

Developing a moral perspective

By Fr. Kenneth Himes, OFM
Catholic News Service

Every day we face moral issues and make decisions. There are the large and obvious ones that appear as headlines in newspapers -- war, stem cell research, refugees, homelessness. There are also the less dramatic but still significant choices we make about raising our children, being loyal to friends, doing good work, speaking truthfully and similar sorts of daily decisions involving moral values.

We act the way we do more because of character than due to some set of abstract principles to be applied to a situation. By character I mean the kind of person one is, the inner life of motives, attitudes, virtues and vices. When we "size one another up" or "take the measure of a person," when we say we want to see "what someone is made of," we are addressing the character issue.

If character is so important, we must be concerned with how we acquire it. Like faith, character is caught as much as it is taught. Character develops over time and is the gradual formation of habitual ways of seeing, thinking, valuing and acting.

Without question, the most powerful influence on character is example. We become people of good character by being in the presence of people with good character. We have all met folks who inspire us in some way; we look at them and think, "I'd like to be like that." We find ourselves using such people as models; we try to act as we think they would.

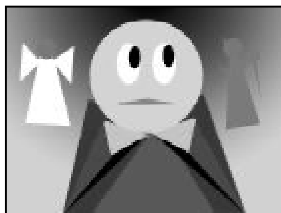
We live our lives over the long haul, and we struggle to do the right thing in many little moments and the occasional major event. There are opportunities in life, every day actually, in which one chooses to become this kind of person and not that kind. Each day is an exercise in shaping our character through personal choice.

That leads to the second kind of decision making, choosing what to do as well as who to be. This is the realm of moral decision making that we call discernment. It is the ability to see rightly, understand what is at stake and know which choice best reflects our commitments and values.

I suggest there are four elements that should play a part in a good discernment process.

1. Assess the situation honestly.

We must always ask, What is going on? A person must seek to understand the elements of the situation in which he or she is deciding. What are the values at stake in this decision? Who is



"Every day we face moral issues and make decisions."

CNS illustration/Emily Thompson

affected by it? Why am I going to do what I do, what are my motives?

Given my decision, what are the likely consequences? Are there alternatives to the choice I am considering? Why do I prefer this option to others?

Trying our best to answer these questions will lead us to clarify our values, understand our motivations and weigh the best means of achieving the good we seek.

2. Check the sources of wisdom available.

Consult with people we trust. Do not restrict ourselves to those who usually agree with us. Search out the person who will ask hard questions and not simply tell us what we want to hear. See if there is clear teaching available from our religious community.

3. Bring our decision to prayer.

Can we stand before God and be at peace with our choice? Have we asked God for strength to do the right thing? Have we prayed that we may love only the good and not allow ourselves to develop a passion for some lesser value?

4. Seek confirmation of our decision.

Another exercise is to consider the possibility that you will be asked to defend your decision in public before strangers. Could you give reasons that would be persuasive to them? Are you comfortable that if your decision were widely publicized you could face others without regret or embarrassment?

In the moral life there are useful processes to follow in forming conscience and making moral decisions, but we cannot expect that like some computer program all we need do is hit the right keys and the answer will pop up on our screen.

There is no guarantee that having tried to inform our conscience the proper answer always will appear to us in clarity. It may be that a morally responsible decision must be made with an awareness that we are not absolutely sure what to do. Nonetheless, we act in good faith knowing that we have done what we could to inform our conscience.

Thus, we can stand before God trusting in his mercy because we have tried to do the right thing

Editor's Note: Franciscan Father Himes chairs the theology department at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA.

When teens raise moral issues

By Sheila Garcia
Catholic News Service

Helping teenagers deal with moral issues can be a daunting task for parents. Still, most parents welcome the opportunity to provide moral guidance. When teenagers raise issues with moral dimensions, how should parents respond?

We try to avoid two extremes: ■ First, teens' questions should open the door to dialogue, not a one-sided lecture. Parental monologues tend quickly to cut off communication and deter teenagers from approaching their parents in the future. ■ Parents may try to sidestep questions they find difficult or embarrassing. But teenagers don't expect flawless answers. I've found that despite less-than-perfect responses to my sons' questions, they remember the essential values I've tried to convey.

Parents often downplay their influence, but when teens raise a moral issue they want and need their parents' guidance. A majority of teens surveyed by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy identified their parents as the most important influence over their sexual decisions. Parents believed their teens' friends were most influential.

Here are ideas to help make discussions about moral issues productive.

First, what is the context for the question? Even more basic, what "is" the question? When teens ask about certain issues, especially sexual ones, parents can leap to the conclusion that they are contemplating some type of risky behavior. Perhaps, though, the question was prompted by a Web site, TV program or an offhand comment at school. A little gentle probing can clarify why the question is being raised.

We might keep in mind the story of Billy, who came home from school one day and asked, "Where did I come from?"

His mother took a deep breath and began to explain human reproduction. When finished, she asked if Billy understood.

Biblical helps for making moral judgments

By Fr. Paul Campbell
Catholic News Service

In order to make moral assessments, we need to realize the importance of truth and know how to experience it. Seeking biblical insights can help.

Jesus defined truth as he stood before Pilate. Jesus said, "I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

His message is so simple, yet, in our lives many voices claim to speak the truth. Unfortunately, often those voices are promoting their self-gain.

All who were involved in the crucifixion acted as if they were pursuing the truth, but in reality they were following selfish motivation: ■ Pilate wanted to alleviate the pressure he felt from the people. ■ Some wanted to silence Jesus for challenging their comfortable way of life. ■ The Romans wanted to do whatever would preserve their domination.

Though times have changed, the act of pushing one's agenda despite the absence of truth still occurs. Print advertisements, for example, may have small print sections that contradict or qualify the claims being made.

We don't even use the word "lie" anymore. Lies have been redefined as miscommunications.

It is tempting to become morally outraged at society over this. Yet moral outrage always seems to be directed outward at people, organizations and even



Kristian Hilber, 17, talks with sister Morgan, 16, near their lockers at C. Milton Wright High School in Bel Air, Md. "When teens raise issues with moral dimensions, how should parents respond?" CNS photo



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"I guess so," he replied. "But Karen's from California. Jason is from Chicago. Where do I come from?"

Second, when discussing church teaching on moral issues, we need to explain the "why" behind it. Many adults know the bottom line, but never were taught the moral reasoning that leads to it.

Teens' questions might intimidate parents but can also prompt them to educate themselves about moral issues. Parents might ask themselves, for

example, if they really understand what it means to respect life from conception to natural death. Web and print resources, such as the new U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults, can boost parents' ability to address complex topics.

Third, parents can help teens apply moral values to real-life situations.

How do moral values relate to the kind of car I drive or how I vote in the next election? Some moral issues, such as the war in Iraq or the death penalty, are complex, and reasonable people may reach different conclusions. When we help teens grapple with difficult issues, we give them tools and experience needed to make prudent judgments later in life.

Fourth, anticipate a skeptical, even negative, response, and allow your teen a chance to raise questions and objections. Parents can become defensive when teens challenge their deep-seated values. Patience, however, is what parents need in order to accept that this is how many teens work through difficult issues.

In discussing moral issues with teenagers, parents try to explain what they believe, why they believe it and what difference it makes in their decision making. This way parents give teens a safe space in which to work out their doubts and questions, while providing the moral guidance they seek.

Editor's Note: Garcia is associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth.

FAITH IN THE MARKETPLACE

Does sacrifice characterize your life?

Selected Responses From Readers:

"My husband and I sacrifice money so I can stay home and be the main caregiver for our children, who are 6 and 4. I've been very blessed to be able to share this time with them before they're both in school and I go back to work."
— Carrie Furka, Stow, Ohio

"My biggest sacrifice is being present — giving my time and being available — for people and family who need to be heard. Sometimes it's not even much time, but people need to be listened to. You have to give people time, and it is so rewarding."
— Doretha Gurry, Marshfield, Mass.

"Being a Grand Knight in the Knights of Columbus is a great involvement. We do a lot of different things for the needy, helping people out. It takes time, but I don't think of it as a real sacrifice."
— Calvin Kenneth Jones, Anchorage, Alaska

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