



THE DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE  
**Office of Human Life,  
Family and Bioethics**



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## *A Bit of Bioethics*

### ON JUDGING, JUDGEMENTALISM AND FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP

#### JUDGING

Up to this point we have established that conscience is a rational judgment that determines an act to be right or wrong. For a human act to be right, and not wrong, the act itself, its purpose and the circumstances must *all* be morally good.<sup>1</sup> By using our reason and intellect, ordered towards God, we can know what is morally good and ought to behave in that way.

The Catechism is very clear:

The dignity of the human person implies and requires *uprightness of moral conscience*. Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstance by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the *prudent judgment* of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, many are reluctant to “judge.” To be certain, we must first ensure our consciences are formed properly, such that we know what is morally good and what is evil. To apply that knowledge constitutes judgment: we judge the moral goodness of the object of the human act (the action), its end (the intent) and the circumstances. We must judge what is good and what is not, so that we know what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. Hopefully we do this all the time before we act. And just as hopefully, when we fail to do the good we ought, we do an examination of conscience, judge those acts which were sinful, confess them, and with a contrite heart, resolve to avoid them in the future. We cannot escape this fact: *we must judge*, for we cannot know what is good and what is not if we don’t judge.

It is very common, though, for one to hear the words, “Who’s to judge?” or “I don’t want to interfere” when we talk about the human acts of others that we know objectively are opposed to God’s will. It is true that one cannot know the intention in another’s soul or the circumstances influencing another’s

<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church with modifications from the Editio Typica*, 2nd edition Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1997, 1755.

<sup>2</sup> *Catholic Catechism*, 1780.

commission of a sinful human act. But the object of the act itself (what we do), if it is evil, cannot be made good by these aspects which we cannot know completely (or maybe at all); if an action is wrong, it is wrong. To know a human act is wrong means we have to have judged the moral quality of the human act—because we should judge what is good and what is not. Indeed, it is clear that there is a Christian duty, bound in charity not only to identify that which is not good (i.e. an evil act) but also to correct the person committing this sin, “charity demands beneficence and fraternal correction.”<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, some say “I will not judge!” But we do, all the time. We make judgments with which others may reasonably agree or disagree (this is too long, that is too far, etc.) and there are judgments for issues that leave no room for differences in opinion. For example, if you are exiting the grocery store and find a thief breaking into your car, reaching in for some valuables, you do not stand non-judgmentally watching his labors. No, you judge this act as unjust and you call the police. If your daughter is texting while driving into a busy intersection, you do not sit non-judgmentally in the passenger’s seat. No, you judge this act as irresponsible and dangerous and you say something (I will leave that to the reader’s imagination!) to get her attention back where it belongs on the road. In these examples, judging seems natural and necessary.

But there are some acts for which judging, while just as necessary, is not so comfortable. First, the act may not result in direct and/or imminent physical danger, even though the long-term or spiritual harm may be overwhelming and grave. Sometimes we are reluctant to judge an act because we fear rejection, alienation or some other deterioration in a relationship we value—it’s “too close to home.” Finally, the acts we are most uncomfortable with judging (and those we most have a duty to correct) are those sinful acts which involve intrinsic evils that society condones (such as abortion, contraception, fornication, same-sex marriage, etc.). If we really love someone, we do not want her to drive into that busy intersection—and so we rebuke, even forcefully, if necessary. But why do we so passively accept the possibility of a spiritual catastrophe?

None of these reasons is sufficient to neglect a duty to love others and direct them away from grave sin, for we are “our brother’s keeper.”<sup>4</sup> However, the effort to correct a moral evil must be conducted with mercy and charity (that includes discerning what warrants correction, when it is one’s role to admonish, and how to charitably intervene). In fact, Jesus taught “If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone...” and if this fails, one should resort successively to the witness and aid of a few others, the assembly and then the church before separating from him who will not repent. (The New American Bible, Matthew 18:15-17)

At the same time, it is imperative that we address first and foremost our own planks, and not just the splinters of others. (Matthew 7:3-5) “Brothers, even if a person is caught in some transgression, you who are spiritual should correct that one in a gentle spirit, looking to yourself, so that you also may not be tempted.” (Galatians 6:1)

## JUDGMENTALISM (WHAT JUDGING IS NOT)

So, we can and should judge a human act as morally good or evil when we have sufficient information about a situation. We should not judge rashly or excessively harshly, “...but judge justly.” (John 7:24) We should not make a habit of examining others’ sins before our own. Moreover, because we are not guilty

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<sup>3</sup> *Catholic Catechism*, 1829.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical on The Gospel of Life *Evangelium vitae* (March 25, 1995) §19. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html)

of a particular sin does not denote superiority—usually there are other sins that more than compensate our piety in one area—and so we should be honest, fair and humble in recognizing our own shortcomings and sinfulness. To do otherwise, earns the label “judgmentalism.”

It must be made clear that *although we are obligated to judge sinful acts, we can never judge the human person, the state of his soul, for that judgement is God's alone* as He knows everything including the full intent or circumstances leading one to act in a sinful manner. And so, we must reserve our judgment to the morality of the human act, not the sinfulness of a person.<sup>5</sup>

In short, judging is not the same as being judgmental, but if we are not careful, we can be judgmental even while exercising our duty to judge rightly.

## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

In a time when the intrinsic evils of abortion, infanticide, contraception, euthanasia and assisted suicide, same-sex marriage, etc. are accepted, promoted, and lauded as both cultural and institutional so-called progress for human freedom, we must be on guard. This requires us to be informed in the Faith, strong in our convictions, and courageous in identifying and correcting what is not ordered towards God and our ultimate fulfillment of heavenly eternity.


In a short time, we will be called to exercise our civic duty to elect representatives of political office who will determine the future of our local communities, our state and our nation through the policies and programs they will implement. In this, we must look critically, with the eye of our Catholic Faith, not at names or party affiliations, but on the promises they make to promote goodness and overcome shortcomings in the laws and policies that will determine our future direction. We must judge justly with a special emphasis on protecting the most vulnerable among us—our brothers and sisters, who are unborn, debilitated or in the last stages of this life. In the words of St. John Paul II, “A society will be judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members; and among the most vulnerable are surely the unborn and the dying.”<sup>6</sup>

It is important to review in more detail the concept of prudential judgment and binding moral principles especially with regard to sensitive social issues, but we will take that up next month. For now, let us not forget: “The Christian calling is heavenward in direction but earthly in its temporal enactment.”<sup>7</sup>

Let us pray without ceasing to be examples of genuine charity: just, merciful and humble.

God bless you,

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<sup>5</sup> Take for instance a young woman who has an abortion. Even though we will not know the full and likely misguided intent underlying her decision (does she really believe it is not a unique human person that shares half her genetic code, or that it is better to spare the child from a life of suffering, etc.?) or the circumstances of the human act (e.g. undue pressure from her parents or the child's father), we know objectively that procured direct abortion is an intrinsic evil because it unjustly deprives an innocent human being of its fundamental right to live. There is no debate that the deliberate act of abortion is evil, regardless of intent or circumstances. However, we cannot judge the young woman's soul. She has committed a grave sin in procuring the abortion, but if we don't identify it as a sin (and a very grave one at that), how we can counsel her to recognize this condition, correct her misunderstanding, and direct her to the necessary remedies found in God's infinite mercy? To keep quiet for the sake of “friendship” or pseudo-charity, is to deny her the opportunity to a conversion of heart necessary for eternal fulfillment.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, Address to a new ambassador of New Zealand to the Holy See, (May 25, 2000) [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2000/apr-jun/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20000525\\_ambassador-new-zealand.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2000/apr-jun/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20000525_ambassador-new-zealand.html)

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Fisher, *Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34.

