

A UNIVERSAL NORM OF MORALITY

The second in a series of five addresses on PEACE, THE FRUIT OF JUSTICE, delivered in the Catholic Hour on January 14, 1940, by the Right Reverend Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen of the Catholic University of America.

What would be your answer if someone asked this question: "What is the fundamental cause of the ills of the world at the present time?" Perhaps you will be interested in hearing the answer of the Holy Father, Pius XII: "Before all else, it is certain that the radical and ultimate cause of the evils which We deplore in modern society is the denial and rejection of a universal norm of morality as well for individual and social life as for international relations" (*Summi Pontificatus*, NCWC, p.13).

By a "universal norm of morality" the Holy Father obviously means a standard of morality that has reference to human nature, that is applicable at all times and all places, not one which is grounded on particular interest. Here are three samples of particular judgments which show how far the world has departed from a morality based on conscience and on God: a) The contemporary opposition to Communism. America has suddenly turned against Communism. But why? Because of a universal moral judgment based on the intrinsic wickedness of Communism? Most certainly not! Rather because of a particular judgment: Communism signed a treaty with someone whom most Americans hated, namely Hitler. That is not good sound moral reason. It is like saying: "Murder is all right, but if the murderers ever sits down to share an ice cream soda with a thief he ought to be hanged!" Does Communism begin to be wicked only because it associates with the wicked? Do enemies of civilization begin to be objects of our repudiation only because they join hands with our enemies? Is the bank-robber wrong only because he gave some manganese and iron to the thief who stole my spare tire? If Communism is wrong because it joined with the

breakup of nations? Shall the man who breaks up another home be less blameworthy than he who breaks up another nation? And if we, who claim to believe in God, look upon our vows before Him as scraps of paper, shall those who deny God be held to a more binding morality? Shall we be called the defenders of God when we allow God's law that what He has joined together let no man put asunder, to be violated? Shall pledges made at Geneva be held unbreakable and those made before God breakable? Shall non-aggression pacts alone be sacred in the world and marriage pacts unholy? The point is not that these nations have a right to be unfaithful to their treaties because we are unfaithful to ours, but that *neither of us has the right*.

We must not expect our world to be faithless to God and faithful to men; nor can we wreck fidelity in the bond of man and woman and expect fidelity in the bond of man and man. It is just like expecting a uniform to be saluted when it no longer contains a soldier. We might just as well admit it: if divorces are right, then broken treaties are right. If it is a good thing for the marriage tie to be broken, let us not say that it is bad for international treaties to be broken.

In the past though men did wrong, they admitted there was such a thing as wrong; and therefore they needed to do penance and return to God. "They had then an effective moral sense of the just and of the unjust, of the lawful and of the unlawful, which, by restraining outbreaks of passion, left the way open to an honorable settlement" (*Summi Pontificatus*, NCWC, p.15). But today, men refuse to admit there is anything wrong. Whom do you ever hear today doing penance for his economic injustices or his immorality or his selfishness? The only wrong our modern world admits is social. The sinner today is called the patient or the socially unfit. If a little boy loses his temper and insults his father,

he is not told that he is at fault; our progressive educators would not warp his mind by speaking of wrong—they blame it on his naughty ductless glands. Today nobody is wrong; they are anti-social or have bad tonsils. This makes moral regeneration well nigh impossible; men are blind and no longer want to see; deaf and no longer want to hear. There-in is the difference from the past. As the Holy Father puts it: "In our days . . . dissensions come not only from the surge of rebellious passion, but also from a deep spiritual crisis which has overthrown the sound principles of private and public morality" (*Summi Pontificatus*, NCWC, p.15).

But how restore a universal norm of morality? By a return to conscience! Here are the basic teachings of the Catholic Church on the problem: The foundation of a universal moral judgment is conscience which is a reflection of God's Eternal Reason and Holy Will ordaining us to preserve order in His universe and through it to come to self-perfection in Him which is happiness. Good and evil thus become judged not in terms of *my* interest or *my* pleasure, or those of *our* race, *our* class, or *our* nation, but in terms of the purpose for which we all were made, namely God.

It may be objected: Does not conscience err? Undoubtedly it does because we bring to its judgment all the bias of our emotions, interests, pleasures, and pains. Furthermore, my conscience can be dulled by repeated infractions of God's laws.

The first week one works in a boiler factory, the noise is deafening, but after six months one becomes accustomed to it. So the warnings of conscience can be so often ignored that we reach a point when our judgments are based on what we will for the moment, not what we ought to do for our higher good and the good of our neighbor. Furthermore, I may know what is right and still not do it; I may not know what is right, nor have the strength to do it.

To meet these difficulties inherent in conscience as a universal norm of morality, that is, the inadequacy of my own reason to tell me what is right in all circumstances, and the weakness of my nature to do the right amid difficulties, scorn, and opposition; and likewise to meet the problem of restoring myself to the moral order, to God's favor, when I have violated His Laws, the son of God came down to earth to give us His Truth, His Life, and His Forgiveness.

He did not just tell us what is true. His Person *is* the Truth: "I am . . . the truth" (*John* 14:6). Because the truth is personal, it is lovable.

He did not promise merely to assist us in this world. His Person *is* Our Life: "I am the Life of the World" (*John* 6:33).

He did not tell us to ask God to forgive sins. He *forgave* them because He is God: "Thy sins are forgiven thee" (*Matt.* 9:2).

In this point all Christians who have not lost belief in the Divine are agreed that the Person of Christ is the perfection of the Law of Conscience. But here is where the Catholic penetrates the deeper mystery of Christ, which he believes others miss. The Catholic, while asserting that Christ brought the Truth of God, the Life of God, and the Forgiveness of God to our weak, weary consciences, can not forget that Our Lord communicated that Truth and that Life and that Forgiveness to men "even to the consummation of the world" (*Matt.* 28:20).

His Truth He communicated by sending "the Spirit of truth (who) will teach you all truth" (*John* 16:13) with the guarantee that error or "the gates of hell" would not prevail against His Church (*Matt.* 16:18).

His Life He communicated: "This is my body . . . this is my blood." "Do this for a commemoration of me" (*Matt.* 26:26-28 and *Luke* 22:19-20).

His Forgiveness He communicated: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose *sins* you shall retain, they are retained" (*John 20:22-23*).

Now as a reasonable being, I want to know where that Truth is today? Where is His Divine Life? Where is His forgiveness! He gave it. Who has it?

Was that Divine Truth, the guide of my conscience, spoken to a Galilean breeze and wafted away never to be received again by man? If it is not available for me today then it was not worth bringing to this earth, and certainly not worth dying for. If it is for all men, it must be available for all time. There is only one thing that would ever make me doubt the Divinity of Christ and that is He should give no guarantees to preserve for all generations the unspotted Truth He thought so precious that He died rather than surrender one jot or tittle of it. He never wrote His Divine Truth. He never told anyone to write it down. But He did say He would send it on Pentecost and He did. Where is it now, for me, in this day and hour when ten thousand false prophets would lead me like blind leaders of the blind?

And His Life, the extra strength to do what is right, where is it now? If He made the child to live by its mother, did He not make me to live by His Life? Where is that Bread which is His Body and that life which is His Blood? Has He no power to communicate to me His Life as He gave it to His Apostles? If He cannot project His Life through the centuries, then how does He differ from Caesar or Napoleon or Lincoln? Shall He who rose from the dead in the newness of Life not be the life of my soul at this hour as my soul is the life of my body? If I thought that Christianity was only the memory of someone who lived 1900 years ago and left us only the remnant of his teachings set down forty

years after his death, then I should give it up and seek for another Christ who would keep His promises and be in truth my life and my all.

And His Forgiveness, where is it now? He gives it, and rightly so, for in the 20th century we have as much and maybe more need for absolution than in His day. Shall I who by Divine Providence am detached 1900 years from His physical presence be denied this forgiveness of sins which He gave to broken hearts of His day? I need forgiveness as did Magdalene and the penitent thief. And I want it particularly because He passed on that power of forgiveness. Who has it? Who claims it? Lead me to that truth, as the keeper of my conscience, to that life as its inner strength, to that forgiveness as its restorer to the favor of God.

But there is not a single person listening to me who does not earnestly seek that universal norm of morality which tells us what is right, not when the world is right, but when the world is wrong; which gives us the Divine Bread of Life when we know what is right, and have not the strength to do it; and which forgives us our sins when knowing what is right we did what was wrong.

Where that Truth, that Life, and that Forgiveness are, I shall not tell you, because I do not want you to take my word for it. But I will tell you how to find it. Get down on your knees every day and ask God to lead you to the knowledge of the fulness of His Truth and to give you the strength to follow that Truth when you see it. God will do the rest. Just try it!

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