's life. Right feeling, right thinking, and right choosing are not sporadic but persistent and even predictable.

We are all too familiar with "bad habits" of overdrinking, overeating, or smoking. We call them habits precisely because they are patterns of behavior in a person's life. We would not be inclined to call them virtuous, however, because as such they do not "tend toward the good." In fact, they are harmful to individuals, so we name them vices. The traditional seven deadly sins of pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth are seen more as vices than as individual sinful acts (CCC 1866).

Virtues, on the other hand, nurtured as skills for living a life of love in union with God, who is love, are dimensions of one's moral character that make the perception of what is good easier. They are not merit badges which we wear to prove our goodness to others. Rather, they are the dispositions, demonstrated in action, which shape us as the people whom God has created us to be. Saint Thomas said, in fact, that virtues dispose one toward the good readily, easily, and delightfully. So virtuous

The Church holds that some actions are always and everywhere wrong because they "radically contradict the good of the person made in [God's] image" (*The Splendor of Truth,* 80). Some examples cited in *The Splendor of Truth* are "homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia . . . slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children" (80).

The circumstances (CCC 1754): The circumstances are "secondary elements" that enhance the goodness of an action or its evil character. Circumstances cannot make an evil action good. In our example, we come face to face with someone in need. What circumstances influence our moral response? We might ask ourselves whether it is best to give cash to someone on the street and whether we have the cash to give. We might wonder if we are the second or tenth person to be approached by the man. We might ponder the value of a short-term solution to a larger social problem. Many other factors could be at work, but none seems to indicate that giving money to the man would be harmful to him or to us.

The intention (CCC 1752-1753): Intention focuses on why we act and what we hope to accomplish. The intention, or often intentions, must be evaluated in light of authentic human good. We presume that money is given to the man because we care for his well-being. In this case, our action tends toward the good. The whole virtuous character of our action changes, however, if we give money to the man simply to draw attention to ourselves as a charitable person. We might see friends walking along the street and want to impress them with our charity. In such a case, even though the man benefits from our action, the goodness of the act itself is missing because of our faulty intention. The intention most clearly reveals what is in the heart of the moral agent.

Throughout our discussions, we will be reminded again and again of these components of the moral act: object, intention, and circumstances. The virtue of the moral agent and the goodness of a moral act will be evident in all three elements.

3. Conclusion

We have examined the human response to the God who first loved us. We noted that the uniqueness of the human response lies in the gift of freedom and awareness, the freedom to respond to God, to shape our own lives in community in the image of God, to shape our own lives in community in the image of God. The human response is on target when marked by feeling, thinking, and choosing which moves one to action and fosters authentic human good.

Of particular importance in our development as moral persons are the virtues. The human or moral virtues make our tending toward the good easier and shape us as moral persons whose good behavior is both predictable and dependable. The theological virtues facilitate our relationship with God through lives of faith, hope, and charity. They encourage the proper use of freedom. Human freedom, says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, enables us to direct our lives toward truth and goodness and so mature as God's children. It is used responsibly when it directs us toward God who is our true happiness (CCC 1731). The virtuous person uses freedom for virtuous acts. We examined the components of the moral act, noting that the goodness of the act must be present in all three elements. The responsible use of freedom is manifest particularly by a life of virtue where one tends toward the good readily, easily, and delightfully. In doing so, one responds to Love in love.

++++

Source: Kevin J. O'Neil and Peter Black, "Responding to Love in Love" in *The Essential Moral Handbook: A Guide to Catholic Living* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2006), 23-55.