

Principles of Catholic Morality: How Church teaching can be supported through scientific inquiry

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Introduction

Knowledge of moral theology is essential to understanding the Catholic faith and our relationship with God. Throughout this paper I will provide several examples of how one can address a variety of questions pertaining to moral theology. Providing logical well thought out answers will provide a solid foundation for this understanding. As well, I will provide a detailed explanation of the issues surrounding fornication and cohabitation. The explanation will be substantiated by documented support from the secular scientific community. It will be conclusively demonstrated that the secular scientific world cannot help but recommend, for the sake of people's marriages, that they refrain from fornication and cohabitation. It will be revealed that following the teachings of the Church on chastity and abstinence are the best way to guarantee that a couple will have a happy, fulfilled, long-lasting marriage.

The Basics of Moral Theology

Scriptural Foundation: Sin, Repentance, Forgiveness

Moral theology is not exclusive to the Catholic Church; it is something that in Old Testament times was a key component of Hebrew and Jewish life as well. Beginning with the 10 Commandments through to the 613 Levitical laws, the way people conducted their lives was of great concern to all as it related to God and the community. In the New Testament whether it is in the Gospel or the Epistles, the issue of morality is not avoided either. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus states that if a man

looks at a woman with lust in his heart he has committed adultery with her (Matt 5:28). Later he describes our moral obligation to care for those who are in need, warning that those who don't help the needy will be sent to the eternal fire (Matt 25:31-46). In St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (5:19-21) a list of actions that must not be done is provided:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

A similar list is found in the Book of Revelation (21:8) as well:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.

It would be foolhardy to read these words and not think there is any consequence to one's actions. In fact the whole purpose of Salvation is centered on morality. Jesus is referred to as the Saviour from our sins. If humans were not fallen creatures who were toiling away in sin there would have been no need for a Saviour. St. Paul states that "all have sinned a fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:28). It is

because we are sinners that we need a saviour.¹ It is through baptism that the slate is cleaned; the stain of original sin and personal sin is washed away. However, unlike the common misconception, at our baptism we don't promise to be 'good people'. We promise to reject Satan and all of his evil works. Heaven is not filled with 'good people'; it is filled with sinners who have repented. In the Gospel according to St. Luke, Jesus warns those who don't repent that they will perish (Luke 13:1-5). We see that repentance is the key to salvation. We repent, God forgives, and our relationship is restored.²

Consensual sin is still sin and an offense against God

Sin is typically perceived as problematic if another is unwillingly violated. This is particularly true when it comes to sexual sin. If those involved in the sexual sin are consenting adults, then it is thought that their actions are morally licit. In an attempt to justify one's actions, we often hear statements such as "but we love each other." Scripture speaks clearly however, that even though those who are involved might give consent, the action does not become morally acceptable. For instance, in the Book of Genesis we see Sarai give Abram permission to be with Hagar. Even though he was given permission from his wife, he was still committing adultery (It isn't clear whether he had Hagar's consent or not).³ Even if the sin does not appear to harm one's neighbour it is still sin.

All sin, regardless of its benign appearance, is an offence against God. Just

¹ The biggest issue facing our Church today is that very few actually believe they are sinners. Most think that they are 'good people'.

² Naturally repentance presumes the person is sincerely asking for forgiveness.

³ Considering the battles that continue to this day between Jews and Muslims, I wonder how many Jews wish Abram would have just stayed in his own tent.

because one of my daughters says to the other that it is okay to push her down the stairs, the one who pushes is 'sinning' since she is violating a rule that I have made. She may not be overtly sinning against the sister who agreed to this (although I would argue that she is) but she is most definitely sinning against her father (and mother) who made the rules. It was the very notion that sin was always an offence against God that caused the controversy with Jesus as he would forgive the sins of people who had never sinned directly against him. People would speak amongst themselves saying, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21). This is a clear indication that Jesus is indeed God and that all sin is an offense against him.

Misguided compassion

The presumption amongst many is that to be loving or pastoral one needs to be accepting of all people. It is true that we should be accepting of all people; however this doesn't mean that we are obligated to accept their actions. For instance, people who are living together and are in a sexual relationship, or those involved in same-sex relationships, often feel rejected by the Church when their sexual lifestyle isn't openly accepted. They often cite Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in adultery as an example of the Lord's compassion. His compassion is often mistakenly interpreted as acceptance. While Jesus is truly compassionate towards this woman, he clearly and explicitly judges her actions as sinful and tells her to go and "do not sin again" (John 8:11). As Jesus indicates, being loving does not mean accepting sinful behaviour.

The Role of Conscience in moral decision making

There are those who believe that they must never act against their conscience. This, however, leads to the questions, "Is God God or is our conscience God? The understanding that we must never violate our conscience only applies when we have two or more good things to choose from. Do we help the person who is

stuck on the side of the road, or do we continue on our way to Mass? Do we have more children or not? These are issues that need to be prayerfully considered. These are an example of issues of conscience. It would be an exceedingly rare circumstance where a person must make one of two evil choices. The alternative would always be to make neither choice. As is stated in the Catechism, "we must never do evil so that good may come of it" (CCC 1789). For instance, the use of artificial contraception (referred to as "intrinsically evil" CCC 2370) has often been considered an issue of conscience. Even the Canadian Bishops in the *Winnipeg Statement* (para. 27), a document that was produced shortly after *Humanae Vitae* was published, seemed to suggest this was the case. In an effort to clear up the confusion regarding this, the Canadian Catholic Bishops then published the *Statement on the Formation of Conscience*. In it they clearly state:

41. For a Catholic "to follow one's conscience" is not, then, simply to act as his unguided reason dictates. "To follow one's conscience" and remain a Catholic, one must take into account first and foremost the teaching of the magisterium. When doubt arises due to a conflict of "my" views and those of the magisterium, the presumption of truth lies on the part of the magisterium. "In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul. This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra* (*Lumen Gentium*, #25). And this must be carefully distinguished from the teaching of individual

theologians or individual priests, however intelligent or persuasive.⁴

The last line of this is particularly important as there are priests who, in an attempt to be loving and pastoral, will say that certain things, such as contraception, are an issue of conscience.

The Unchanging Church

One of the greatest complaints that people have with the Church is that it needs to 'get up with the times'. There is this notion that the Church is stuck in the Dark Ages and not in tune with the needs of the world. Is the Catholic Church stuck in the Dark Ages? Should the Catholic Church, like most Protestant Denominations, change her moral teachings to suit the people? When trying to determine the truth of a situation, it is always good to turn to Scripture to see if there is a precedent set that can be followed. Dissenters say the Church should more freely allow divorce and remarriage. The New Testament deals very explicitly with this issue. In chapter 10 of St. Mark's Gospel, Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees about divorce. They say that Moses allowed them to write a certificate of divorce to end their marriages and they wanted to know what Jesus thought of this. Now Jesus could have recognized the signs of the times and realized that to be 'up with the times' he would have to agree with Moses. However, he does not. Instead he states that the only reason that Moses made the concession was because of the hardness of their hearts and that it was not intended to be this way. Rather than 'getting up with the times,' Jesus then refers to the

⁴ During a marriage preparation course my wife and I were teaching, we explained, in detail, the Church's teaching on contraception. Later that day the participants had a Q&A with a priest. A person asked him about contraception and his reply was, "as long as it doesn't cause an abortion, I guess it's okay." The validity of anything we said prior or after was completely undermined by this comment by the priest.

beginning of time. He refers to the way marriage was intended to be as it was designed with the first man and first woman.⁵ Citing the book of Genesis, Jesus reaffirms the intended standard for marriage as he says, ““For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate”” (Mark 10:7-10). For the Church to ‘get up with the times’ doesn’t mean, that Church moral teaching must ebb and flow with the politically correct appetites of the day. Indeed, the Church is progressive and will adjust her teachings if a significant revelation (even scientific revelation) is made in a particular area of morality. An example of the Church getting up with the times in regards to moral issues can be found with the teaching on abortion. The Church initially thought life began at quickening. However, when science determined that life began at the moment of conception, the Church acceded to the teachings of science and amended her teaching on abortion, with life now considered sacred from the moment of conception. When it is appropriate, the Church is most willing to ‘get up with the times’.

Fornication and Cohabitation

In the Scripture passages from Galatians and Revelations, one of the sins included on both lists was fornication. Despite the fact that Scripture is painfully clear on the topic of sexual intimacy outside of marriage, people seem to struggle with this particular moral teaching. We seem to need justification behind the rule before the rule is even considered. In the classroom, students often wonder what the issue is with sex outside of marriage. Saying that it is wrong because the Bible/Church says it is wrong will have minimal effect on the students. However, if the issue can be explained from a scientific perspective students will be

⁵ The Genesis story might even provide a precedent for arranged marriages...it isn’t like Adam had a choice.

more inclined to listen. Aside from the obvious issues such as Sexually Transmitted Infections and unwanted pregnancy⁶ there is another very compelling reason, supported by scientific research, to wait until marriage for sexual intimacy.

The ‘Logic’ of Cohabitation

The rates of cohabitation before marriage have risen dramatically throughout North America. Susan Brown et al (2006 p. 455) suggests that the number of cohabitating couples has risen from 500,000 in 1970 to 5 million in 2000. On the surface, cohabitation appears to be the responsible precursor to marriage. Logic would tell us that those who ‘test drive the car before they buy’ will be happier with their purchase than those who don’t. Despite the apparent logic in this argument, the exact opposite seems to be the case. This is known as the cohabitation effect. The cohabitation effect refers to the phenomenon in which those who do live together before they get married actually have a lower rate of marital happiness and higher rate of marital instability than those who do not live together prior to marriage. Citing six different sources, Brown states that “the evidence is remarkably consistent that premarital cohabitation is associated with poorer marital quality and higher levels of marital instability and divorce” (p. 455). The reason cohabitating couples give for living together is to “test the relationship’s viability for marriage” (p. 455). One would think that by living together, couples would develop the communication skills necessary to overcome significant issues within their relationships, however, “premarital cohabitation is positively related to marital disagreement, conflict and instability as well as negatively associated with marital interaction, satisfaction, communication, and commitment” (p. 456). It is reasonable to wonder whether there is any

⁶ There are no accidental pregnancies. Sexual intimacy is intended for procreation. The accident is not getting pregnant.

benefit to living together at all. Brown cites four sources that pertain to marital happiness and cohabitation. Two of the sources have a “negative association” between marital happiness and cohabitation. The other two sources demonstrate no association between marital happiness and cohabitation. In short, there doesn’t seem to be any evidence connecting cohabitation with happy, fulfilled marriages.

Brown also looked at the impact of cohabitation on marriages between those who view marriage as a covenant and those who did not. Cohabitation seemed to have little effect on those who did not view marriage as a covenant. Roughly 20% of the non-covenant couples divorced regardless of whether or not they lived together prior to marriage. Of the covenantal couples who cohabited, like the previous group, 20% divorced. The marital covenant didn’t seem to have a significant impact on them. On the other hand, of the covenantal couples who didn’t cohabit less than 10% got divorced. This isn’t a surprise since of the covenantal couples who cohabited reports of marital instability were “more than twice as high as those who did not cohabit” (p. 461). Of the covenantal wives who did not cohabit the reports of marital happiness were much higher than those who did (p. 461).

Brown wasn’t the only one to find this connection between cohabitation and weaker marriages. Jay Teachman (2003), also noted that, “marriages preceded by a spell of cohabitation are as much as 50% more likely to end in divorce at any marital duration than marriages not preceded by cohabitation” (p. 444). He also alludes to the less researched area that suggests that “premarital intercourse is associated with an increased risk of marital disruption (p. 444).⁷ In his research, Teachman

⁷ By the end it will be apparent that sexual activity prior to marriage, particularly with multiple partners (serial monogamy) is the greater cause of the cohabitation effect rather than actually having the

looks at not only cohabitation but premarital sexual activity. His findings suggest that “women who cohabit prior to marriage or who have premarital sex have an increased likelihood of marital disruption” (p. 453). However, he does note that women whose “intimate premarital relations are limited to their husbands...do not experience an increased risk of divorce” (p. 453). Teachman continues, stating that “it is only women who have more than one intimate premarital relationship who have an elevated risk of marital disruption...having at least one other intimate relationship prior to marriage is linked to an increased risk of divorce (from 53% to 166%)” (p. 453).

Despite the argument that couples get to know one another better when they live together before marriage, somehow this knowledge doesn’t translate into better communication skills. Cohan & Kleinbaum (2002), found that “premarital cohabitation was related to poorer marital communication” (p. 189). In fact they found that, “couples with single and multiple cohabitation experiences displayed poorer communication skills compared to couples with no premarital cohabitation...” (p. 189). It will become apparent later in this essay just how tragic this will be for cohabiting couples.

Just as not every person who drives while impaired or drives in excess of the speed limit will get into an accident, not every couple who lives together before they get married will get divorced. However, a police officer would be sure to tell you that your chances of getting into an accident if you do those things are much greater. Budinski and Trovato (2005) also acknowledge that cohabiters have a higher risk of marital dissolution. In fact, prior to their study, “it was never found...that cohabitation before marriage actually works in favour of marital stability, at any point in marriage” (p.

same address. People ask, “What if we live together and don’t have sex?” I say, “Good luck.”

87). What they did find was that if cohabiters happened to remain married for 10 years, their risk of divorce dropped considerably (p. 86, 87). It seems that if the divorce was going to happen, the greatest chance was within the first ten years. It is like a marital survival of the fittest; the weak do not survive. But, to continue the metaphor, just because a person makes it home safe after drinking or speeding, one cannot conclude that there is no issue with drinking or speeding.⁸

What Causes the Cohabitation Effect?

Though the evidence against cohabitation and premarital sexual relations is overwhelming there still seems to be some uncertainty as to why some marriages suffer when they are preceded by cohabitation. One possibility is the way a person reacts chemically when they are in a relationship with another person. In Helen Fisher's book, *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*, the author looks at the neurochemistry of the brain within couples who are in a relationship with one another. There are many chemicals that she discusses; however, one in particular that she focuses on is dopamine. She states that, "elevated levels of dopamine in the brain produce extremely focussed attention as well as unwavering motivation and goal-directed behaviors" (p. 52). "These," according to Fisher, "are central characteristics of romantic love" (p. 52). In this state, the "lovers intensely focus on the beloved, often to the exclusion of all around them. Indeed they concentrate so relentlessly on the positive qualities of the adored one that they easily overlook his or her negative traits" (p. 52). This can spell disaster for the relationship in the future when they are no

longer able to overlook these negative traits. This also might explain why people, filled with frustration, complain about a friend or family member who simply can't see that the person he or she is with is not a good person. Fisher concurs, suggesting that it is elevated levels of dopamine that could explain why men and women "become dependent on their romantic relationship and why they crave emotional union with their beloved" (p. 53). This theory would likely pique the interest of those who are acquainted with the symptoms of drug addiction. As Fisher states, "dependency and craving are symptoms of addiction-and all of the major addictions are associated with elevated levels of dopamine" (p. 53). Fisher then goes on to reveal that those who suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder and those who are "in love" both have reduced levels of serotonin (p. 54). These reduced levels of serotonin are combined with increased levels of dopamine and norepinephrine which she suggests, "could explain why a lover's increasing romantic ecstasy actually intensifies the compulsion to daydream, fantasize, muse, ponder, obsess about a romantic partner" (p. 55).

People experience these chemical releases and feelings of euphoria when they are in a drug induced state. They desire the drug; they 'chase the high'. Once addicted, they will do whatever it takes to ensure the source of their high remains. Bartels and Zeki, (2000) discovered that brain activity during sexual arousal and cocaine use is similar; this led them to conclude that there is a "potentially close neural link between romantic love and euphoric states" (p. 3833). Wise (1996) concurs suggesting that "drug reward controls behaviour through actions on the same biological mechanisms that are assumed to explain the control of behaviour by food reward or sexual gratification..." (p. 249).

⁸ Budinski and Trovato (2005, p. 87) developed a list of five hazards for marital breakdown: 1. One experiences their own parent's marital breakdown, 2. One is a resident of Quebec, 3. One's level of religiosity, as measured by frequency of religious attendance is low, 4. One's spouse had cohabited previously with another person, and 5. Contraceptive use was practiced (women only).

If it is true that elevated levels of dopamine lead to addiction,⁹ and if we logically make this connection to drug use then it seems reasonable to conclude that if romantic and sexual love increase levels of dopamine causing a euphoric state in the lovers, they, as well, will end up in quasi drug induced state, with one being the 'dealer' for the other. In short, they become addicted to one another.

When couples enter into physical relationships they experience these euphoric rushes of dopamine also known as 'highs'. For some, this euphoric feeling might actually be what they interpret as love. Unfortunately, in their minds, when the feeling is gone, so too is the love. This can lead to attempts to heighten the pleasure through sexual apparatus or pornography and, when all else fails, infidelity.¹⁰

Couples who do not enter into sexual relationships prior to marriage are able to spend their time truly getting to know one another on a far more intimate level without the 'chemical' interference. Even in cases like these it would not be advisable to rush into the marriage. Time is needed to get to know one another. However, when they do get married they will know that they are married to the ideal person. The lady, in particular, will know that her husband loves her for who she is and not just because she can provide sexual gratification. Women who become sexually involved early in the relationship will not really know this for sure.¹¹ There are few women in the world who would not want to know that their husbands love them to the very core of their being.

⁹ Wise, (1996) confirms this point, stating that, "the mesolimbic dopamine system is strongly implicated in the habit-forming properties of several classes of abused drugs" (p. 244).

¹⁰ In the drug world it is not uncommon for addicts to enhance the high by combining a variety of drugs.

¹¹ The man may not even know this for sure. Unless they are unable to be sexually intimate for a prolonged period of time, he might actually think he loves her for her and not her sexuality.

Naturally, the addictive qualities of sexual intimacy are present in the relationships of those who wait until marriage before they are intimate, however, in this case, the man becomes 'addicted' to the woman who is perfect for him and the woman becomes 'addicted' to the man who is perfect for her. Because they were able to be together prior to marriage without sexual intimacy they know that their marriage is based on their love and commitment and not a euphoric feeling. When the time comes, and it will, when sexual intimacy is not as frequent, the couple will be able to rely on the knowledge of their love for, and commitment to one another to carry them through.¹²

As the relationship continues, the chemicals associated with euphoria, dopamine and norepinephrine, are slowly replaced by chemicals associated with attachment, oxytocin and vasopressin (Fisher, p. 90-92). The attachment chemicals are, quite naturally designed to bind a couple together, particularly when children are involved. However, with the lack of dopamine and norepinephrine, those who equate the feeling of euphoria with the feeling of love will find themselves left wanting. They will no longer feel like they are in love with their spouse. Despite the fact that the couple will typically have cohabited prior to the marriage, it is possible that they will have only recently come to know one another.¹³ In many cases, once the euphoric cloud is gone, they will find that they do not even like their spouse. They ask themselves, "How could I have married him (or her)?" Inevitably those who find themselves in relationships like these will turn to another person as a source of the 'feeling' that has been lost. When this lost feeling is experienced with another, for many, this is the sign that they are now in love with

¹² Sleep deprivation associated with child rearing is nature's birth control.

¹³ Recall the findings of Cohan and Kleinbaum (2002). Communication was much poorer amongst those who cohabit (see page 10 of this essay).

this new person and, for the sake of the happiness of all,¹⁴ end the relationship with their spouse.

Conclusion

Anyone who has taught moral theology whether to adults or teens will know that only a very small number actually accept the Church's teaching simply because the Church teaches it. In the realm of sexual morality it seems that this is even more difficult since many have openly embraced the teachings of secular society on this issue. If one is able to use scientific evidence from secular society to demonstrate the efficacy of the Church's teachings then, people might be more inclined to accept them. From a pedagogical perspective, offering students concrete explanations for why certain actions should be avoided cannot help but bring many of them into an increased receptivity of the Church's teachings.¹⁵ Many consider there to be a sense of angst between religion and science. It is comforting to know that, at least in the case sexual intimacy before marriage, science has proven the Church's 2000 year old teaching to be the best for relationships. If people want to experience fulfilling, long lasting marriages, the only rational choice is to follow the teachings of the Church.

¹⁴ What they really mean is happiness for them. If they don't get what they want they will pout like children and make everyone's life miserable.

¹⁵ Pedagogically this information could be presented in a variety of ways which help to open the discussion on this topic. Naturally there will be those who wouldn't believe in their own butt unless it jumped up and bit them. These will disregard the entire argument as just one more way we try to push religion on them in a Catholic school. However there will be many who will consider the points made and will, hopefully, more deeply consider applying them to their lives.

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