

***Fourth Sunday of Easter***  
***May 11, 2025***  
***Year of the Holy Spirit***

*“Detraction and calumny destroy the reputation and honor of one’s neighbor. Honor is the social witness given to human dignity, and everyone enjoys a natural right to the honor of his name and reputation and to respect. Thus, detraction and calumny offend against the virtues of justice and charity.” (CCC #2479)*

You may be aware of a recent controversy which occurred on social media. An AI image was posted depicting a politician dressed as the Pope. To my knowledge, this image has been viewed by approximately 97 million individuals world-wide. As most would assume, there have been varied reactions to this image. There are those who, liking the politician, considered it a joke. Likewise, there were others who, disliking the politician, claimed it was a blasphemous offense against the recently deceased Pope. Lastly, there were those who landed somewhere in the middle between these two responses. One might have noticed, many comments were offered which appeared to reflect their author’s emotional state. I do not want to make this reflection about the politician. Instead, I think it would benefit all of us to question our moral compass which guides us to make ethical decisions. Are we being morally responsible if we make decisions using our gut emotions or our reasoned intellect?

Allow me to first state this, making moral judgments solely upon how we feel in the moment is a terrible way to interact with one’s environment. A person may be angry because they are late for work and stuck behind a school bus picking up children. Does their anger justify a decision to speed around the bus when it has stopped to board a child? Our emotions are subject to change as situations change, individuals change or time proceeds. As Christians, we should be aware of the old saying: “Let the intellect rule over the passions.” Our Catholic church, over its history, has been blessed with many great theologians whose teachings still offer guidance as to how we may arrive at an ethical decision. In the case of a moral decision (action), there are three basic items we need to account for: (1) the object, (2) the intention and (3) the end or outcome of the decision (act). Let us take a moment to examine these.

Our decisions must involve an object. If the object is good, then we may proceed to the other two factors. If the object is intrinsically evil (meaning it is evil in all cases) then we can proceed no further with our decision. Returning to the example which began our reflection, we must first ask: “Is the image of someone dressed as a pope a good thing or an evil thing?” If we say it is evil, then how can we justify our children dressing up as Christian saints on All Hallows’ Eve (Halloween) the night before All Saint’s Day? Honoring the holy saints is a good thing. They provide us with examples of virtuous Christian living. Some here might be thinking to themselves: “Your right, BUT the person did not intend it that way.” This leads us into the second point, intention. What is the intention of the person performing the act? We must first acknowledge one point; a good action may become bad due to the evil intention of the person who performs the act.

As an example, years ago I painted the back wall under the choir loft in Saint Thomas church. What was the reason I did this? Did I do this because it needed to be done OR did I do this so that one day I could tell everyone in a reflection “I” did this. In essence, see what “I” did. Painting a wall to beautify a church is a good thing, but my intention may have been self-serving. The point is, ONLY GOD knows what is in one’s heart and ONLY GOD knows the intention of one’s actions. Finally, we turn to the end or outcome of an act. Even if the prior points are morally justified, if the outcome is bad, then should the action be reconsidered? As an example, a parishioner is acting in a sinful way. I, as the parish priest, commit to speaking with this parishioner hoping our talk would motivate them to correct their sinful behavior. These are both good so far, however I choose the time for our talk to be during the Sunday reflection and thus humiliate them and embarrass everyone in attendance. I should reconsider the end or outcome of my act, the talk, which ruins the good of the first two points.

I felt it necessary to address this “social media issue” because of this reason: I needed this reminder. And why did I need to hear these words? Because I was initially embarrassed by the arguably vile and judgmental responses of both priests and lay Catholics. Then, to make things more regrettable, I realized I had fallen into this same trap as well. It may not have been on this one thing, but I made public proclamations about persons, places and situations having only prideful ignorance as my guide. I needed to hear again the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2478, as a reminder before I choose to open my mouth and insert my entire anatomy into it. I close quoting this paragraph.

*(CCC #2478) To avoid rash judgment, everyone should be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbor’s thoughts, words, and deeds in a favorable way:*

*“Every good Christian ought to be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another’s statement than to condemn it. But if he cannot do so, let him ask how the other understands it. And if the latter understands it badly, let the former correct him with love. If that does not suffice, let the Christian try all suitable ways to bring the other to a correct interpretation so that he may be saved.” (Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises, 22).*