



# Moral Development and Catholic Conscience Formation

## *Notes for New Catechists and Parents*

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**H**uman development refers to the way in which individuals grow and change over their lifespan. Growth in cognitive understanding, social skills, and self-regulation all have an impact on the moral development and conscience formation of the individual. To be as effective as possible in forming individuals for a life of discipleship, catechists should know about the typical stages of human development.

As catechists, we should understand how individuals grow and change with regard to moral thinking and reasoning if we wish to assist them in forming a Catholic conscience. The way we approach moral catechesis and conscience formation will vary somewhat depending upon the developmental level of the individual.

Preschool and kindergarten children are just beginning to understand the expectations of adults in their lives. They need limits and structure, and guidelines should be supported by positive consequences when behavior is appropriate and logical negative consequences when it is not. This is a wonderful time to teach children that God made them because he loves them, and that he invites them to imitate him in showing love for one another in concrete ways. When the preschool child understands, “God made me,” the next logical questions are, “Why did God make me?” and “Why did God make me the way I am?” During these years, children can learn, for example, that God gave them hands to help others, voices to praise God and to talk with friends and family, and eyes to see God’s beautiful world. Moral catechesis for the really young preschool years should focus on learning to forgive and asking for forgiveness.

In the elementary school years, when children have reached the age of reason, catechists have an excellent opportunity to share the Ten Commandments, presented

on a developmentally appropriate level, to help the child better understand when they are, and are not, doing God’s will. Catechists should explain that the reason God commands us to do some things and avoid other things is that he knows what is good and bad for us and only wants what is good. In light of the New Covenant, the Ten Commandments should be presented in the context of the Great Commandment of Jesus Christ, as all of the Commandments relate to loving God and others. The Beatitudes are also critically important content for moral catechesis, but they are more principles of living than laws, making them somewhat more abstract. For this reason, the child’s understanding of the Beatitudes and their practical application will increase over the course of the elementary years. Children in the early elementary school years may feel some guilt and shame as they become aware of God’s rules and realize they have not always followed them. Catechists might feel tempted to tell them, “God doesn’t expect us to be perfect,” but in fact, Jesus does call us to “be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). A better approach would be a message that simultaneously promotes a positive self-image and continued efforts to be virtuous with God’s help. You can challenge children to think of ways that Jesus was perfect and how they could do those things in their own lives. Use words like the following: “When we sin, we deliberately choose actions that are harmful to our relationship with God, ourselves, and/or others. God is merciful and forgives us when we are truly sorry. Through God’s grace and our cooperation with it, we can strive to heal those wounded relationships and grow in goodness.” Catechists should also help children distinguish between “mistakes” (e.g., “I accidentally bumped into a classmate”) and “sins” (e.g., “I deliberately bumped into a classmate and caused him to



hurt himself"). In learning this distinction, children are developing an age-appropriate moral conscience.

Because elementary school-age children are such concrete thinkers, good and bad choices, or loving and unloving actions, should be presented in terms of concrete examples that apply to their everyday life. Role-play of good choices will further increase understanding and may elicit a greater desire to make good choices.

In the later elementary and middle school years, children are moving into a period of more abstract thought, and they are able to begin internalizing standards of behavior. In other words, they begin to have the capacity to make moral choices not based on what will happen externally but on their inner understanding of right and wrong. This is a critical time for conscience formation, as the standards they internalize will continue to guide them as they grow and mature. A reexamination of the Beatitudes and Commandments, as well as a study of virtues, can be helpful. This is especially effective when learning occurs in the context of identity formation, which is such a critical issue in these years.

God has a unique plan for everyone's life. Each person should do all he or she can to discover and embrace that plan, which is one's personal vocation. Children this age should be prompted to think about what God's plan for them might be and what habits and goals would help bring that plan to fruition. They should also be taught an understanding of "mercy."

In the high school and young adult years, individuals continue this development of identity, and this can be supported by discussions of vocation and behaviors consistent with our state in life and our identity as sons and daughters of God. Teens and young adults sometimes begin to question and struggle with Church teachings, including moral teachings. This struggle can be a natural part of the transition from being Catholic because it was how they were raised, *to being Catholic because it is what they believe*. Reassure them that they are called to be a part of the Church as they seek thorough answers that are built upon universal truths to their questions, which they grapple with as they strive to grow in their faith. Help them see that even their struggle to understand their faith is an important part of growing in faith, and a means to help them hold onto and internalize their Catholic identity.

Finally, and most importantly, a discussion of moral catechesis would not be complete without some mention of the example of the catechist. The *General Directory for Catechesis* speaks of the "solid spirituality and transparent witness of life" that is so vital to this ministry (Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997], no. 156). It is important that all catechists remember that the example they set for others is the most practical and meaningful teaching they provide. An openness to God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit help to ensure faithful teaching not only in word but in action.

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