4 Universal Moral Principles: Lessons of the Ages

Basic moral principles represent the wisdom of human experience over the ages. These principles are not collected into any one book, nor are they agreed upon by every human being. But some principles are so widely held that we can think of them as universals. Here are a few of these principles:

1. **Do good; avoid evil.**
   This most basic moral principle, the starting point for morality, was articulated by Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, and is held by all the world's major religions. All other moral principles flow from this one.
   C.C. 1803 "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions.

2. **Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.**
   All the world's major religions carry an expression similar to the Golden Rule familiar to Christians: "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12)
   C.C. 1970 The Law of the Gospel requires us to make the decisive choice between "the two ways" and to put into practice the words of the Lord. It is summed up in the Golden Rule, "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; this is the law and the prophets."

3. **The end does not justify the means.**
   Classical philosophy and the major world religious traditions have upheld the principle that having a good end (goal or purpose) does not justify the use of evil means (method) to achieve that end.
   ``There are those who say: And why not do evil that good may come? Their condemnation is just' (Rom 3:8)."
   C.C.1756 It is therefore an error to judge the morality of human acts by considering only the intention that inspires them or the circumstances (environment, social pressure, duress or emergency, etc.) which supply their context. There are acts which, in and of themselves, independently of circumstances and intentions, are always gravely illicit by reason of their object; such as blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery. One may not do evil so that good may result from it.

   Also, as Pope John Paul II wrote in *The Splendor of Truth*: The foreseeable consequences are part of those circumstances of the act, which, while capable of lessening the gravity of an evil act, nonetheless cannot alter its moral species.

4. **Follow what nature intends.**
   Known in philosophy as natural law, this principle is not actually a law written down someplace but, rather, an approach to making decisions that respects the nature of things, especially human nature. Briefly, natural law tells us this: Follow what is natural for human beings and the rest of creation. Do not violate the nature of things. For instance, our innate
sense of what is fair and honorable. The universal condemnation of selfishness, senseless cruelty, and deceit.

Additionally, consider how natural law could apply to humans' tampering with the earth's environment. For example, it is natural for the earth to have a protective ozone layer around it to shield animals and plants from the destructive effects of ultraviolet light. Human beings' damaging of the ozone layer through pollution could be considered a violation of natural law.

C.C. 1956 The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men. It expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties:

For there is a true law: right reason. It is in conformity with nature, is diffused among all men, and is immutable and eternal; its orders summon to duty; its prohibitions turn away from offense . . . To replace it with a contrary law is a sacrilege; failure to apply even one of its provisions is forbidden; no one can abrogate it entirely.