THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

Living a Catholic Life No. 8 *Moral Certitude*

"Living a Catholic Life" is a collaboration between Knights of Columbus councils, parishes, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

What is certitude? According to St. Thomas Aquinas, certitude indicates the firmness of the individual's mind in its assent to the truth about some judged reality. It can be distinguished from both opinion, which is the tentative assent of the mind to the possible truth about some judged reality, and doubt, which is the inability of the mind to either affirm or to deny the truth about some judged reality.

Classically formulated, three kinds of certitude are available to the acting person. First, metaphysical certitude, also called absolute certitude, is the certitude with which things in their essence and nature are known. This kind of certitude involves self-evident and necessary truths. That the whole is greater than the part and that I exist here and now are known with metaphysical certitude. That which is metaphysically certain cannot be otherwise. It cannot even be conceived of as existing otherwise.

Second, physical certitude is that certitude with which things with determined natures are known. This kind of certitude involves the order of nature and is grounded in the constancy of the laws that describe that order. This order is not self-evident but is discoverable by the process of inductive reasoning usually associated with scientific inquiry. That a person will die and that Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system are known with physical certitude. That which is physically certain can be conceived of as existing otherwise, but only if the order of nature is altered by divine providence.

Third, moral certitude, also called prudential certitude, is that certitude with which things with free natures, that is, human beings, are known. That one's friend is loyal and that one's wife is faithful are known with moral certitude. Moral certitude also includes that certitude with which things that behave in a probable manner are known. That aspirin alleviates headaches and that a stamped envelope deposited in a US Postal Service mailbox will be delivered to the addressee are known with this kind of certitude. Since human nature and things that behave in a probabilistic fashion are both subject to exceptions—usually truthful individuals can still choose to lie on occasion, and usually effective drugs could have no effect on a particular patient—moral certitude is not incorrigible. That which is morally certain can be conceived of as existing otherwise and may in fact exist otherwise.

Significantly, moral certitude includes that certitude that allows the acting person to act even when he may think that it is possible but unlikely that he is mistaken. This certitude is what moralists have called imperfect moral certitude. It is attained when the individual's judgment is free of all reasonable doubt of error. Importantly, it does not require the elimination of all doubt. According to the consensus of the Catholic moral tradition, it is sufficient to act if one only has imperfect moral certitude.

How does one attain moral certitude? Moral certitude is also called prudential certitude because it is that certitude that allows the prudent individual to act rightly and virtuously amid the complexities and ambiguities of life. Prudence is the moral virtue that disposes the acting person not only to discern the true good in every circumstance but also to choose the right means of achieving it. Following Aristotle, Aquinas called prudence "right reason in action" (*Summa theologiae* II-II.47.2). Located in the intellect and in the will, it is the virtue that facilitates good human acts. It allows the acting person to intend, to deliberate, to decide, and then to execute this particular act well, here and now, with that person's and his or her community's authentic good in mind.

According to Aquinas, the virtuous individual attains certitude after a careful process of deliberation that allows the individual to discern not only the authentic good that he or she should seek out but also the most righteous means to attain it. This course of action has to include asking and answering the right questions to form the intellect to remove all reasonable doubt of error. These questions often include factual and philosophical investigations to obtain all relevant background information. The prudent person also needs to learn all the universal moral principles that are applicable in a particular circumstance. One can do so by reflecting on one's moral experience as a human being naturally ordered toward the good, by studying reliable sources, and by seeking the counsel of wise and prudent persons. For Catholics and other persons of good will, the corpus of magisterial teachings of the Catholic Church is also a sure guide for the proper formation in bioethics.

However, prudence consists chiefly not in the knowledge of universals but in their application to action. Therefore, after asking and answering all these questions, prudent individuals need to pray and to think about all the scientific, philosophical, and moral knowledge that they have acquired to determine whether they can actually do what they contemplate doing. For some persons, the accumulated knowledge at any given time may be enough for them to act. They have moral certitude. For others, the knowledge may not yet be enough. For a few, the knowledge will never be enough.

This column was adapted from Edward J. Furton, ed., *Catholic Health Care Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: National Catholic Bioethics Center, 2020). For more information on this topic, please visit www.ncbcenter.org.