

Moral Discernment

To capture the crux of Christianity, one must be able to integrate the cause of Christ within one's surroundings, including spiritual, emotional, and physical arenas. Such arenas are sometimes highly visible and definable; others seem to defy observation, definition, and thus, comprehension. These which lack definition are dealt with in Moral Discernment in a manner which delineates principle rather than exactness for recognizing, contemplating, and resolving such dilemmas. In this reflection paper, I will present observation, clarification, and expansion of Gula's working definition of moral discernment. I will also examine some of the principles that were (and are being) engaged in my personal moral discernment journey. Further, I will present specific moral guides who affected my personal moral development and in doing so, will hopefully present suggestions regarding those whom can affect others in their moral development. Finally, I will present an observation of the Christian community as an entity as it affects (and effects) moral discernment within its constituency.

Presented in a manner that often utilizes modern psychological terminology, *Moral Discernment* begins its discourse of the discernment process by examining the moral conscience. According to Gula, "we need to discern what is truly loving. Conscience is our capacity for making such a discernment" (Gula,12). Of particular interest in the book was the working definition of "the difference between superego and moral conscience [as a] distinguish[ing] between shoulds or have-tos and wants as the source of the commands directing our behavior. Shoulds and have-tos belong to someone else. The wants of conscience (what the truest self would want to do) belong to us" (Gula, 13-14). Certainly, the development of this moral conscience consists of many eventualities and contributors. In fact, when conscience is noted as "the whole person's commitment to value and the judgment one makes in light of that commitment of who one ought to be and what one ought to do or not do" (Gula,18), then a

variety of sources NEED to be included in its formation. Thus Gula sets out on the task of developing that “place where God speaks to us” (Gula, 21). Indeed, he further illuminates the goal of this task by stating that “the moral life is a matter of who we are as well as what and how we choose” (Gula, 22).

Gula summarizes his ingredients into the recipe of moral development and by making the powerful statement, “We become persons of good character by acting in the same spirit that persons of good character act.” (Gula, 24). This declaration, accompanied by those previously observed posits the importance of quality modeling and the integration of such into the moral make-up and character of an individual. Gula further elaborates on his subject by presenting other important components into the mix. These include “some degree of knowledge, freedom, and affective capacity to care for others and to commit oneself to moral values.” Gula, 27). The development and exercise of these ingredients culminates in the term used by Gula (and others) of “ethics.” Ethics is seen then as engaging a “two-fold range of interest-- how to be a good person and how to make decisions that lead to right moral action. Ethics is a discipline that can make us more critical of our morality- that is, of our values, our actions, and our character—by bringing us back to thinking about what it is to be a good person” (Gula, 43). Finally, this transports us to the place of being able to produce a working definition of discernment: “Discernment is the process of discovering the course of action most fitting to what our fundamental relationship to God demands” (Gula, 47). By illustration, Gula further defines discernment as asking “not only, ‘Is this action right?’ but [also] ‘Is acting this way consistent with my fundamental commitment to God? Does it fit who I am and who I want to become as a disciple of Jesus for today?’ (Gula, 49).

Personal Road to Moral Discernment- How and Who

Much of my personal moral discernment was shaped early in my childhood as I witnessed my parents, especially my mother, wrestle with character-revealing decisions and attitudes. My parents would discuss with one another the proper manner of handling a given situation, would consult their wise parents or some other sensible source if necessary, and then firmly entrust themselves to a commitment and live with it. This would take place regarding decisions, attitudes, and methods of rearing children. I was able to observe this in my formative years.

Later, as I began my personal relationship with Christ, the Bible was modeled for me through my local church and additionally through my mother. These keen insights took a firm root within my conscience of biblically-based, moral development. This was proper as according to Gula, “moral character represents the persistent configuration of the beliefs, images, ideals, perspective, attitudes, dispositions, virtues, and vices from which our moral discernment and actions spring” (Gula, 85).

In my later teen years, many of these character-revealing ‘configurations’ presented themselves to me firsthand. I often found myself in situations where I was forced to present my morals, my attitude, and ultimately, my character. One additional exciting aspect of the teen years of growth was found in the fact that I grew along with my three closest friends: Cheri, Rick, and Dan. The two young men and I constantly spent time together and continually sharpened one another (in a manner some phrase as positive peer pressure but which we decided to call “pure pressure.) Cheri was my first real girlfriend, and as it turns out, my only love because as we spent time together, grew in the Lord together, and encouraged one another in Him, we also fell in love and eventually married (on June 2, 1977.) These influences modeled moral discernment to me in a manner that was positive, non-condemnatory, and forgiving. (I

don't want to give the impression that mistakes were not made and poor decisions were not sometimes arrived at; they, in fact, were.) I do, however, count myself as rich to have discovered and cultivated friendships such as these. They were necessary and valuable assets to my moral and spiritual growth. They were truly divinely appointed to my situation and were utilized by God to make me whom I am today.

The Christian Community and Moral Discernment

As noted above, the church and Christian friends were great influences into my formation of spiritual development and moral discernment. Although I do not necessarily feel that principles should be derived from experiences, I do feel that these experiences added credence to the concept of moral discernment deriving through that which is modeled before an individual. Pastoral care and Christian community dictate that the believer should be shaped by the image and mind of God. Conversely, it is intended that the image and mind of God are presented for individual (and corporate) moral growth through pastoral leadership and Christian community modeling. Certainly, these aspects were integral within my personal realm of moral growth.

Part of this modeling process includes a clear discernment of what is right; “the objectively right action is that which truly fits human nature” (Gula, 106). This type of instruction can be achieved through proper Biblical teaching and preaching. There is, however, that subjective element which cannot be taught per se but must instead be modeled before and processed by the individual. “The subjective right is what we truly believe to be fitting in this situation, even though we may be wrong” (Gula, 106). This makes applicable the old saying, ‘some things are better caught than taught.’ Pastoral guidance, therefore, within a given situation, “takes the person and the situation into consideration in determining the good that can be achieved for now” (Gula, 109). Yet even this aspect of pastoral care requires maturity and

development as the “ability to hold in tension the objective and subjective poles of morality without collapsing one into another” (Gula, 110) must be gained and ably presented to the one developing in moral discernment. As I related in my discernment-growth sequence, it is readily apparent that parental influence, Christian community influence, and peer influence are contributing factors within the process. Those who are of the community of faith should, therefore, feel the urgency of their continued morally-correct modeling in the lives of those who surround them, particularly those who are relatively new to the faith and those who are young.

Conclusion

Having determined that no one factor is the answer-for-all, it should become readily apparent that the development of moral discernment is truly a growth process that in-and-of-itself requires discrimination in order to know what to allow into one’s life. The influence of the modeling by parents, friends, and the Christian community is important and necessary to the wholeness of that individual’s moral discernment development. With these factors in mind, it is my conclusion that parents must be careful regarding what they present to their children regarding attitudes and decisions; friends must be aware of their influence in forming the morals of their peers, and the Christian community must be intentional in her role of presenting, through word and deed, a model for Christian moral development. With God’s help, we not only DO make an influence in someone else’s life, but that influence CAN and WILL BE a positive one.