Ask Fr James

What is the Catholic Church's most basic moral principle?

There are two basic moral principles that should guide the Catholic's moral conscience. The first is; ***Do good and avoid evil."*** The second is; ***"the end does not justify the means."*** The Church has always been in favour of applying natural law or scriptural based moral theory to provide guidance in deciding what to do when faced with a moral.

"Do Good and avoid Evil" derives from Mark 3:4 when Jesus challenged the Pharisees; "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil?" Based on this question, every Catholic is asked to examine their consciences and strive to do good always and avoid evil. The individual, to be motivated to do good always, must inform their conscience either through attending catechism and faith formation lessons, imbibe Catholic religious education at home and at school and listen attentively to the priests' homilies at Mass and also by reading scriptures and good commentaries.

There would be times when we would be faced with moral dilemmas arising out of "difficult moral case" such as when we are faced with decisions surrounding the Principle of Double Effect (PDE). For instance, to give drugs to a terminally ill patient with the intention of hastening death but permitting it as relief of suffering. This is to perform euthanasia. It is causing a bad outcome in order to cause a good outcome. Saint Thomas Aquinas explains it in this way: "A single act may have two effects, of which only one is intended, while the other is incidental to that intention." It is never permitted to cause evil deliberately as a tool to bring about goodness. Don't justify the permissibility of an action which causes serious harm. We are to always try to "do good and avoid evil."

Thus, according to Roman Catholic moral theory, whenever we are faced with a moral dilemma, there are "four necessary conditions" to consider before our final decision:

1. The action should be morally good;

2. The agent should intend the good effect and not the evil one;

3. The good effect should not be generated by the evil one;

4. There should be a proportionately grave reason for causing evil

There is something about evil that fascinates the human mind. Evil has many faces and can take form in unexpected ways. There are individuals who would always culpably "choose evil" when they could have done the opposite and there are others who will choose to do evil because they have a twisted moral code that rationalizes the act to be morally justified. Erich Fromm warns that "as long as one believes that the evil man wears horns, one will not discover an evil man."