

Love Builds

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In the reading from the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, 8:1b-7, 11-13, Paul has a great opening line. He says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." And that's what he's trying to convey here by using the example of whether you are allowed to eat meat sacrificed to idols or not.

So, at that time, meat was sacrificed to idols, and meat that was left over could then either be eaten in the temple banquet hall or sold in a local market. And so, imagine you, with your more mature Christian conscience, knowing that idols don't exist and that the meat sacrificed to those idols is amoral, not immoral - it has no moral value. And you see a delicious pot roast in the market that was sacrificed to idols in the temple, and you go to buy it.

And someone in OCIA comes up to you - someone who is learning and being formed to become a Catholic - and says, "You can't buy that pot roast because it was sacrificed to idols." Now, St. Paul is saying the best thing for the Christian with a more mature conscience to do is to say, "Okay, I'll put it back," so as not to offend the weaker conscience of the person whose conscience has not yet matured enough to understand that it would be okay to buy that pot roast. But you know why it's okay to buy the pot roast.

So, what Paul doesn't tell us here exactly is that this might also be a good time for catechesis: "Why don't you come over to the house, have a cup of coffee, and I'll explain to you why it's morally acceptable for me to buy that meat?"

And then you would go on and explain to this person, very kindly, that buying that meat would be only a remote, mediate, material cooperation with evil, which means it's really no cooperation with evil at all. Let's understand what cooperation means.

You're not buying that meat in order to offer sacrifices to a pagan god - a god that doesn't exist. So there is no moral cooperation.

Material, yes: the material is something physical. It's the meat that was connected to the idol worship, and that's what is catching the eye of the person with the less-formed conscience. Just because that meat was associated with idol worship, that doesn't mean that you can't eat it.

Because it's a mediate connection - an indirect connection - to the pagan sacrifice. You're not directly participating by offering this meat to a pagan god.

You're taking it home for dinner to feed your family, and that brings us to remote in time and space. You're not eating that meat in the banquet hall of the temple, which could be a tremendous scandal, because if you ate that meat in the temple and other people saw you, they might think that you were complicit in idol worship and were actually taking a kind of communion in this pagan temple. But no, you're taking that meat home.

Time and distance are separating you from the evil of idol worship. So, in explaining all of that, there is really no cooperation with evil because it is so remote.

That piece of meat is remote, mediate, and material, but your intent is in no way to cooperate with idol worship. And so, it's okay to eat that meat.

That kind of applies to our entire Catholic life when it comes to discerning the morality of an action. If you can, try to remember that, because that's a very good example of how our kind of moral flowchart works.

We dealt with that kind of moral flowchart with COVID-19, didn't we, and the vaccines, which the Vatican and the USCCB - the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops - said could be taken because doing so was remote material cooperation with evil, since the cell lines that were used went back to the 1960s and '70s.

But still, some people didn't want to take the vaccine, and that's okay. Others objected that even that was too close a cooperation with evil for them. So that's just to tell you who we are and how we are as Catholics, and how we discern some of these moral issues.

But let's get back to St. Paul. The most important part, I think, that he raises is that we need to be aware that not everyone's conscience is formed in the same way or to the same degree.

Some moral consciences have been developed very well and very fully, and others have not. We should be patient and gentle with those who still have a little bit more maturing to do, remembering St. Paul's great line: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."