

Notes for Keynote 1:
The Gift of an Inner Moral Compass

Jesus said, "If your eye is bad, your whole body will be in darkness." Father James Martin, a Jesuit priest, elaborates: "If you can't see clearly what is going on your entire life will be misdirected. If your moral sense is blind, then you will be unable to make moral decisions."

How can we help our children find their inner moral compass? How can we raise what researcher Robert Coles calls, "morally literate children"?

We begin at the beginning. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. . . God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. . . God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:1, 27, 31). We begin with reverence and respect for what God created, from roses to rivers, from sparrows to stars, from fish to forests. We begin with reverence and respect for people, for *imago dei*, the image of God in each person. James R. Estep, Jr., in his book *Christian Formation*, said, "We do not develop into the image of God; we *are* the image of God." God created, it is very good, and it's a serious matter to hurt, neglect, or damage what God made.

When we look at everything going on around us today, we can either despair for our children's future or look forward with hope. I choose hope, because no matter what's happening in our world at the moment, there is – and always has been – a True North toward which a functioning moral compass points.

What is Morality?

Basically, morality is respect, which means to give attention to, "to consider worthy of high regard, to esteem." But morality is active, not passive. It's not simply claiming a set of beliefs or assenting to a certain lifestyle; it's a way of actually living from day to day. Morals are modes of conduct *relative to right and wrong*.

The psychologists Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and John C. Gibbs speculated that, like the principles of math, the fundamental principles of morality are cosmic, built into the way the world works. In their research, they call basic morality "Ideal Normative Reciprocity," which simply means a balance in relationship.

Ideal Normative Reciprocity means treating each other as respected equals. In other words, it's the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31).

How do we guide our children in that direction? How do we help them find their moral compass? One of the first steps is so basic that we often overlook it: setting goals. What are we aiming for?

Here are my top ten signs of moral wisdom. These are not in order of importance, not exclusive, not exhaustive. I encourage you to make your own list. Consider how you would define each virtue on your list, *and decide why* you think it's an important characteristic of moral wisdom.

1. Responsibility

Responsibility basically means "the ability to respond, to reply." It's based on caring. Being moral means caring about all that God created – the people, the earth, and the heavens. Because we *care*, we respond by *taking care* of people, the earth, and the heavens. We can never grow wise morally if we're not willing to take responsibility for our words and actions.

2. Empathy

According to theorist Martin Hoffman, empathy is *the* goal of moral development. "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn," said the apostle Paul (Romans 12:15). That's empathy. We often use a related word: *compassion*, "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it."

3. Self-Control

Michele Borba, in her book *Building Moral Intelligence*, says that self-control is our "moral muscle." It "helps [a child] use his head to control his emotions" and helps us "put on the brakes." It's often called impulse control. But self-control works two ways. Not only does it keep us from doing what we believe is wrong, but it also empowers us to do what we believe is right. In that sense, self-control helps us not only "put on the brakes" but also "step on the gas" or "pedal forward" when we need to.

4. Generosity

Giving in the form of basic sharing is one of the earliest moral lessons we teach children. As we mature morally, we're more able to be generous in our giving and sharing, not just with our money and possessions but also with our time and attention, which is often more difficult to give than money. Generosity underpins forgiveness. In fact, *give* is half of the word *forgive*. When we forgive, we give up our demand that someone gets payback for hurting us. We let go of our anger and bitterness toward them. We give up at our attempts to get even. *While basic morality operates on the principle of reciprocity, forgiveness does not.* It operates on a higher principle: mercy. Forgiveness is generosity of spirit.

5. Honesty

People who are morally wise are honest. They can be trusted. They're clear, open and transparent. They have *integrity*, which in the words of Brené Brown is "choosing to practice your values rather than simply professing them." Integrity means following moral and ethical principles and having high moral character. Honesty honors the image of God

within us. In our dealings with other people, honesty shows that we're morally strong. There can be no morality without honesty.

6. Gratitude

One of the first moral lessons we teach children is how to respect people by using good manners, saying, "Please" and "Thank you." Gratitude, expressed as manners is important, but it's only a start. Mature gratitude is heart-felt and overflows in actions that give back or pass it on. In that sense, gratitude is linked with generosity. As we mature morally, our gratitude deepens, along with our reverence, wonder, and awe for all that God created.

7. Patience

People of high moral character have learned patience, a quality that is essential for relating to other people. Patience, in psychological terms, can be called "deferred gratification," the ability to wait to get something we really want or to wait to be rewarded for spending time and effort to achieve a goal. When we have to be patient over a long period of time, we call it perseverance or endurance.

8. Humility

Humility is acknowledging that there is a great deal that we do not know. It also acknowledges that whatever we do, we are not the best. Humility says both, "What can I bring to the table?" and "What can I learn at the table?" The apostle Paul said, "I try to find common ground with everyone" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Being humble also includes repenting, which means being able to say, "I'm sorry" and trying to turn a hurtful situation around, making amends as best we can.

9. Kindness

Kindness is a broad umbrella. In Old English, *kind* (spelled *cynd*) meant family or lineage. Generally, people favor their family, treating them with more kindness and grace than they give to people outside the family. So kindness is treating someone with grace and favor. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Father Thomas Hopko suggests that this last part means, "Love your neighbors as if they were one of you," meaning one of your family, one of your group. That means treating others with the same kindness, favor, and grace that we would grant to people in our own families and social groups.

#10 is in the notes for keynote 2, because it deserves its own space as the True North of our moral compass.

I first heard the phrase *moral compass* in a radio interview of novelist Scott Spencer. He said that one of his novels was inspired by the question, "What do you do when you are physically away from your moorings?" The answer to that question, he explained, depends

on your *moral compass*. His interviewer commented, "People close to us are our memory banks. They help explain our lives to us."

Think about that for a minute. People close to us are our memory banks. They help explain our lives to us. I would say, they often reflect our lives back to us. They help us find – or lose – our moral compass. I refer to these people in a child's life as *significant adults*.

Becoming morally wise is a lifelong process, and it develops in stages. That's where we come in, we who are *significant adults* in a child's life. What do I mean by *significant adult*?

Significant adults are influencers. They influence a child's choices, which means they influence that child's future. Traditionally, the most significant adults in a child's life are Mom and Dad. But not always. Of course, parents will always have a significant impact on their children, even if one or both parents are missing. But while the absence of a parent is significant, when I use that term, I'm referring to adults who are present in the child's life, who play an active role, and who strongly influence the child's choices and values:

Preschoolers *imitate* the signs of faith of significant adults. Signs of faith like praying and reading the Bible. They also imitate the morality displayed by significant adults.

Elementary age children *identify* with the faith and morals of the significant adults in their lives. "Do you know what movie *they're* going to watch?!" Or "*Dad* says that word all the time."

Tweens and teens are sensitive to the expectations of significant people and tend to conform to their wishes. And by the teen years, the significant people may not be adults.

To discover who the significant people are for a particular child, ask, "Who spends time with the child? (Not just in the same house, but *with* the child.) Who listens to the child? Who plays with the child?" The answer to these questions will usually reveal the identity of the significant people in the child's life.

Significant adults help children recognize and calibrate their moral compass.

So being a significant adult is a great privilege. We are a memory bank – for the world, for our peers, and for our children. It's our job to show our children how to work with their own temperament and skills to navigate the world.

Acts 17:28 says, "In [God] we live and move and have our being." The reverse is true as well: In us God lives and moves and has being. The point? We are not alone in our efforts to grow morally wise. We have the help of God's Spirit.

Neil Postman, a researcher who studied the social effects of media, said, "Children are the living messages we send to a world we will not see."

What message do you want to send? How will you send it?