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OUR MORAL LIFE IN CHRIST

COLLEGE EDITION

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Chapter 1

The Basis for Morality

Imagine an athlete who participates regularly in sporting events—a football player, for example. He and his teammates want to win every game, and their ultimate goal is to win a championship. To reach that goal requires that he and every other player on his team perform to the very best of their ability.

In order to perform at the highest level, each player must prepare himself well and do what is expected of him. He studies the team's playbook in great detail, so that he knows every formation and what he is supposed to do on every single play. He goes out with his team and practices these plays many times until executing them becomes almost second nature. He works out regularly to build his strength and improve his endurance, so he will not tire as easily. He knows the rules of the game and strives to remain disciplined enough to avoid being penalized for breaking those rules. He and his teammates work at how to use time well so that the clock does not run out at the end of the game while they are still behind in the score. He keeps his eyes always focused on the prize.

The life of a Christian is a lot like that—at least it ought to be. To live in this world the way Christ taught us takes preparation. We need to study our “playbooks”—the Bible and the teachings of the Church—to learn what Jesus expects of us. If we want to become stronger, with the indispensable help of God's grace, we must “work out” our faith regularly through prayer, the sacraments, growth in virtue, and service to others. To avoid being penalized, we need to learn the rules Christ asks us to live by, and we must discipline ourselves accordingly with self-control. With the indispensable help of God's grace, we must use our time well and keep our eyes focused always on the ultimate prize—eternal life and happiness in Heaven.

Christ became man, suffered, died, and rose again from the dead so that we might enjoy eternal life with God. His sacrifice on our behalf saves us from the power of sin and death that is reflected in the perils that arise from using our God-given free will in making wrong moral choices and thereby acting sinfully. Rather than abandon us to our

sinful tendencies, Christ invites us—every one of us—to share in his life, both in this world and the next.

To accept his invitation requires not only that we have faith, but also that we live according to that faith by using our free will to make good moral decisions. We must, in other words, live our moral life in Christ.

The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace...

Indeed we also work, but we are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us. It has gone before us so that we may be healed, and follows us so that once healed, we may be given life; it goes before us so that we may be called, and follows us so that we may be glorified; it goes before us so that we may live devoutly, and follows us so that we may always live with God: for without him we can do nothing.¹ (CCC 2001)

FOR DISCUSSION

- What would happen if you played a game that had no rules in which everyone could make up his or her own rules?
- What does it mean to “share in the life of Christ”?
- Did Jesus indicate how his followers should live?
- Who is harmed if we do not always do our best and “follow the rules”? Ourselves? Others?
- What is the connection between freedom and living a moral life in Christ?

INTRODUCTION

Morality refers to the standards by which we judge actions to be good or evil. *Moral law* refers to the standards of human behavior that were established by God and are taught by the Catholic Church.

In recent decades, there has been heated controversy over how to define certain standards of behavior for society as they relate to a number of disputed issues. Those who support a “woman’s right to abortion,” for example, have clashed frequently with those who believe the unborn child has a “right to life.” The strong tensions and lively discussions that result are indications that while most people