

Jim Philipps's approach to teaching Christian morality to youth is great for a full course or using a chapter or two to fill in those trickier concepts. His covenant approach will work well with any faith formation group. This book is a real keeper for your catechist's library.

☛ **RICHARD DRABIK**, *Assistant Director, Virtual Learning Community of Faith Formation (VLCFF), University of Dayton*

I admit to being among the lily-livered who dread teaching morality, especially to the young. But Jim Philipps makes it sound almost fun! I'm now a fan of scary god vs. smiley god metaphors, developing a Jiminy Cricket conscience, and conjuring a better-world scenario with my audience. It would be a boon to sit in his classroom; the next best thing is to let his wise, simple, and practical ideas flow through you.

☛ **ALICE CAMILLE**, *catechist and author of *This Transforming Word and Invitation to Catholicism**

This inspiring book filled with delightful anecdotes, practical advice, and simple instruction is a great reminder that to be a Christian is to not live in theory, but to fully embrace discipleship in the joy, sadness, and routines of our day-to-day lives.

☛ **GARY JANSEN**, *author of *Exercising Your Soul**

Jim Philipps is an expert catechist and an engaging writer who shares many great practical ways to teach students of all ages how to walk the road of relationship with Jesus Christ. Bonus: it's a great refresher on Catholic Christian morality for catechists too!

☛ **DIANE VELLA**, *Director of Parish Faith Formation, St. Bernard Parish, Levittown, NY*

All young people seek to understand what real love looks like. Jim Philipps maps out the route through the living of an authentic moral life. As the faith community's companions on the journey with our young people, catechists will be guided by his clear, concise, and creative directions. When our catechists are effective, the kingdom of love is present. *Teaching the Basics of Catholic Morality* will help you be effective!

☛ **PAT LEONARD**, *Associate Professor of Theology, St. John's University*

Reading *Teaching the Basics of Catholic Morality* is like chatting with a very bright, enthusiastic, and faith-filled friend. Mr. Philipps shares not only his theological insight but his vast experience as a teacher, and he does so with warmth, wit, and wisdom. This book goes straight to the heart of Christian faith and morality, rooting laws and commandments in the context of God's love for us in Jesus Christ and the call to walk with him as disciples and friends. It will provide both inspiration and practical advice for catechists.

☛ **ANTHONY MARINELLI**, *catechist and author of *The Word Made Flesh and Conscience and Catholic Faith**

The Eleventh Commandment—thou shall read Jim Philipps's book and appreciate how "scary god" and "smiley god" affect our relationship with God and our understanding of morality. This book is packed with theological perspectives, is written in plain English, and provides practical tips and reflection questions.

☛ **SUZANNE RICHARDS**, *Director of Parish Faith Formation, Christ the King Parish, Commack, NY*

In an easily accessible style, Jim Philipps opens the door to practical and concrete ways to help children to grasp the richness of Christian morality. The book is full of suggestions and examples of how to teach various concepts, and the reflection questions at the end of each chapter are a rich resource for teachers. This book is a gem that challenges all who read it to reflect on their own lives as disciples, and it offers creative ways to help students.

☛ **SR. LAUREN HANLEY**, *Spiritual Development Director, St. Frances de Chantal Parish, Wantagh, NY*



The ESSENTIAL CATECHIST'S BOOKSHELF

TEACHING THE BASICS OF

Catholic Morality

A CATECHIST'S GUIDE *to*
FOSTERING *the* VIRTUOUS LIFE

James Philipps

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INTRODUCTION

Take any public speaking course and chances are you'll hear about the famous survey done that recorded what a sample population said they feared the most.

Death came in second. Speaking in public was number one.

I think if you took a similar poll among Catholic catechists, the number one fear might well be teaching the principles of Christian morality to young people. The root of the fear is that a catechist who ventures into these murky waters may wind up being caught between a rock and a hard place.

If the catechist puts too much emphasis on the teachings of the church as presented via the textbook, he or she runs the risk of not connecting with the lives of the learners, lives that are shot through with the messiness of youth. On the other hand, if the catechist does not hew carefully enough to the text and allows the students' opinions too much rein, then he or she risks incurring the icy stares of the DRE or pastor standing right outside of the door.

If such thoughts fill you with trepidation, please know that the tension you are feeling is rooted in integrity, not incompetence. Anyone who takes his or her faith seriously, who tries to live it, and who wants to share that faith with others feels this

tension. One truth my thirty-plus years in the classroom has demonstrated to me is that the Spirit speaks most authentically through us when we embrace that struggle to be faithful to the church, to the needs of our students, and to our own experience of the risen Christ.

The purpose of this book is to aid you in helping your learners understand the requirements of Christian discipleship by presenting the essential principles of such a study as well as specific classroom-tested activities that you can use with children of different ages. Teaching about Christian living is something like learning a new language: once you grasp a few basic rules and learn a few key words, you can build a greater and more complex vocabulary as you start to speak. Even the most complex of Catholic moral teachings are rooted in the principles outlined in this book. Each chapter concludes with a series of questions for you to ponder and discuss with others.

To paraphrase Pope St. John Paul II, don't be afraid to go out into the deep waters of discipleship with your learners. What our faith offers is not a checklist of moral "dos" and "don'ts," but a way of living more joyfully as we honor the inherent sacredness of every human being and recognize the fundamental connection between each one of us and others, creation, and God. All of this comes together within the risen Christ, who calls us to follow him.



ly hammock and looking down upon us through rose-colored glasses, had better things to focus on.

Our understanding of what it means to live a moral life as disciples of Jesus Christ was, in different ways, distorted by both images. Under the reign of “scary god,” we tended to overemphasize the letter of the law; if we followed every church teaching precisely, then “scary god” couldn’t hold anything against us. Moral living was more about what you *didn’t do* than what you did do. And that approach resembles the moral code of a slave whose main goal is to avoid the wrath of a harsh taskmaster. Wasn’t this exactly the kind of life that St. Paul proclaimed our baptism had freed us from?

When “smiley god” came on the scene, one could almost hear the crash as strict moral commandments came tumbling down, replaced by a vague call to “be nice.” Living in a world where God made no demands upon us didn’t free us from the subjugation to “scary god.” It merely co-opted our free will in a different way. Now we rediscovered just how enslaving our own passions and desires could be. Living in a world where nothing we do matters is just as confining as one in which our every action is harshly scrutinized.

Throughout the reigns of “scary god” and “smiley god,” there were always holy people who recognized what the Holy Spirit was whispering in all of our hearts: God, who is absolute Love, is all about *relationship*. Those who allow the Spirit to lead them have always recognized that the two false images of God, however different they might seem, both suffered from the same defect. It is impossible to live in relationship with either of them.

The very idea of seeking a relationship with “scary god” seemed absurd. Better if he never noticed you at all. Yet “smiley god’s” indifference to the real pain we cause one another through our sins suggested more of an absentee parent

than a loving God. “Scary god’s” obsession with finding sin left no room for compassion; “smiley god’s” apathy left no room for love.

We are all caught up in a relationship with a God who wants to be known by us as intimately as God knows us. Yet we are also in the loving hands of a God who will settle for nothing less than our best efforts, begun with and carried along by divine grace, to love one another. Again and again we are called to respond to the wonderful truth that we are loved more than we can possibly imagine. We make this response when we choose to love our neighbor with a love so thorough and far-reaching that it even includes our enemies. The essence of Christian living can be summed up in this way: whatever choices we make that lead us into deeper relationship with creation, other people, and God are morally good choices.

“HESED-YAHWEH”

Before going further into an exploration of the way right relationship weaves its way through all of the Bible and the life of the church, it might be helpful for you to gain a sense of how your learners imagine God. Begin by asking them to point out some of the shortcomings of the “scary god” and “smiley god” images of the past. Break them into groups and have each group create an image of God that they think better represents who God really is. Encourage them to be creative and to be ready to present their images to the class. (If you need a jump start, I have found that simply writing “God is...” on the board and inviting members of the class to offer a word or phrase to complete the sentence can help get things rolling.) Younger children might be encouraged to draw pictures of God as a way to explore their images.

It is certain that among the words and images your learners will bring forth will be much that associates God with love and

forgiveness. Such words and images provide an opportunity for you to introduce the concept of *covenant*. Helping your learners grasp the essentials of covenant living is the first key you will need to unlock the basics of Christian discipleship. The Hebrew phrase that best captures the meaning of covenant is “hesed-Yahweh,” most commonly translated in English as either the “friendship of God” or the “faithfulness of God.” It reflects the deep and abiding awareness of the Hebrew people that, no matter what, God was present to them and stood by them. Gradually our earliest spiritual ancestors came to realize that God yearned for one thing and one thing only: relationship. God is absolute Love, and love always seeks to go beyond itself to the other. God’s call of the “chosen people” was not an ending but a beginning, a “light unto the nations” by which others whose minds and hearts had been darkened by sin would come to see who God really was and how God wanted all people to live.

Through covenant, God entered into an ongoing relationship with his people. Working together, God and God’s people would restore right relationship to all of creation. The prophets and other writings of the Bible offer many beautiful and poetic expressions of “hesed-Yahweh.” Time and again, God calls the people to conversion, such as in this passage from the prophet Isaiah: “Come now, let us set things right, says the LORD: Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; Though they be crimson red, they may become white as wool” (Isaiah 1:18). God often speaks as a loving parent would: “When Israel was a child I loved him. Out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1).

Yet intertwined with these expressions of God’s love and mercy is God’s demand that we love one another. The prophet Amos makes it crystal clear that there can be no relationship with God without a commitment to loving one’s neighbor,

especially the poorest neighbor: “Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land...The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob; Never will I forget a thing they have done!” (Amos 8:4, 7). God called a people to himself out of slavery, and God calls upon these people to rescue others from oppression through a commitment to justice. One day, the prophet Jeremiah promises, the covenant will be transformed into a “new covenant” written not on stone tablets but on the flesh of the human heart (see Jeremiah 31).

A great way to introduce this theme of covenant to young children is through the use of good children’s literature. For example, the books *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown, and *Love You Forever*, by Robert Munsch and Sheila McGraw, are creative and beautiful expressions of the enduring love between parent and child. Pick your favorites and spend a little time reading at the beginning of each class. You might also ask your learners to bring to class their own favorites. After reviewing the basics of covenant living with your learners, ask them to identify the person who best models covenant living for them. Have each student write a letter to that person expressing how he or she feels and why. (These letters would make wonderful Thanksgiving or Christmas presents!)

COVENANT VS. APPEASEMENT

Another way of understanding what covenant means is by contrast to what it doesn’t mean. The surrounding cultures among which the Hebrews lived and where their experience of covenant first took root had a quite different view of all things divine. Life certainly did not center around entering into a relationship with the gods. Life was all about performing specific ritualized acts that would appease them. It is easy to understand how such a pessimistic view could have arisen. In ancient times as in our time, bad things happen to good

people and good things happen to bad people. This sense that we are at the mercy of forces we cannot control must have been so much more powerful for our ancestors who were not shielded from the elemental forces of nature in the ways we are in our modern cities and with the advances of modern medicine. Personifying the powerful and arbitrary forces of nature and of chance in the form of gods and goddesses would have made perfect sense. (If you have time, you might want to find a book of Greek and Roman myths and share an example with the group.)

Good and evil, in all of these appeasement systems, has little to do with loving one's neighbor or with any actions that build community and enable us to become truly free. What keeps the gods happy is good and what angers them is bad—regardless of the effects these actions might have on the web of relationships. Covenant turns this appeasement-centered universe on its head. Our Christian faith proclaims that we are loved beyond our ability to imagine. Recognizing and experiencing this love and making a conscious decision to extend it to others—this is the basis of covenant morality. We do not do good things to earn God's love. It is because God loves us that we can do good things.

There is no better illustration in the Scriptures of the difference between living in covenant and living in appeasement that I know of than the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Read the parable with your class. Involve them in the story by asking them some questions, such as: Which character do you connect with the most and why? What is the worst thing you have ever done that your parents have forgiven you for? How would you react if you were the older brother? Does being fair always mean treating everyone the same?

MICAH'S "CHEAT SHEET"

The prophet Micah reflected upon centuries of Israel's attempts to live according to the covenant. He sought a way to get to the heart of things and was led by the Holy Spirit to write these profound words: "You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). It is worth spending a few moments to consider what Micah is saying.

The first thing Micah emphasizes is that covenant living is mostly about what we do. Your learners will undoubtedly be familiar with the phrase "actions speak louder than words." Ask them to come up with some examples of people who say one thing but do another. What are some ways we can demonstrate by our actions that we are disciples of Jesus?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus proclaims that "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). The scribes and Pharisees, the leaders and the teachers of the Jewish people in Jesus' time, are often portrayed in the gospel as tending to focus more on telling the people how they should live rather than leading by example. This same emphasis on doing can be found throughout the Ten Commandments. Until our commitment to living as God calls us to live can be seen by others in the integrity between what we say and what we do, we are not living in covenant.

When Micah says that we must "love goodness," he is challenging us to look at the motivation behind those good actions we do. Are we like the hypocrites who "love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them" (Matthew 6:5)? Such people are not interested in praying, but in *looking* like they are praying, to earn the praise of those who pass by. Are we more concerned with loving our

sisters and brothers or in *appearing* like we are loving them? If my motivation for doing good is anything other than the desire to please God, I can easily slip into that appeasement universe where my actions are simply the means to pacifying an angry god.

Or are we like the elder son in Jesus' parable, who complains bitterly to his father that "all these years I slaved for you... yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends" (Luke 15:29)? Does all the good that we do seem to us like a joyless slavery, devoid of any love, a soulless assortment of actions that seek only to avoid God's punishments and to earn our reward? All of these paths turn to ashes all the good we might have done and the relationships we might have built; they lead us further and further away from God.

When Micah calls on us to "walk humbly with your God," he ends where this chapter started. Living in covenant is never primarily about our own efforts. A good way to understand what Micah is saying is to imagine that Jesus walks besides us at every moment and to reflect upon what this means. This is a good exercise to do with your learners as a way for them to evaluate their behavior for the day. Ask them to imagine that Jesus is walking right beside them. How does their day look from that point of view?

Only a life that integrates the faith that is celebrated on Sunday with the faith that is lived out every day is able to demonstrate to the world what walking with God looks like. Outlining the details of such a life will be the subject of the rest of this book.

● *For reflection*

- 1) How have “scary god” and “smiley god” influenced you? In what ways has your image of God matured over the years?
- 2) What does God’s invitation to live in covenant look like in your life? What are your most meaningful relationships and how do you nurture them? What keeps you from a more wholesome relationship with God? the church? your friends and family? nature? yourself?
- 3) Read the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Which of the three characters do you identify with? Why? Which one troubles you the most? Why?
- 4) How do you live out in your day-to-day life the faith you celebrate on Sundays? Are there any gaps you are aware of? Why do you think they exist?