

# Moral Issues

Shedding light on the  
critical moral problems  
of our time.

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Mirus

a Catholic Culture publication



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our time

by Jeffrey A. Mirus Ph.D.

Abortion, animal rights, capital punishment, contraception, environmentalism, health  
care, homosexuality, lying, suicide, war and more.

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# Introduction

September 27, 2011

Of some one hundred and twenty essays on CatholicCulture.org in which I have dealt with moral issues over the past eight years, the thirty-six collected here seem to me to be the most enduringly useful. In addition to four introductory and closing essays on moral theory and moral witness, they cover—in alphabetical order—such issues as abortion, animal rights, biomedical issues, capital punishment, contraception, environmentalism, health care, homosexuality, lying, marriage and gay marriage, the objectification of women and pornography, suicide and war.

In these essays, I sometimes try to establish the simple right or wrong of a particular moral question, and at other times I consider important related issues, side effects and repercussions. The various issues cannot be separated completely, both because all moral issues are intrinsically related and because the predispositions, strengths and weaknesses of a particular culture cause that culture to deal with all moral issues in similar ways. But readers will notice that two common moral topics in our own time are largely excluded from this collection.

The first is the morality of political decision-making. I have written many times on this topic, often in the context of assessing single-issue politics, or in attempting to develop guidelines for the classification and assessment of moral issues in determining how to vote, or again in outlining the proper moral sphere and operations of government. However, I have for the most part excluded those essays for two reasons: First, they are closely entwined with Catholic social doctrine, which I hope to address in a separate volume; and second, they would have made this collection far too long.

The second is the priestly sex abuse crisis. The reasons for exclusion in this case are more complex. The immorality of priestly sexual abuse is as obvious as it is grave. Nobody in our culture has any trouble seeing that it is wrong. Therefore, my own writings on this topic have been chiefly concerned with related issues, such as, on the one hand, the failure of internal Church reform and renewal which led directly to the crisis and, on the other hand, the hypocrisy of the larger culture in condemning the Church while at the same time lionizing free sexual expression in general, and homosexuality in particular.

It is still very difficult to deal with this topic without stimulating passions which tend

to obscure a more constructive moral discourse. It is better in this volume, I think, to save the issue of priestly sexual abuse—which, again, everybody agrees is seriously wrong—for a later study of Church reform. No doubt most of the other topics treated in this volume can occasion their own passions, but they are also the occasion of distinct moral disagreements. That is why these topics have been chosen here.

# Relativism and the Rights of Man

October 11, 2007

At the same time the Council of Europe was condemning creationism as a threat to human rights, Pope Benedict was warning against moral relativism for the very same reason. An innocent bystander might be tempted to believe that Catholics are no better than secularists when it comes to attempting to stamp out alien ideas.

As always, however, one must consider the arguments (assuming there are any). The Pope's argument is that what's left of Western civilization is shooting itself in the proverbial foot by abandoning natural law in favor of roll-your-own ideas about right and wrong. This is because natural law is not a matter of faith, but a form of moral reasoning "accessible to all rational creatures." As such, it provides the common ground necessary to a well-ordered, just society.

Without the natural law, there is no objective means of resolving public debates. Legislation becomes "not the search for good but the search for power." In last week's private address to the International Theological Commission, Benedict noted that ethical relativism is often promoted on the assumption that it guarantees tolerance and mutual respect. To the contrary, he argued, relativism has placed the bonds of society at grave risk: "the fundamental essentials are at stake: human dignity, human life, the institution of the family and the equity of the social order—in other words, the fundamental rights of man."

This is a far cry from the logic of the Council of Europe and other secularist organizations and ideologues who attempt to dismiss contrary ideas simply by name-calling. Such ideas are always outdated, unscientific, medieval, authoritarian, intolerant, homophobic, puritanical, provincial, or insensitive. And the case is always self-evident; a simple assertion is enough to sweep aside all discussion; dialogue is in short supply. When John Paul II was pope, his ideas were dismissed because one couldn't really expect someone from the backwaters of Poland to understand the subtleties of modern thought. Now that Benedict is pope, well, it is hard to take a neo-fascist seriously.

Of course, in order for a true discussion to take place, all parties need to be willing to be governed by something other than their passions. But if everything is relative, what else is left?



# The Consequences of ... Consequentialism

August 04, 2010

It's really about whether the end justifies the means. In response to [Population Consequentialism](#), one of our users asked if I could provide a brief outline of what was wrong with *consequentialism* as a moral theory. He noted that, on the practical level, the notion that "you reap what you sow" can be a salutary school of behavior. And certainly there is some practical wisdom here, but only if we already know the difference between right and wrong. At the level of a moral theory—that is, as a way of determining right and wrong—consequentialism doesn't work at all. It is impossible to determine the morality of an action purely by assessing its consequences.

The first problem is that only God can see all the consequences of any moral action. We can't see them, and so we can't be expected to make a sound moral judgment based on our assessment of them. Making a moral decision based only on the consequences we think will follow from any particular action places us on very shaky ground. We may rightly guess some consequences and completely miss others, or we may look purely toward material or measurable consequences while ignoring spiritual ones, which by their nature cannot be measured. Or we may think that some action will make us happy only to find, in the end, that it makes us miserable—and vice versa.

The second problem is even deeper. It is simply impossible to assess the moral relevance of consequences without a prior standard of judgment already in place. Even God, who can see all consequences, cannot use consequentialism as His ultimate guide, for He would first have to judge the moral relevance of each consequence based on His deep understanding of the nature of things. After all, whether consequences are good or bad depends largely on how things are designed. Moreover, God must also advert to His knowledge of the Good in principle (really, His knowledge of Himself) in order to judge what constitutes the good or the bad (or the deprivation of a due good) in any given consequence.

In practical terms, of course, the theory of consequentialism is generally used to enable people to have a clear conscience when they feel a conflict between the desirable consequences which recommend an action to them and some cold moral principle which

tells them not to do it. How often have we seen this used, for example, in sexual matters? If pre-marital sex fosters “love” and brings you “closer” then do it! If an unborn child stands in the way of the happiness of an adult, then kill it!

In the last analysis, how do we know whether the consequences either of sex outside marriage or of abortion are bad or good unless we first understand the nature of human life, the dignity of the human person, the purpose of sex, and the vocation of marriage? And even if we understand these things to a point, how can we evaluate them properly if we don't understand that the human person was made for love or, even more commonly, if we don't really understand what love is? Moral principles, based on both the natural law and Divine Revelation, enable us to make sound moral decisions in spite of our own relative ignorance of the nature and purpose of things. (Moral principles also enlighten us about the very structure of reality, so that we might understand it better.)

On the basis of a fairly common consequential calculus, it can be argued that dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the morally right thing to do because the failure to do so would have prolonged the war, resulting in an even greater number of casualties. Thus the most obvious consequence of the use of the atomic bomb was a reduction in the total dead. And yet it remains morally wrong to deliberately target non-combatants in war, because the non-combatant has not forfeited his right to life by threatening the life of another. A prior moral understanding is required to assess such consequences properly, and to see that the consequence of the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent women and children has a very different moral weight than the consequence of the deaths of tens of thousands of enemy soldiers in battle.

Similarly, it can be argued by consequentialism that the sterilization of the retarded (or of ourselves) is morally good, because by this means we can avoid unwanted problems while promoting sexual freedom and personal prosperity. But sterilization is still a mutilation of the human person and, even when voluntary in ourselves, it involves a spiritual twisting away from love and responsibility. Or it can be argued that there is nothing morally wrong with embezzling funds from a corporation which is unlikely to know they are missing; after all, this has the decidedly good consequence of making me rich, and with no “down side”. Yet stealing remains wrong and, like all sins, it deadens the soul.

Because we are unable to foresee all the consequences—and even all the *kinds* of consequences—which flow from any given act, and because we cannot truly judge whether each of these consequences is essentially good or evil without a prior moral standard, consequentialism simply can't work. Principles drawn from beyond our own immediate perceptions and desires are absolutely essential. Moreover, in practice

consequentialists are invariably intent on justifying something they shouldn't want. So beware: The end really doesn't justify the means.

# The Women Who Have Abortions, and the Love They Need

November 10, 2008

The November/December issue of *Envoy Magazine* includes an article by Jane Brennan, entitled “How Could She Do That?”, about what motivates a woman to have an abortion. Jane herself had two abortions, worked with Planned Parenthood, and helped her sister get an abortion before she finally began to reevaluate everything she believed. Now she does pro-life counseling.

The article is not a statistical analysis; it is simply Jane’s own story. For Jane, feminist ideology, the lies of abortionists and their advertisements, limited understanding of the biological and metaphysical issues, widespread social acceptance, abusive relationships both as a child and as an adult, and a deep fear that each of her first two pregnancies would ruin her life all combined to drive her into the abortion culture. After her second abortion, Jane divorced an abusive husband. She later met and married a man who treated her well. Unfortunately, she needed counseling and chose to get it from a radical feminist counselor. The result was that she generally made her husband’s life a kind of hell. But when he moved out, she was shocked and upset enough to begin questioning everything the counselor had been telling her. Jane realized she had to change. Her husband moved back in. And Jane did change, ultimately finding relief and new life in a Catholic Church.

The point of Jane Brennan’s article is that pro-lifers need to try to understand the mindset of women who get abortions, as well as the problems they experience afterwards. She feels that many pro-lifers find the decision to abort incomprehensible, and that this limits their ability to reach these women. Brennan recommends that the pro-life movement make better use of women who have had abortions (such as those in the group Silent No More) to make presentations at parishes and elsewhere which will encourage other post-abortive women to begin to turn their lives around, and help pre-abortive women to do the same. As she says in her conclusion:

Then the grim reality of how abortion shatters lives would be heard, and soon it would not be thought of as a clinical procedure or a fundamental right but the tragedy it is. This might cause people to say, “I don’t want that to happen to my

daughter, my sister, my girlfriend, or to me. In fact I don't want abortion to happen at all."

Brennan's story is powerful and moving. While I think most people who work in pro-life counseling are far more sympathetic to the plight of women seeking abortions than Brennan tends to believe, there is no arguing with her recommendation that the pro-life movement should make greater use of personal testimony from those who have had abortions.

The pro-life movement also needs to make use of men who can get out the message of what it means to love. Brennan reveals this need in her own story when she notes that it was the departure of a man who actually treated her well that finally jolted her out of her self-centered, self-defeating philosophy of life. I have long argued that too many problems of contemporary women (especially the kind of problems that drive them to abortion) are caused by men who either do not know how to be men, or who refuse to be men—men who use women as toys, abandoning them when they no longer find them fun. Fathers who abuse and/or abandon their daughters; lovers and husbands who abuse and/or abandon their wives: These men are architects of insecurity and anger in women, both of which fuel feminism and a culture of death.

It is no coincidence that the wildly popular film *Bella* makes precisely this point; the film's hero ought to become a role model for males. My own prescription, therefore, is that in addition to inviting post-abortive women to become increasingly involved in pro-life work, we also need to recruit good men who can help spread the message of what it really means to love. Men must not only explain but demonstrate with their lives what it means to love a woman as Christ loves the Church. There will always be exceptions, and some good men have been devastated by a wife's decision to abort. Nonetheless, I think it is not too much to say that the single most important force in ending the epidemic of abortion is something men have the power to do: Love.

# Abortion and the Isolation of Women

August 14, 2009

It may be that nobody cares enough to change, but writers across the spectrum have pointed out how divorce impoverishes women. More often than not, the woman retains custody of the children. Frequently the woman has devoted significant amounts of time and energy to homemaking while the man has built his career. Statistically, more women depend financially on men than vice versa. If we remove a supportive and protective adult male from a household, that household will almost always experience a dramatic drop in per capita income.

Then there's the question of a woman's relative ability to make a good income. There are some legitimate reasons that women don't (statistically) fare as well in the workplace as men. If one's goal as an employer is to hire someone who will put work first for a great many years, then women are not the safer bet. Nor, in my opinion, should they be. But whatever the combination of reality and prejudice that holds women down in the workplace, these factors provide additional reasons that divorce tends to impoverish women far more than it does men, even when men have the additional financial burden of alimony and child support. Which too often goes unpaid.

Now one might think that abortion would be part of the solution to this problem. Left to nature, women who are embraced intimately by men will normally conceive and give birth. Therefore it would seem that if we thwart nature by aborting the child at a reasonably early stage of development, then we are effectively defending the woman's equality with the man. Of course, unless we also condone and encourage both infanticide and the killing of older children, we cannot through judicial murder address the fact that many couples start off by wishing to have children. The kids come, by mutual intention, before the divorce or abandonment. In any case, as we will see, the abortion mentality invariably lowers the position of women in a whole variety of ways, no matter what stage of motherhood they are in.

## Lack of Sympathy

Even a woman who was once married, if she is now burdened with children, will receive very little sympathy. The very fact that abortion was an option conveys an implacably cruel message to women: "The children are your fault. You and you alone could have

ended the pregnancy, but you stubbornly wanted kids. So you'll just have to live with that decision, won't you?" The same mindset applies doubly for an unmarried woman impregnated by her boy friend. If she resists the pressures (and often the beatings) by which either her man or her parents seek to compel her to abort, then she has only herself to blame when the man moves on to a more sexually-competitive woman, leaving the mother in poverty. The very possibility of abortion always tends to isolate women.

In an article in the August/September issue of *First Things*, Richard Still developed this point thoroughly under a compelling title: "Her Choice, Her Problem: How Abortion Empowers Men". Here is a sample passage:

Prior to the legalization of abortion in the United States, it was commonly understood that a man should offer a woman marriage in case of pregnancy, and many did so. But with the legalization of abortion, men started to feel that they were not responsible for the birth of children and consequently not under any obligation to marry. In gaining the option of abortion, many women have lost the option of marriage. Liberal abortion laws have thus considerably increased the number of families headed by a single mother, resulting in what some economists call the "feminization of poverty."

Stith has it exactly right. There is now a relatively affordable, relatively safe (for the mother), relatively acceptable and extremely widespread mechanism for preventing birth even after a pregnancy occurs. And the decision to make use of this mechanism rests (legally, at least) with the woman. Therefore, the man's role in the pregnancy, a mere malfunction of recreational sex, does not really cause her any insurmountable problem. She simply has to make a sensible decision. It's her problem if she doesn't.

### **Social Isolation**

Now in many good religious circles, particularly good Catholic circles, a pregnant woman in distress will generally be afforded the psychological support she deserves. Even if the conception of the child is regarded as sinful or unfortunate, the role of the male is recognized, and the decision to carry the child to term is considered admirable, even heroic. Thus family and friends can help her to deal with the sense of isolation caused by the blame and abandonment of her superficial lover. This is so because in such circles abortion is not a legitimate option.

But in most secular circles, including circles of those who adhere only to secularized and attenuated notions of what it means to be "spiritual", it isn't just the now-absent

father who abandons the mother, but nearly everyone else in her social circle. She will be psychologically abandoned by many friends and family members: “Why couldn’t you see reason? Why couldn’t you take the easy way out? You’ve just brought trouble on yourself. Why should we feel sorry for you when you have nobody but yourself to blame?”

Nor does this isolate only those women who become pregnant out of wedlock (or, let us say, outside of a relationship they fully expect to last). The availability of easy abortion puts all women on notice that anything to do with kids is essentially their fault. But just as it is natural for women to both bear children and nurture them, so too does easy abortion strip women of their nature, fostering a cultural atmosphere which pressures the woman to suppress her very self—her deepest desires, her instinctive tendencies, her highest aspirations and dreams of fulfillment. All these must she deny if she is not to be cruelly isolated from the world she used to cherish, the world in which so many enjoy each other’s carefree company and seem equally ready, if she will but deny herself, to enjoy hers.

Most persons are at times sexually playful, but it takes a deep denial of our very selves to become a sexual plaything. Immature men, including many older men who are trained up to a high level of immaturity by a pornographic culture, have a chronic tendency to make of women their sexual playthings while denying their personhood, their deep yearning for commitment, for family, for nurture and for growth—characteristics that are not only deeply personal but especially well-developed in female persons.

When society presses contraception, abortion and sterilization on women in the name of liberation, society speaks a colossal lie. The overwhelming effect of this technocratic separation (also a divorce) of procreation from intimacy is to eliminate commitment, eliminate nurture, eliminate growth, eliminate family. To play this game a woman must, as it were, isolate herself, engaging in a kind of self-alienation which fractures and destroys. Yet to refuse to play the game—or to have failed to play it when she thought she had a family commitment that later broke down—results in her alienation and isolation from others.

### **Women’s Liberation?**

In this context, all talk of woman’s liberation is utterly laughable. One marvels that the feminist movement is not outraged by all these steps our culture has taken to ensure that women cease to be themselves and become both physically and psychologically barren—like men with curves. A few feminist writers have seen it and have denounced



the results of abortion and divorce and all that goes with them for women, but most are so jealous of the male's capacity for reproductive irresponsibility that their only thought is to exalt that same capacity in women instead of seeking to diminish it in men.

To the contrary, women will never be liberated unless our culture can send them a vastly different message, a message of affirmation instead of isolation, a message that the aspiration for commitment, nurture, growth and family is altogether good and noble, and a message that women who exemplify this aspiration are to be praised, supported and emulated. Our idea of sexual intimacy must be reunited with its natural outcome in procreation, so that sexual intimacy can once again become personal intimacy: A profound physical, emotional and spiritual joining which more perfectly images the Creator and demands a stability and fidelity capable of mirroring the Creator's love. The idea of masculinity must also be reunited with the male instinct to create space for him and his, to protect what he loves against anything that would tear it away, to make a noble sacrifice that is uniquely his own.

Unfortunately our culture, our media, and our laws are largely controlled by overheated adolescent minds, both male and female, which have almost no idea of the consequences of their own disordered desires. Indeed, the world is full of people who can easily understand why a woman might get pregnant, but cannot understand—for the life of them or anyone else—why a woman should give birth.

An abortion culture—a culture of death—hurts everyone, but in different ways. First of all, of course, it kills the baby. But over a longer term and in deeper psychological, emotional and spiritual ways, it enables selfish men to twist women to their own deceptive purposes, deeply alienating those whom they are most called to cherish. Men need to learn to embrace women again as persons, not just as bodies. This is the only way to end the abortion culture, a culture that, despite its claims, always and invariably isolates women by refusing them love.

# God and Mammon: Catholic Support for Abortion

April 16, 2009

Recently I exchanged emails with a correspondent who argued that a Catholic political stance in favor of abortion is morally acceptable because the evil of abortion is something that we know only from Faith, and not something that all men can know as demonstrably true. When I suggested in reply that the Catholic position on abortion is based on natural law, and so its truth is knowable by all, my correspondent responded that I was simply wrong. It is not possible, he said, to understand the evil of abortion experientially, as we do with other actions proscribed by civil law. Therefore, Catholics such as Joseph Biden and Nancy Pelosi (and Fr. Robert Drinan before them) can recognize the evil of abortion from their Faith while, at the same time, legitimately choosing to vote in favor of it as a matter of civil law.

This is, of course, merely a more sophisticated expression of the argument against “imposing our religious views” on others (including, apparently, on ourselves). In fact, it raises the argument to the Nth degree, in effect asserting that we may not endorse a public prohibition of anything that all men cannot (or do not?) know certainly and experientially to be evil. The mind boggles at the complacent absurdity of this argument.

## Natural Law and Natural Justice

The first defense against such absurdity is to insist, with the Church, that it is an essential purpose of civil government to foster justice: to ensure that each person receives his due, to criminalize actions which strip another of what is rightfully his, and to punish those who commit such crimes. A large part of civil government is necessarily occupied with the protection of life, property and legitimate human opportunity from both internal and external assault. It is precisely our natural knowledge of these things which forms the basis of our civil pursuit of justice; in other words, our responsibility for proper civil government derives immediately from the natural law.

Now, in considering natural justice as a practical matter, it will often be preoccupied with those things about which most citizens agree, but it is ludicrous deliberately to restrict its implementation to such matters, let alone confine it to those things about

which the entire body of citizens claims to be certain. A moment's reflection reveals that such an approach is unworkable. There may be any number of citizens or groups of citizens who fail to understand that stealing from businesses is wrong, that blacks and whites have equal human rights, that children are not mere things, that women possess the same dignity as men, that workers have a right to the fruits of their labor, and so on. In fact, history is replete with instances of entire cultures which have failed to recognize some aspects of the natural law that our own culture finds obvious (and vice versa).

But just as ignorance of the positive law is no excuse, neither is ignorance of the natural law, for the understanding of the natural law and its codification in positive law is a work of reason which citizens are always expected to possess even when they fail to exercise it properly. Consequently, operating with prudence, civil government not only may but must act in accordance with natural justice, however dimly perceived. In fact, the failure to do so on a major scale is sufficient to render a government illegitimate, and to permit its legitimate replacement should the opportunity arise. While in practice no culture and no government ever recognizes all of its obligations under the natural law, every government has a duty to pursue natural justice even when—perhaps especially when—some among the citizenry wish to deny justice to others in their midst while claiming that this denial is necessary or even good.

It ought to go without saying that the first requirement of justice is to protect that which is both dearest to each person and most fully his own, namely his very life. It is a relatively simple exercise of reason to understand that all innocent human persons have a right to life, and that there is a moral obligation to protect that right through all the stages of a human person's existence. The fact that, for any number of reasons, some persons are blind to this reality when it comes to groups they dislike or find inconvenient does not provide a warrant for declaring the protection of life optional for these groups. In practice, of course, grave injustices may arise and there may be very little anyone can do about them. But in theory, the obligation to protect the right to life is clear, and there can be no possible justification for concluding that, because not all citizens recognize that right, it is therefore permissible for those who do recognize it to frame laws as if they do not. The only possible excuse for someone to work in favor of the violation of the right to life, or in favor of any other grave natural moral evil, is serious confusion; but again, such confusion about naturally-knowable goods is rightly considered blameworthy.

### **Christianity Clarifies Nature**

Because of the weakness of the human intellect and the influence of the passions, men frequently make mistakes about what is good, and so they misunderstand issues of

natural justice. For this reason, pagan societies frequently have large gaps in the understanding and application of the natural law. It is also true that the light of faith and the influence of grace lift the intellect out of darkness and help it, without superceding nature, to perceive more accurately all natural truths. As societies have become Christian, their sense of natural justice has been strengthened and many disputed principles have become more clearly understood and more properly valued.

Thus, for example, many pagan societies (or even nominally Christian societies too influenced by pagan ideas) have erroneously held that some human groups are not fully human, that some particular human condition renders one less than human, or that in any case human persons themselves possess neither an innate dignity nor rights. How often has might made right, with the powerful neatly disposing of the less powerful according to their whims! In our own culture, we tend not to be blind about the stages of human life (our biology is too good), or about racial or sexual equality. But we tend to be very confused about what a person is, about the meaning and purpose of sexuality, and about whether any person has sufficient dignity to trump the desires of those who are healthier, wealthier or more powerful. Thus the inconvenient and defenseless in society are again at grave risk—the unborn, the handicapped, the elderly, the ill. Renewed exploitation of women by men, and of children by parents, is not far behind.

Now it is certainly true that there is a cultural clash between those whose intellects and consciences are enlightened by Christianity and those whose intellects and consciences have become darkened through their own weakness, cultural pressures, and personal sin. But in the civil order this clash is primarily over the understanding of natural justice, and those who properly perceive the demands of natural justice can have no excuse for failing to answer those demands even when others lack understanding. They certainly may not use the foolishness and perversity of their neighbors as an excuse for the promotion of injustice in the name of civic responsibility. Matters that can be known only through Revelation are quite different. Here God calls each one to Himself in a free response of Faith. But with natural justice it is otherwise. In the pursuit of justice, men make serious demands of each other for the sake of what is naturally good and right. Moreover, in the civil order, the exercise of justice is necessarily coercive.

### **Personal Responsibility**

But let us suppose for a moment that the right to life of the unborn child is not a matter of natural justice. Let us suppose instead that it can be known only through Faith that an unborn child is a human person with the same rights as his parents, including a right to life which all just societies must recognize. If such were the case, would a Christian who

recognized the personhood of the unborn be justified in voting in favor of abortion because his fellow citizens cannot be expected to recognize that personhood? Answer: The very idea is absurd.

If I know, from whatever source, that my friends are persons, but I see that others who are less enlightened wish to deny their personhood and murder them, am I justified in promoting laws that protect such murder? Laws that make it easier? Laws that encourage it? Laws that reduce the murderers' risks? Am I not rather obliged to do everything in my power to protect the rights of my friends, to frame laws and policies based on a recognition of their personhood, to restrain and, if necessary, punish those who unjustly try to take their lives? By what possible convolution of argument would I be justified in thinking the blindness of others gives me the responsibility of protecting that blindness through laws that both perpetrate and justify the gravest possible injustice to my friends?

It is wrong to think that there are two conflicting truths, a sacred truth and a secular truth, a religious truth and a civil truth. We cannot say, "My religion teaches me that unborn human life is sacred, but the secular world teaches me either nothing or the opposite. Therefore, when I am in Church, I will defend the unborn, but when I act in the civil order, I will work to ensure that the unborn may be killed. In this way, I will fulfill both my religious and civil responsibilities." Of course, nobody argues this way, and in any case, those who favor abortion in the civil order do not condemn it when they are in Church. Instead, they are either deeply confused at all times or, very likely in some cases, they are simply cultural opportunists at all times.

With respect to this last point—that of cultural opportunism—I return to a suspicion I have raised on many occasions, the suspicion that most pro-abortion Catholics are driven primarily (albeit often unknowingly) by a desire for acceptance and favor among those they regard as the leaders of our culture. Though the number of politicians active both in the 1960's and today is growing small, it has been widely noted over the years that many politicians, including many Catholic politicians, who became advocates of abortion in the 1970's and beyond, were on record as firmly opposing abortion a decade earlier. One cannot judge any person's motives, but one can recognize that in politics as in life in general—and perhaps especially among those who are attracted to politics—there is a strong desire to "fit in" with the movers and shakers, the cultural elite, the Right People.

### **Absurdity Redux**

There is, in other words, a strong desire to adopt fashionable positions rather than to assume personal responsibility for one's decisions. In any case, it is a failure to assume

personal responsibility (and often a lie as well) which causes people to justify their positions by saying they are “personally opposed but” or that they “must not impose their religious views” or that they are justified in approving, promoting and protecting grave evil because a great many of their contemporaries neither know the difference nor (so my correspondent asserted) can be expected to know the difference.

None of this is new. These are ever the arguments of the weasels and the wafflers who wish to be justified in the sight of all, and who love nothing more than to appear to occupy the moral high ground while behaving exactly as the prevailing culture wishes them to behave. Such arguments, when they do not come from those who are profoundly confused morally, are merely the stock in trade of hypocrites. Were the same arguments propounded to justify slavery or the exploitation of women, their fallacies would be immediately spotted, exposed and denounced. The fact that our cultural elites frown on these positions would actually compel Catholics who support abortion to reach, in these other cases, a straightforward and logical conclusion at last.

Can you imagine the following? “I am personally opposed to slavery, but it is my civil duty to make it legally possible for the many who suffer from too many responsibilities to own slaves.” Or, “I know from my Faith that women have the same human dignity as men, but exploitation of women is a widespread need in civil society and to uphold the right of men to act on these needs, we must frame laws that protect this exploitation.”

No, such assertions are taken seriously only when they pander to the larger culture. They are nothing more than evidence of a secularized conscience, a conscience formed not by the will of God but by the will of Mammon. A very high authority once said that we cannot serve both; indeed, the open mind boggles at such currying of favor even when it is unconscious, which is why I described it as complacent absurdity. Only in a topsy-turvy Wonderland does this logic hold—in Wonderland, where we can safely agree with Humpty Dumpty that our words mean exactly what we choose them to mean, neither more nor less, and where—sadly—the one who continually greets the sweetest of little roses with a cry of “Off with their heads” is the true queen of our hearts.

# Contraception: Why It's Wrong

March 15, 2007

The recent debate over contraception between Fr. Thomas Euteneuer of Human Life International and nationally syndicated talk-show host Sean Hannity has brought to center stage an issue which most Americans—and most Catholics—simply do not understand. Let's review what's wrong with contraception.

The *intrinsic* moral issue of artificial contraception is a marriage issue. Contraception has little or no intrinsic moral relevance outside of marriage. This contributes to the difficulty our culture has in understanding the problem, because our culture doesn't understand marriage either. After all, only about half of all couples are formally married. For this reason, it is perhaps best to start with what we might call the *extrinsic* moral issues associated with contraception, which apply to all sexual relations.

## The Consequences of Contraception

I am using the word “extrinsic” to apply to the consequences of contraception as opposed to its own essential moral character. Catholics are not consequentialists, and we don't determine the morality of an act by attempting to foresee all its consequences. But we do determine the prudence of an act by assessing its potential consequences. For this reason, it is highly instructive to examine the extrinsic moral issues associated with contraception.

Even morally neutral acts can have good or bad consequences and should be selected or avoided accordingly. It is a morally neutral act, for example, to dam a river, but one wants to be pretty sure of the consequences before one builds the dam. So too, many moralists have argued (I believe correctly) that contraception is morally neutral in itself when considered outside of marriage. But contraception suppresses the natural outcome of sexual intercourse, and in so doing it has two immediate and devastating consequences.

First, it engenders a casual attitude toward sexual relations. An action which, because of the possibility of conceiving a child, makes demands on the stability of the couple is stripped by contraception of its long-term meaning. The mutual commitment of a couple implied by the very nature of this intimate self-giving is now overshadowed by the fact that the most obvious (though not necessarily the most important) reason for that

commitment has been eliminated. This clearly contributes to the rise of casual sex, and the rise of casual sex has enormous implications for psychological and emotional well-being, personal and public health, and social cohesion.

Second, it shifts the emphasis in sexual relations from fruitfulness to pleasure. Naturally-speaking, the sexual act finds its full meaning in both emotional intimacy and the promise of offspring. For human persons, sex is clearly oriented toward love and the creation of new life. By eliminating the possibility of new life and the permanent bonding it demands, contraception reduces the meaning of human sexuality to pleasure and, at best, a truncated or wounded sort of commitment. Moreover, if the meaning of human sexuality is primarily a meaning of pleasure, then any sexual act which brings pleasure is of equal value. It is no surprise that pornography and homosexuality have mushroomed, while marriage has declined, since the rise of the “contraceptive mentality”. Abortion too has skyrocketed as a backup procedure based on the expectation that contraception should render sex child-free. All of this, too, is psychologically, emotionally and physically damaging, as well as destructive of the social order.

### **The Intrinsic Evil of Contraception**

Now all of these evil consequences apply both inside and outside of marriage. Within marriage, however, there is an intrinsic moral problem with contraception quite apart from its horrendous consequences. Outside of marriage, sexual relations are already disordered. They have no proper ends and so the frustration of these ends through contraception is intrinsically morally irrelevant. Outside of marriage, contraception is to be avoided for its consequences (consequences surely made worse by the difficulty of psychologically separating contraception from its marital meaning). But within marriage, the context changes and the act of contraception itself becomes intrinsically disordered.

Within the context of marriage, the purposes of sexual intercourse are unitive and procreative (as Pope Paul VI taught in his brilliant and prophetic encyclical *Humanae Vitae*). It is worth remembering that there is no proper context for sexual intercourse apart from marriage; this is why it is impossible for human persons to psychologically separate contraception from the marital context. But the point here is that marriage has certain ends (the procreation of children, the stability of society, the mutual happiness of the couple, and their mutual sanctification) and so does sex within marriage. The purposes of the marital act are the procreation of children and the progressive unification of the spouses. These two purposes are intimately related, for it is through marriage that a man and a woman become “two in one flesh”, both through sexual relations and, literally, in their offspring.



It is intrinsically immoral to frustrate either of these purposes. Let me repeat this statement. It is immoral to choose deliberately to frustrate either the unitive or the procreative ends of marital intercourse. It is immoral to make of your spouse an object of your pleasure, to coerce your spouse, or to engage in sexual relations in a manner or under conditions which communicate callousness or contempt. These things frustrate the unitive purpose. It is also immoral to take deliberate steps to prevent an otherwise potentially fruitful coupling from bearing fruit. This frustrates the procreative purpose.

### **Related Issues**

Because it causes so much confusion, it is necessary to state that it is *not* intrinsically immoral to choose to engage in sexual relations with your spouse at times when these relations are not likely to be fruitful. The moral considerations which govern this decision revolve around the obligation married couples have to be genuinely open to children insofar as they can provide for their material well-being and proper formation. There is nothing in this question of timing that frustrates the purposes of a particular marriage act.

Statistically, couples who avoid contraception find that their marriages are strengthened, their happiness increased, and their health improved. Some of these considerations are topics for another day. But Fr. Euteneuer is clearly correct and Sean Hannity is clearly wrong. Contraception is a grave evil within marriage and has grave consequences not only within marriage but outside of marriage as well. Both individual couples and society as a whole will mature into deeper happiness by freeing themselves from the false promises of contraception, and from its moral lies.

# Plan B and the Case of Rape

December 14, 2007

Recently the bishops of Connecticut were faced with a new State law requiring that all hospitals (including Catholic hospitals) administer the drug known as Plan B to victims of rape, provided a pregnancy test is negative. Before the law was passed, the bishops stated that they could not comply if the law did not also include an ovulation test. But when the State passed the law anyway, the bishops changed their position.

## Looking Bad in Connecticut

Plan B is both a contraceptive and an abortifacient drug. The bishops had initially argued that a negative pregnancy test was insufficient evidence that no new human life was present, because pregnancy tests typically do not detect the existence of a fertilized ovum until bodily changes begin after implantation, which occurs six to twelve days after fertilization. Even the best test can determine pregnancy only within 48 hours, but this test is time-consuming, expensive and seldom used.

For this reason, the bishops held that an ovulation test should also be required prior to mandatory administration of Plan B, because this alone could ensure that a baby had not been conceived. However, when the law went into effect without this provision, the Bishops created something of a scandal by changing their minds. Abandoning what they had advanced as representing the opinion of the majority of Catholic moralists, they instead focused on the fact that some moralists disagreed, and they concluded there was sufficient moral doubt, as well as sufficient doubt about how Plan B works, to permit compliance with the law after all. (See [their final statement](#).)

## The Points at Issue

It is extremely unfortunate that the bishops' change of mind occurred in response to the bill becoming law, because the timing weakens their moral credibility. Therefore, I prefer to outline the necessary Catholic principles independently rather than attempting to draw them out of the shifting reasoning of the Connecticut bishops. Plan B does two things. It prevents ovulation so that there are no eggs for sperms to fertilize (contraception proper) and, if eggs are present, it prevents fertilized eggs from implanting in the uterus (that is, abortion). The Church's teaching is very clear on the fact that direct abortion is always

wrong, even in the case of rape. However, many who accept this position have expressed confusion on the two remaining moral points at issue:

1. In rape cases with a negative pregnancy test but no ovulation test, may abortion be tolerated as an unintended consequence of attempting to prevent ovulation?
2. In rape cases, is the prevention of ovulation (that is, true contraception) permissible?

The original position of the Connecticut bishops was based on a negative answer to the first question and a positive answer to the second. Their final position answered both questions positively. In the ensuing discussions, some Catholics have claimed that orthodoxy requires both questions to be answered negatively. I shall argue that the original position of the bishops was in fact correct: “No” to the first question; “Yes” to the second.

In discussing these issues it is important to recognize that an accurate understanding of the way Plan B works is critical to the analysis. My understanding is that Plan B is supposed to prevent ovulation. If ovulation occurs, it may also prevent implantation of the fertilized ovum in the uterus. For this reason, if ovulation has not occurred, the goal in the case of rape is to prevent it from occurring, thereby rendering pregnancy impossible. But if ovulation has occurred, the only possible goal is to prevent implantation—that is, to kill somebody. The moral problems connected with these issues are exacerbated by the fact that we cannot know with absolute certainty exactly what is going on in all cases.

### **Abortion as an Unintended Consequence**

Unintended consequences do not render an otherwise moral act immoral. In a war, if I take care to destroy an ammo dump when no innocent civilians are present, the fact that an innocent civilian wanders into the ammo dump moments before I cause it to explode does not alter the moral permissibility of the action I have taken. On the other hand, if I deliberately ignore the known fact that the enemy randomly runs neighborhood children through the dump to deter my aggression, my plan is morally flawed from the first.

Presumably, the Connecticut Bishops had something of this sort in mind when they rendered their final compliance decision for Plan B. It isn't certain whether Plan B will work through contraception or abortion, and while a positive pregnancy test can establish the presence of a new person, a negative pregnancy test cannot tell us that no new person

is present. Presumably, the bishops concluded that, as the Catholic intention in administering Plan B to a rape victim is to prevent conception, and as it is unknown under Connecticut law whether no fertilized ovum is present, any resulting death may be construed as an unintended consequence.

It is a fairly complex business, but I believe this logic fails because the bishops have accepted the State's order to keep themselves in ignorance of ovulation. Through a simple test, it can be determined whether ovulation has occurred. If it has not occurred, administration of Plan B may rightly be intended to prevent it. If this strategy fails, the unfortunate result may reasonably be viewed as an unintended consequence. But precisely because the test is possible, the failure to test indicates an unnecessary willingness to decide to administer the drug knowing that identifiable conditions may exist which render its purpose abortifacient. After all, if ovulation has occurred, the only possible purpose of administering Plan B is abortifacient. This seems to me to be morally flawed.

To add to the complexity, we have no choice but to acknowledge that no drug is 100% effective, and that Plan B is not always effective in preventing ovulation. Therefore, when it is used for this purpose, it is predictable that in some cases ovulation will still occur, and that fertilization may therefore also occur, and finally that implantation may be prevented. Does this invalidate the classification of the potential abortion as an unintended consequence? Though I am reluctant to say so, I believe this depends on the state of human knowledge, on percentages, and on intentions. If the normal operation of the drug is to prevent ovulation and the drug is generally regarded as very effective (both of which I understand to be true), then the decision to use it for this purpose, after determining that ovulation has not already occurred, appears to me to be morally valid.

Any consequent abortion, however tragic, would be similar to the unintended consequence of a stray civilian in the ammo dump: possible, but not likely, and certainly not intended. Note how much this depends on prudential judgements based on human expertise, which should always make us cautious, but note as well that, given enough instances of ammo dump destruction, the presence of a civilian could also be statistically predicted. If the likelihood were small, it would not alter the moral case. Absolute certainty concerning circumstances is seldom possible for man.

### **Contraception in Rape Cases**

The difficulty of the foregoing discussion permits me to engage the bishops of Connecticut with some degree of sympathy, even though I believe they decided wrongly

to comply with the State's new law. As I have indicated, there is a great deal of necessary human calculation in this question which, without further clarifications from the Magisterium of the Church, renders it at the very least difficult to assess. It is with some relief, therefore, that I turn my attention to the second and far simpler question, namely, whether contraception is moral in the case of rape. In this discussion I am referring to true contraception, that is, the prevention of conception. I am not using the term *contraception* as a euphemism for certain kinds of abortion.

Some severe Catholic moralists who disagree with the Connecticut bishops have presented an argument based on the natural law. These authors contend that we know from natural law that the sexual act must be open to life and, therefore, all contraception is immoral. They cite the constant teaching of the Church on this question, most fully enunciated in Pope Paul VI's great encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

Unfortunately, they cite the Church's teaching wrongly, and so they thoroughly misunderstand the natural law. They attempt to discern the natural law from biology by itself, which is impossible. The natural law is read properly only within the innate human perception of context, that uniquely human understanding which enables us to discern the teleology of natural things. The natural law is not found, therefore, in an isolated biological analysis. If it were, it would be immoral for humans to fly. In fact, according to the Church, the natural law governing the sexual act's openness to life is dependent not on isolated biology but on biology within marriage.

### **The Natural Law and the Marital Act**

*Humanae Vitae* makes this very clear, and I will add italics in the following citations to bring out the key point. In this encyclical, Paul VI says that the new questions regarding contraception require the Church to make a deeper reflection on the principles of "the moral teaching on *marriage*—a teaching which is based on the natural law." He argues that the Church has always issued such documents "on the nature of *marriage*," and that the reason he did not leave the issue to the majority report (delivered by the commission he established to study the question) was because some opinions had emerged which were "at variance with the moral doctrine on *marriage* constantly taught by the magisterium of the Church." (#4 and #6)

The Pope then goes on to discuss "*married love*", which he defines as human ("not just a question of natural instinct or emotional drive") and freely willed "so that *husband and wife* become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment." Such love is total, faithful, exclusive, and fecund. He then discusses "responsible parenthood", which concerns "the objective moral order which was

established by God” and in which the “*husband and wife*, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties toward God, themselves, their families and human society.” “From *this*,” he states, “it follows that they are not free to act as they choose in the service of transmitting life, as if it were wholly up to them to decide what is the right course to follow.” (#9 - #10)

Finally, Pope Paul goes on to treat sexual activity *only* in this marital context: “The sexual activity, in which *husband and wife* are intimately and chastely united with one another, through which human life is transmitted” is noble and worthy. And so the Church, “in urging men to observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every *marital act* must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life” (#11). And finally:

This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the *marriage act*. (#12)

## Outside of Marriage?

For the Church, the term “marital act” is not merely a euphemism for “sexual intercourse”. The natural law enunciated in the constant teaching of the Church applies specifically and exclusively within marriage. Indeed, outside of marriage, the sexual act is simply wrong, no matter how noble its purpose, or how open to life and love it may be. And this too is governed by the natural law, which reserves the sexual act to marriage, something that cannot be determined by isolated biology, which produces its results either way.

In fact, when the sexual act occurs outside of marriage, the use of contraception is not intrinsically immoral; it does not compound the sin. Rather, it is intrinsically irrelevant. In the larger picture, of course, if someone is utilizing contraceptives in order to support a promiscuous lifestyle, the intention is evil, and so the act. Similarly, Church leaders have generally opposed all programs designed to solve problems through the widespread distribution of contraceptives because such programs have a severe tendency to justify or encourage promiscuity. The evil consequences are inevitably and always present, and they are disproportionate to any supposed benefits. But this does not speak to the *intrinsic* evil of a particular contraceptive act, which evil obtains intrinsically only

within marriage.

Most Catholics would instinctively “feel” that in the event of rape, a woman would be justified in taking reasonable steps to prevent the attacker’s sperm from fertilizing one of her eggs, and in this case most Catholics would be correct. Certainly she must avoid intending to kill a newly formed child if he is present, and she must avoid any techniques which are designed to kill a child unless she can be reasonably certain that no child is present. But she is perfectly justified in attempting to prevent conception, by a thorough flushing or any other genuinely contraceptive means. It is only those Catholics who have gotten the Church’s natural law teaching wrong who fall into the contrary mental trap.

### **Not Easy**

None of this is easy—neither the situation, nor the science, nor the moral reasoning which must be so carefully undertaken. The first argument, which involves an understanding of the effects of drugs, the weighing of probabilities, and the evaluation of human intentions, is exceedingly difficult to nail down. I can only say that I have tried to outline it correctly. The second argument—the argument that pure contraception is morally permissible in the case of rape—is, I believe, unanswerable. In the end, I am primarily concerned that the Church’s teachings on the natural law within marriage should be rightly understood. In this context, no Catholic should be driven by a mistaken sense of duty to require a rape victim to suffer anything she is not morally bound to accept.

[**Note:** A few days after I posted this analysis, a reader drew my attention to a recent study in *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* concerning evidence that Plan B may not have an abortifacient effect, the manufacturer’s literature notwithstanding. See the follow-up in my blog, [Plan B: Not an Abortifacient?.](#)]

# Contraception and the Catholic Vision

May 16, 2008

On May 10th, Pope Benedict XVI called Paul VI's landmark encyclical *On Human Life* an act of courage which has "become a sign of contradiction." He made his remarks at a conference on the fortieth anniversary of the encyclical held at the Pontifical Lateran University. While many Catholics still find *Humanae vitae*'s condemnation of contraception difficult to understand and accept, it should be more than evident by now that the Catholic vision of life and love enunciated by Pope Paul VI is one of the great keys to reviving our dying culture.

## Rejection of the Encyclical

I take it as a given that the widespread use of contraception among Catholics does not reflect a reasoned response to Church teaching. Rather it arises from the prevailing patterns of our sex-saturated culture and the widespread rejection of *Humanae vitae* by the secularized moral theologians who have passed themselves off as Catholic teachers over the past two generations. While it did take some time for the Magisterium and faithful theologians to articulate persuasively the reasons for the immorality of contraception, it has long since become clear that the immediate and prolonged rejection of the Church's teaching was rooted as much in moral turpitude as in intellectual difficulties. Many in the academy and elsewhere had their own perverse sexual habits to protect.

Essentially, Paul VI articulated the timeless Catholic teaching that there is an inseparable bond between the unitive and procreative aspects of marital love, and that it is always wrong to deliberately frustrate either the unitive or the procreative purpose of the marital act. The core of the teaching, which is a matter of the natural law, is most succinctly summarized in section 12:

This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.

Reading a little further, in section 13, we find the essential moral context, with a strong



suggestion of the nobility of adhering to God's plan:

Hence to use this divine gift while depriving it, even if only partially, of its meaning and purpose, is equally repugnant to the nature of man and of woman, and is consequently in opposition to the plan of God and His holy will. But to experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception is to acknowledge that one is not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of Catholic couples have never been presented with a clear outline of the Church's teaching on this matter, nor of the consequences of ignoring it, nor of the benefits of following it.

### **Fundamental Vision**

In his comments at the anniversary conference, Pope Benedict emphasized that “no mechanical technique can substitute for the act of love that husband and wife exchange as a sign of the greater mystery, in which they are protagonists and co-participants in creation.” Paul VI saw clearly that this “act of love” is not merely a physical act, but a truly marital act of love in all of its dimensions, an act which both recognizes and expresses the dignity of the spouses and their mutual relationship to God, and an act in which the spouses surrender themselves to each other, holding nothing back, yet without ever losing that fundamental discipline of love which puts the other and God above their own individual pleasure. In a critical passage in section 21, which is worth quoting at length, Paul VI expresses something of the true and complete dimensions of this act of love:

The right and lawful ordering of birth demands, first of all, that spouses fully recognize and value the true blessings of family life and that they acquire complete mastery over themselves and their emotions. For if with the aid of reason and of free will they are to control their natural drives, there can be no doubt at all of the need for self-denial. Only then will the expression of love, essential to married life, conform to right order. This is especially clear in the practice of periodic continence. Self-discipline of this kind is a shining witness to the chastity of husband and wife and, far from being a hindrance to their love of one another, transforms it by giving it a more truly human character. And if this self-discipline does demand that they persevere in their purpose and efforts, it has at the same time

the salutary effect of enabling husband and wife to develop their personalities and to be enriched with spiritual blessings. For it brings to family life abundant fruits of tranquility and peace. It helps in solving difficulties of other kinds. It fosters in husband and wife thoughtfulness and loving consideration for one another. It helps them to repel inordinate self-love, which is the opposite of charity. It arouses in them a consciousness of their responsibilities. And finally, it confers upon parents a deeper and more effective influence in the education of their children. As their children grow up, they develop a right sense of values and achieve a serene and harmonious use of their mental and physical powers.

*Humanae vitae* was prophetic when it was first promulgated, because the consequences of breaking the bond between the unitive and the procreative in marital love were not then as clear as they are now. Within twenty years, however, the trends had become very clear indeed: contraception leads to selfishness, the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake, objectification of spouses, pornography, sexual exploitation, divorce, homosexuality and abortion. These trends are now so obvious that Catholic leaders who do not yet instinctively understand the centrality and importance of the Church's vision of human life and love are simply incapable of representing the Church and transmitting Christ's salvific power to society today.

### **The Contraceptive Mentality**

Every age and culture is marked by characteristic vices. Our culture is drowning in sexual selfishness, an insatiable desire for constant gratification without consideration of the consequences. Of course each person is highly complex, and I do not mean to suggest that everyone who uses contraception will inevitably be led into every other sexual vice. But the connections are there. As soon as we start thinking of sex only in terms of pleasure, divorcing it from the power to generate new life, we not only trivialize it but also alter its defining purpose. The clearest example of this is the use of abortion as backup contraception. If the sole purpose of sex is pleasure, then one can only assume that it is perfectly moral to attempt to prevent conception. If the attempt fails, abortion becomes the logical means to retain the original goal of trouble-free sexual pleasure.

Moreover, the connections between contraception and homosexuality (and other forms of sexual perversion) should by now be equally clear. If the purpose of sex is pleasure, then its purpose is properly fulfilled by any use of our sexual faculties that brings pleasure. It is very nearly impossible for someone who approves of contraception to argue against homosexual acts, or even homosexual "marriages" (which arise when

marriage is redefined as a close personal union designed to give pleasure). No, the key to that castle has already been given away. But this is also true of every kind of perversion, including the most widespread contemporary form, pornography. For pornography is also a use of our sexual faculties to produce pleasure. When the ends of human sexuality are not understood, pornography is self-justifying.

Yet it is precisely in the worldwide pornography epidemic that we can most easily see the power of ill-defined sexuality to destroy relationships. Since this is more commonly a male problem, I'll illustrate it in male terms. The husband (or significant other, already a distortion) finds pleasure in certain pornographic images. He becomes dissatisfied with the pleasure "produced" by his wife. He wants her to do things differently. He begins to twist her into a sort of performing object for his own sexual gratification. Still unsatisfied, he begins to look for even more gratification elsewhere. Respect and love vanish. The couple is now on the path to pain, rejection, divorce. But of course it can start even earlier. A young man more or less habituated to pornography will have a very difficult time forming a whole and deeply personal relationship with any woman. Far less often, but with no less devastation, the pornographic shoe can be on the feminine foot.

## Chastity

The purpose of sex is not merely pleasure. Its purpose is the procreation of new life with God in a unifying embrace which progressively forms a couple into a stable, mature and self-sacrificing union designed for their own sanctification and that of their children. This is what marital love means, and this is what human sexuality is for. Therefore, when couples catch the vision of Paul VI—when they "make love" in a context of self-discipline, deep mutual respect, sacrifice for the other and openness to life, including periodic abstinence—they find that their personalities really do develop. They become more sensitive to each others' needs, more inclined to communicate in other ways, more capable of working through problems and deficiencies that stand in the way of marital growth.

Chastity, one of the great virtues of self-mastery, is no less needed in marriage than in the single state. The fruits of this virtue are enormous, fruits directly opposing those of the contraceptive mentality, which is the hallmark of our culture's collective abandonment of chastity. I repeat that Catholic leaders—for example, professors, priests and bishops—who cannot by now see these connections are uniquely unfit to minister to the pressing Christian needs of contemporary civilization. For it is not that the Catholic Church is "hung up" on sex. Rather, it is contemporary culture which is "hung up" on

sex-for-pleasure. This is a lethal fixation, a poison that leads only to death, death at every conceivable level. Not surprisingly, the only antidote is to reinvest into sexuality the one thing that it has been missing now for far too long, that is, Life—the life of our spouse, the life of our child, the life of our God.

# The Pope, the Condom, and the Elephant

November 22, 2010

We've been paying close attention to the reports of Pope Benedict's comments regarding the use of condoms in certain special circumstances (see [What the Pope really said about condom use](#)). Among sound Catholic commentators, Janet Smith and Jimmy Akin were the first to weigh in, and they've both made important points. But nobody has responded effectively to the elephant in the room, perhaps because even most Catholic commentators are just a little bit afraid the elephant is real. Let me explain.

It is true, as Jimmy Akin says, that the Pope's remarks were not an exercise of his teaching authority. But to bring that up is to admit at least a mild fear that what he said somehow calls into question the clear and consistent teaching of the Church against contraception.

It is also true that, as Janet Smith notices immediately, the Pope's prime example for a possible acceptable or humanly positive use of condoms appeared to be a homosexual example, in which no contraception is involved. And as Smith also stresses, the Pope did note that the promotion of condom use to reduce the spread of AIDS is not regarded by the Church as a "moral" solution. But Smith seems just a little hasty in jumping on this rather than on the succeeding clause (which begins "but, in this or that case..."). Am I only imagining a temptation to "spin" the Pope's remarks lest they somehow undermine the previous clear teaching of the Church?

In other words, Jimmy Akin does an excellent job of showing the limits of the Pope's comments. Janet Smith does an excellent job of showing by analogy what the Pope was trying to express. Both did a far better job than the Vatican's own Press Office Director, Fr. Federico Lombardi, SJ, who tried to [explain away the uproar](#) by asserting the Pope was merely repeating commonly held Catholic ideas—without troubling to shed any light on these ideas whatsoever. But from the best to the worst, Catholic commentators seem to be rather deliberately ignoring the elephant in the room, as if to look at it directly could somehow endanger the Church.

So let's stare it straight in the eye. The elephant in the room is the conviction that if Pope Benedict acknowledges the possible moral good of using a condom in one

situation, then he is fundamentally weakening or retreating from the Church's teaching that contraception is intrinsically evil. This conviction is a great and gleeful hope among those who uphold contraception, but it is also an intense fear among those who have perceived the evil of contraception all along. The elephant, then, is this huge, gigantic, enormous conviction—whether welcome or unwelcome—that the Pope has put the Church's teaching on contraception in jeopardy.

But this elephant exists only in the minds of those, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, who do not fully understand the Church's teaching on contraception.

Note this well. The Church's teaching on contraception is that contraception is intrinsically evil *when used to frustrate the procreative purpose of the marital act*. In anticipation of exactly the sort of confusion we are witnessing today, I addressed this issue nearly four years ago in [Contraception: Why It's Wrong](#). The point to remember is that contraception is intrinsically evil only within marriage. Outside of marriage, sexual intercourse itself is intrinsically evil; outside of marriage, there is no marital act that must be kept open to life and love; outside of marriage, the morality of contraception must be determined on other grounds, namely extrinsic grounds.

This is exactly the kind of moral analysis the Pope was doing in the discussion which is now so much in the news. When, with respect to the distribution of condoms to reduce the risk of AIDS, the Pope says the Church “of course does not regard it as a real or moral solution, but, in this or that case, there can be nonetheless, in the intention of reducing the risk of infection, a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality”, he is doing exactly the sort of extrinsic moral analysis required for this case. He does not say, “Wait, stop right here, contraception is intrinsically immoral, there can be no further discussion.” He does not say this because that thinking applies only within marriage. Rather, he says we need to look at the circumstances, the moral context, and the moral trajectory.

The vast majority of Churchmen have rejected the idea of fighting AIDS with condoms because the public promotion of condoms tends to dehumanize sexual relations, emphasizing only the selfish pleasure to be gained, and bypassing altogether the responsibility called for in a truly human vision of sexuality. The Pope alludes to this when he mentions “a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality”. It is possible that in some specific cases, the use of a condom might be a step in the right direction (think of a rapist, for example). But Pope Benedict and most other Churchmen over the years have seen that the public promotion of condoms takes us in exactly the wrong direction overall, so that our last state is worse than our first. It further cheapens sexuality, and in so doing undermines the very values which alone can solve the AIDS

problem—and along with it the more fundamental problems which AIDS represents.

But none of this has any bearing on the Church's traditional teaching against contraception in marriage. Indeed, no matter what position the Pope or any other moralist may take on the use of condoms in particular situations which are already fundamentally disordered—situations in which sexual activity is already intrinsically immoral—that position cannot affect the Church's teaching on the use of condoms in sexual acts which are otherwise properly ordered and moral—that is, within marriage. In each and every properly ordered and therefore moral sexual act (that is, in each and every marital act), deliberate contraception remains intrinsically immoral.

There are many other aspects of this story that need to be addressed (see Phil Lawler's *In Depth Analysis* [The Vatican Newspaper has betrayed the Pope](#)). But the purity of Catholic doctrine is not one of them. Unfortunately, there really is an elephant in the room, and this elephant does dominate the vision of both secularists and Catholics—if they do not properly understand the Church's teaching on contraception. But the moment they do, the elephant disappears. Look it in the eye, and it is gone.

# Saving Women Through Cosmetic Surgery

September 28, 2006

According to a recent Canadian medical study, women who have cosmetic surgery are more likely to commit suicide. The study in question tracked thousands of women over a period of 25 years. It found that women who have figure-enhancing surgery are about 1.8 times more likely to take their own lives. For other cosmetic surgery, the figure is about 1.5 times more likely. Why?

## The Problem with Women

Cosmetic surgery can, of course, repair serious defects which anyone would want to correct. But most of it is performed to make an ordinary physical feature “better”. The kind of person who is sufficiently discontented with ordinariness to resort to surgery is obviously more likely to be suffering from depression, low self-esteem or the wrong values. Problems of low self-esteem and depression often have a spiritual component, but very frequently they need also to be dealt with professionally, on their own terms. For women driven to cosmetic surgery by these concerns, the inevitable result will be that the surgery does not relieve their interior stress.

A significant element of one’s self-esteem and overall happiness, of course, is value-based, or spiritual. For example, if we’re not academically-gifted but we grow up in a culture which constantly emphasizes the importance of academic success, we need significant internal resources to avoid having this emphasis adversely affect our own view of ourselves. In our culture, whatever other pressures may be at work, women are continuously judged by appearance, and the women’s market is dominated by products to improve appearance. Women learn early and often that they are stars if they are good-looking, and that they can dominate if they have a certain type of figure. Thus women must find within themselves substantial psychological and spiritual resources if they are to keep their balance, one way or the other, depending upon where they fall in the appearance spectrum.

## Largely a Problem with Men



I don't want to lay all of this at the feet of men; there is doubtless something about human nature which dictates that the female shall be somewhat more concerned with adorning herself to attract the male than the other way around. But a natural and healthy tendency is probably distorted less often by flaws in a particular woman's psyche than by the constant subtle and not-so-subtle pressure applied by men (and by other women thinking about or commenting on what men like). If you want to understand the motive for radical feminism, look for men who have treated women as objects and, in consequence, rejected or abandoned them. At a less socially-cataclysmic level, the destructive dependence on physical beauty for self-esteem has the same root.

You don't have to watch too many beer commercials featuring plain guys and gorgeous women to get the point. If men want to contribute to the well-being of women, they need to affirm women as total persons, not as physical objects. Other women, including sisters and mothers, need to do the same, instead of viewing each other through a distorted male lens. The sense of being valued and loved for who she is (first and foremost a daughter of God), rather than merely how she looks, is tremendously liberating for any woman (as it is, in a different context, for any man when he falls on hard times financially). Even favorite objects eventually become boring and are psychologically set aside at intervals, or perhaps permanently. This problem of the objectification of women is eliminated by every type and degree of authentic love.

### **Mainly a Spiritual Problem**

The root of most of these problems is spiritual. Worse, widespread spiritual problems are generally culturally conditioned, exacerbating each and every particular human weakness. By contrast, Christian culture grows from a spirituality which heals and perfects nature. Like every other counter-cultural trend, this healing and perfecting must begin in the home and will find its greatest initial success in the social and educational circles established by like-minded families. Because of our own fallenness, however, even the efforts of those on the right track must be rooted in daily prayer, custody of the eyes, and a sincere effort to control not only actions but thoughts. There are few of us, male or female, who are without some very relevant chinks in our proverbial armor.

Paradoxically, operating in denial of the fundamental differences between men and women doesn't help. A politically-correct, public-school mentality of denying the sexual component of identity fools no one and leaves our powerful sexual culture free to operate even more viciously just beneath the official surface. The bonds of this culture can be cut only with a spiritual knife, a continuous razor-like behavioral application of a proper understanding of human dignity, which cuts straight to the heart of the problem. Parents

must raise their sons and daughters to understand what this means, and to live by it. A very large factor in the formative years is the cultivation of modesty in the context of a regard for the total person. Unlike modern theories, modesty begins with an understanding of differences.

### **Fixing the Problem One on One**

While we have a great deal of work to do to change the message which women generally receive, especially from mass media and advertising, this is a problem which can be fixed one on one in any particular person's life. Each of us, by our choice of entertainment, our work habits, and even our everyday speech can do a great deal to send the right signals. In our culture, women have a desperate need for pure, affirming relationships with men, and with other women who have experienced such relationships. The proper spousal relationship is clearly critical, but our relationships with other women are also important. These may be paternal, or fraternal, or simply that of a co-worker, colleague or friend. In many cases, even one pure and affirmative relationship can make the difference between happiness and misery—and sometimes between life and death.

# Homosexuality: 1. The Disorder Question

April 15, 2010

This is one of those blog entries one hates to write. I received an email yesterday (in response to [The Lessons of the Scandal: Hypocrisy and Discipline](#)) which began: “I am a practicing Catholic. I do not believe that homosexuality is a ‘disordered state’. Many gay people have the sexuality they were born with. It does not reflect their morals, nor does it reflect their ‘normality’ in terms of sexuality.”

The author went on to argue that whether someone is sexually “disordered” is “not determined by whether they are gay or not but by whether they, for example, are addicted to porn, or perhaps they are promiscuous, or they abuse or use others for their sexual gratification.”

There was a bare possibility that the correspondent was confusing “disordered” with “sinful”, so I responded accordingly. I noted that, because we are fallen, we are afflicted by all kinds of disorders that are not of our own making—physical, mental, emotional, sexual, you name it. In Catholic parlance, what determines whether something is naturally disordered is whether or not it is operating according to its proper end, whether it is properly ordered to its natural purpose. If it is not, we call it “disordered”. Inclinations with respect to any of our faculties which make us want to use those faculties in a manner inconsistent with their proper end are not sinful; they simply reflect our own disorder, our lack of perfect integrity.

But such inclinations often become significant temptations, and if we proceed to indulge an inclination to act in a manner inconsistent with the relevant proper ends, we do in fact sin. Thus, I reminded the correspondent that the Church does not hold a homosexual inclination to be sinful—it is merely disordered—but the Church does regard homosexual activity as sinful, in keeping with the clear witness of Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium.

I think it is important to recognize the distinctions that both common sense and the Church make in these matters. One can argue about whether our disorders are the result of our genes, our environment or (as they develop over time) our perverse wills—very likely all three are frequently in play—but it seems clear that there are many

disorders—including most of our initial disordered inclinations—that we are not responsible for, and for which we bear no blame. And again, as fallen beings, we are a mightily disordered lot. We experience either occasional or prolonged desires and attractions for all kinds of things that are contrary to reason, contrary to any careful analysis of how our faculties really ought to be used, contrary, that is, to right order.

Now our sexual instincts are clearly part of a larger natural system of sexuality oriented toward reproduction. Therefore, these instincts and attractions are properly ordered when they are consistent with their reproductive purpose, and they are disordered when they point toward things and actions which are divorced from this purpose. In addition, within this reproductive context, sexual instincts and inclinations contribute to a special kind of fruitful love between a man and a woman, a love that, insofar as it grows and stabilizes, provides the ideal context for the nurture of the children engendered through the reproductive character of our sexual faculties.

It follows, as the Church teaches, that any inclinations which divorce from sexuality either its reproductive or its unitive elements are in fact disordered. Same-sex attraction, no matter how “unitive” it appears on an emotional level, is necessarily incapable of full natural unity (what the Judeo-Christian tradition calls “two in one flesh” unity), and it is also necessarily divorced from reproduction. In fact, only the procreated child perfectly represents both the reproductive and the unitive ends of human sexuality. Therefore, homosexual inclinations are always disordered. Perhaps it is unnecessary to point out that part of what it means to be human is to recognize, control and redirect our disordered inclinations so that we can live ever more integrated lives.

A final word before I proceed to a second entry on this same correspondence. If we are to take the argument seriously that whether our sexual inclinations are disordered cannot be determined by “whether they are gay or not”, then we must suppose that the object of an inclination cannot make that inclination disordered. That this is false can be seen easily by reflecting on the not uncommon desire to thrust one’s hand into a fire or to throw one’s body into the Niagara River just above the Falls. But I really do hope it will suffice here simply to quote the latest sex education program [recently introduced into third-grade classrooms](#) in Cordoba, Spain: “Nature has given us sex so we can use it with another girl, with a boy, or with an animal.”

Soon our culture may be unable to detect what is disordered even about this, which brings me to my next point.

*See [Homosexuality: 2. The Truth Question](#).*

## Homosexuality: 2. The Truth Question

April 15, 2010

If you read part one of this commentary ([Homosexuality: 1. The Disorder Question](#)), you'll have noticed that my correspondent begins by asserting her "bona fides" through the statement: "I am a practicing Catholic." She then goes on to reflect not Catholicism but the prevailing attitudes of the surrounding culture. In this light, her response to the reply outlined in the previous entry—the reply in which I explained the disordered nature of homosexuality—is even more telling:

I'm sure you can quote me the scripture proving that I am against "God's plan" in this. And furthermore, you can bolster that with what the Magisterium has to say about "God's plan". It is really difficult to have a rational discussion about a subject when you are trumped by God. I guess you know what God thinks better than I do. As does the Magisterium. Of course. Silly me for using the brain God gave me.

This, of course, is nothing but vintage late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century self-congratulatory between-the-ears fluff. In the confusion that has characterized Catholic formation (or the lack thereof) over the past couple of generations, even Catholics don't like being "trumped by God". It's so...so...irrational! We moderns have a nearly infinite capacity to portray ourselves as romantic heroes because we so courageously follow the crowd.

But it is not at all irrational (nor does it indicate a lack of personal integrity) to be trumped by God. In fact, to permit oneself to be trumped by God is the first lesson in the productive use of human reason.

There are, it would seem, two kinds of people in the world: (1) Those who understand that the human person has a powerful tendency to regard the prevailing attitudes of his surrounding culture as "rational", and who therefore seek to protect themselves against the obvious pitfalls of that tendency; and, (2) Those who don't, and so have no effective way of facilitating the transcendence of cultural limitations which is reason's true glory. If my correspondent were at once intelligent, self-reflective and honest, she would admit immediately that, had she lived fifty or a hundred years ago, she

would have had a strong tendency to believe that homosexuality was disordered. She would have received this from her surrounding culture, and she is likely to have accepted it uncritically, just as she now receives and accepts the opposite.

The problem here is that every culture, in every time and place, tends to inculcate a combination of truth and error, and by far the psychologically least demanding course is *always* to accept the entire mix uncritically. What this means, though, is that the most important activity of human reason is to find ways to place itself outside the assumptions of the surrounding culture so that it can perform a more objective analysis of each question. The simplest and most certain means of doing this is to avail oneself of Revelation.

The only absolutely certain authority in the universe is God. If we have good reason to believe—as we do—that God has desired to communicate with us through some revelation, and that we have identified this revelation (through its character and circumstances which are inexplicable without divine intervention), then an intelligent believer will *always* use anything he can learn from that revelation as both a starting point and a potential corrective, both to other sources of information and to his own propensity for intuitive and logical error. In other words, it is not the person who dislikes being “trumped by God” who is “using the brain God gave” him, but the person who really wants to be “trumped by God” as often as possible.

Now let us consider for a moment what it means to be “a practicing Catholic”. For purposes of being a Godparent, it means simple observable things, such as regularly attending Mass and participating at least externally in the life of the Church. But in a far more meaningful sense, being a practicing Catholic means engaging not only externally but interiorly in Catholic life—opening the mind to Revelation, participating in the life of grace, living ever more deeply the mysteries of Faith. One who claims to be a “practicing Catholic” should welcome a deeper appreciation of Scripture, a growing understanding of Tradition, and the intellectual and moral guidance of the Magisterium, for it is precisely these things which enable the Holy Spirit to perfect us, including our reason. In other words, it is only these things that enable us to be consistently trumped by God.

One of the many things Revelation helps us to do is to understand more fully the nature of all those things any given human culture tends to obscure. Therefore, one of the salutary results of adherence to Revelation is that Christians are able to perceive that homosexuality is disordered even when their culture tells them it is not. Moreover, they can also figure out the reasons and explain them cogently once they have gotten on the right track by seeing the basic truth in the Divine mind. Silly me, then, if I fail to take

advantage of Revelation to free my mind from cultural constraint. Silly me if I fail to take advantage of the single most obvious aid that will enable me to “use the brain God gave me” well.

# Homosexuality: A Special Call to the Love of God and Man

September 03, 2010

Most of us are forced by cultural circumstances to say far more about homosexuality than we would like. Because of the persistent moral challenge presented by gay advocacy, most of what we have to say is negative. This troubles me because it is just another burden for those with homosexual inclinations who are committed to living chastely in accordance with the teachings of Christ and His Church. So I'd like to take time out from the culture wars to look at things from the perspective of these courageous men and women, to whom I believe we owe a significant debt.

Sexuality is an important part of our identity as persons. By this I mean primarily the question of whether we are male or female, which is part of the core definition of who we are. I do not mean that our sexual inclinations are part of our self-definition in the same sense. Inclinations, however deep-seated, do not define us for the simple reason that we can master them. For example, I cannot change the fact that I am male no matter how much self-mastery I attain, but I can control to a considerable extent how my maleness expresses itself and I can even alter over time the degree to which I am subject to the temptations that typically afflict males. Yes, my inclinations are part of me. But they do not define me.

At the same time, sexual inclinations play a huge role in our lives because they are so closely linked to our core identities. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts this nicely in number 2332: “*Sexuality* affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others.” The *Catechism* goes on to say that we should “acknowledge and accept” our sexual “identity”—that is, our maleness or femaleness:

Physical, moral, and spiritual *difference* and *complementarity* are oriented toward the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life. The harmony of the couple and of society depends in part on the way in which the complementarity, needs, and mutual support between the sexes are lived out. (2333)



## **Trial and Cross**

For the overwhelming majority of men and women, it is one of the more significant moral, spiritual and psychological projects of life to integrate, control and channel a broad set of sexual inclinations which essentially fit this natural model, this model of complementarity and mutual support between men and women. Some may voluntarily deny direct physical expression of this complementarity, adopting virginity for the sake of the Kingdom; others may do so because they do not have the opportunity for marriage and they wish to be chaste. Clearly, both situations can be challenging, and the acceptance of an involuntary single state can be a heavy cross.

But a person with homosexual inclinations faces an even greater challenge. He or she must not merely integrate, control and channel sexual inclinations, but must largely deny them altogether, not only in their physical expression, but also in a far broader range of affectivity which is conditioned even in small ways by sexual interplay: Heightened interest, a sense of romance, a special tenderness. It is true that a celibate priest must be very careful of what we might call sexually-tinged affectivity, on the altogether sound theory that one thing leads to another. But the person with persistent homosexual inclinations must suppress or redirect such inclinations to an even greater extent. This is an enormous challenge.

Now consider such a person in a culture which is pressing full tilt for the embrace, approval and even glorification of this same affectivity which he is called by Christ to suppress or redirect. And finally, consider him (or her) in a subculture of chastity in which he must constantly hear arguments against the positions of gays (*i.e.*, those who advocate a specifically homosexual lifestyle), arguments which are sometimes clumsily expressed in ways which denigrate “homosexuals” generally and which, even if they are not clumsy, keep his conflicted sexual inclinations ever before his mind. In this subculture of chastity—hopefully a Christian subculture—others may find relief from their long, wearying preoccupation with their sexual defenses, but not he.

Which of us, in our wildest flights of sacrificial piety, would beg God for this particular cross?

## **Perception and Disorder**

In a cultural vacuum, it ought to be relatively easy to understand intellectually that homosexual inclinations are disordered. It ought to be fairly clear that the sexual faculties are both naturally ordered to the propagation and preservation of the species

and supernaturally ordered toward a kind of union among man, woman and child which mirrors the essential fecundity of Divine love. When one notices that one's own sexual inclinations do not tend toward this sort of union and fecundity—or even this ability to reproduce—then one can perceive a very definite disorder in those inclinations. There may be something one can do to alter them; they may be a very confused set of inclinations which are bound up with past experiences or habits, and so amenable to change as one comes to terms with these experiences or habits. Or there may be no way to eliminate the inclinations at all. Nonetheless, that they are disordered can be intellectually grasped.

But we are fallen, and our intellects are dark, and the predominant ideas of our surrounding culture often darken them even more. It can be very difficult to see what ought to be obvious. In our own culture, sexuality is commonly viewed from the point of view of the immediate pleasure it can provide; its deeper meanings and longer-term consequences are typically ignored. Most people slip into a lifestyle based on this relatively superficial understanding of sexuality through the practice of contraception, which distorts the nature of sexuality and seems to permit a more casual definition. This is why, in treating the question of contraception within marriage, the *Catechism* quotes John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio (On the Family)*:

Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality.... The difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm of the cycle... involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality. ( *Cat 2370; FC 32*)

A culture which is built upon the premise that the meaning of sexuality is exhausted by its ability to be manipulated for immediate pleasure does not lend itself to informed intellectual judgments about what is or is not disordered. The question simply doesn't arise. Our culture, therefore, is an enormous barrier to the self-understanding of all men and women, and it places particular obstacles in the paths of those who are trying to understand, alter or at least live at peace with their inclinations toward other persons of the same sex.

## Affective Reach

Those of us whose human affectivity is not rendered fundamentally problematic by the disorder of homosexual inclinations may find it difficult to perceive just how deeply and in what a far-reaching way our affectivity colors our entire lives and all of our relationships. We all must learn to control our likes and dislikes, our emotional reactions, our tendencies to favor some persons and ignore others, the way we pay compliments, the amount of flirting that is acceptable, and the degree to which we permit attractions that are at least partially sexual to color our behavior. We also learn to shape the expression of our masculinity or femininity in various ways, smoothing rough edges, exercising restraint, suiting ourselves to the situation.

For those with a properly ordered heterosexual affectivity, there is a general subconscious delight in the interplay between male and female, a sense of difference and complementarity and joyful mystery. On those occasions when we act inappropriately, the consequences may be unpleasant, but both our affective range and our mistakes are generally understood. We may have to learn to behave differently—to guide and channel our affectivity more suitably and more productively—but we do not have to suspect, reject or alter its basic orientation. Though our sexuality colors and influences much or most of what we do in subtle ways, there is nothing about it that we must fundamentally call into question or doubt.

This is not the case for those whose affectivity is persistently imbued with homosexual inclinations. The attractions they find natural, mysterious or even exhilarating will be perceived by most people as inexplicable or even repulsive. If one seeks comfort and solace in the company of the small minority who share these attractions, the dangers are obvious. Yet not to do so can force one to question one's affectivity at nearly every level. Why is so much of what I feel and how I interact with others imbued with a sexual pattern that others cannot understand and are likely to reject violently? Is my entire outlook, my entire attitude toward life and love fundamentally broken? Am I therefore incapable of love? Am I even unworthy of it?

*Am I worthless?* If our affectivity itself is suspect, how can this question fail to arise? I do not wish to exaggerate the issue. Even though every human difficulty can be assigned to some class, each difficulty remains above all personal. The depth and consistency of our feelings are very personal, and different people will surely experience the problem of homosexual inclinations in different ways, to different degrees, and with greater or lesser impact on larger concerns about their fundamental integrity and worth as human persons. In general, however, it seems fair to say that the question of

self-worth must surface whenever the fundamental nature of one's own affectivity is called into question. Therefore, with this particular cross, the question is very likely to come up.

### **Affirmation and Mission**

Some wonderful supporters of CatholicCulture.org have written to me about this, expressing something of their trials, their struggles, their hope and their faith. This has been inspirational for me, and I am even more convinced from such exchanges that whenever devastating questions arise in the mind and heart of anyone with persistent homosexual inclinations, these questions must be answered decisively—and without a moment's hesitation—in a way which affirms the person as one who is so beloved by God as to have been entrusted with a special mission.

The Catholic tradition is rich in understanding of victim souls, those who seem to have been put on this earth primarily to suffer physically, perhaps being ill or even paralyzed their whole life long, yet embracing a mission of love for souls, and growing into an intense and fruitful union with God. All of us, of course, are victim souls in smaller ways in that we each have our own crosses, which are so many opportunities for spiritual growth and cooperation with Christ: “In my flesh,” says St. Paul, “I make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of His body, the Church” (Col 1:24). So must we all, if we are Christians, and we should rejoice in the opportunity. Nonetheless, it is clear that some souls are singled out for a particularly obvious mission of redemptive suffering.

All of us are afflicted by deficiencies, defects and disorders in our human nature as a result of the Fall, but no deficiency, defect or disorder comes to any one of us by chance. In every case, then, these things are crosses to be embraced for our own good and the good of others. And in some cases, the particular deficiency, defect or disorder provides a signal opportunity. It is an opportunity to bear the cross as a witness to a particular aspect of Christian life which needs strengthening if souls are to grow and prosper in the love of God.

Now again, some persons may find that they can free themselves of homosexual inclinations through a change in lifestyle, through therapy, and through prayer. But it is nonetheless clear that as long as they are afflicted by this disorder, they are called to be chaste. Let us again consider the *Catechism*:

Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teaches them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by

prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection. (2359)

But note that something precious follows from this. Homosexual persons, by the very nature of their particular cross, must raise chastity to a special height, dealing not only with physical temptation but with the broad range of their own human affectivity. It follows that those who must suffer this disorder throughout their lives have been chosen by God to give a particular and exalted witness to the virtue of chastity. This is vocation as beautiful as it is arduous, and it is doubtful that its importance to our sex-saturated age can be overestimated.

One must be wary of using single terms to describe anyone, for such terms obscure more than they clarify even as they minimize the rich diversity of the human personality. But I will use the single term here for the first and only time in this essay: The homosexual is called to be a special and extraordinary witness to the triumph of love over feeling. There is in this, I think, an analogue to the dark night of the soul. It is Love Himself who calls the homosexual, perhaps in a special kind of darkness, and it is in Love alone—and not in feeling—that he will bring many souls to heaven in his wake.

# Marriage: The Forgotten Vocation

January 30, 2007

Although homilists are more likely in this generation to mention marriage when they speak about vocations, the emphasis is still on the need for priests. Yet marriage is manifestly the vocation of most people. Demonstrably, it is also the key to all other vocations. Despite these realities, we have come to take for granted that 50% of all marriages will end in failure. Clearly, it is time to take a closer look at marriage.

## Natural Institution and Sacrament

Matrimony is unique among the sacraments in that it is a natural institution raised to the sacramental level. This alone tells us how valuable and important marriage must be in God's design. What are its essential characteristics?

First, marriage is a natural union of opposite sexes, one man and one woman. This union surpasses any other kind of union, including unnatural unions which ape marriage without possessing its essential qualities.

Second, marriage is a permanent union, dissolvable only by the death of either spouse. Because of its contractual character, many cultures allow the public authority to dissolve the marriage contract, but this necessarily creates an unfortunate tension, for by its very nature marriage is permanent, as is clearly reflected in the vows.

Third, marriage is an exclusive union. It both demands and depends upon the fidelity of the spouses to each other alone. It is opposed to every kind of casual sharing or group distribution of spousal privileges.

Fourth, the permanence and exclusivity of marriage are guaranteed by a formal contract. As such, the character of marriage is both higher and deeper than any informal and temporary arrangement, such as mere "living together" or concubinage.

## How God Values Marriage

That Our Lord valued these characteristics of marriage so much as to sacramentalize them is only the first sign to Christians of marriage's supreme importance. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, we find marriage alluded to in connection with the deepest mysteries of life and being. This begins at the story of Creation, when the Man was found to be incomplete, in need of a partner. And so, with the creation of the

Woman, they became two in one flesh.

Throughout the Old Testament, the relationship between Israel and the Lord is described in terms of marriage. The prophets repeatedly denounce Israel's faithlessness as a sin of harlotry or adultery. Thus Jeremiah: "You have played the harlot with many lovers; and would you return to me?" (3:1) And Hosea: "For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the harlot." (4:12) And, above all, Ezekiel: "Yet you were not like a harlot, because you scorned hire. Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband!" (15:31-2)

The *Song of Songs* gives us a more positive treatment of this theme. In this great poem of courtship between God and the soul, the relationship begins in love and culminates in spiritual marriage. The same theme is carried forward into the New Testament to describe God's love for His Church. St. Paul's famous passage in Ephesians brings it to fulfillment:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.... This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church. (5:21-33)

### Single-Hearted Commitment

For Christ and his followers, marriage was a total commitment, a permanent self-giving, even before Christ elevated it. St. Matthew and St. Mark both quote Our Lord on this very point: "So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder." (Mt 19:6; Mk 10:8) In St. Luke's account, we see that Our Lord was more forceful still: "Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." (16:18)

How important it is for Christians to recapture the vitality of this commitment! This permanent, exclusive self-giving in marriage is not only the foundation of the social order and the key to the sanctification of the vast majority of all human persons; it is also the school of commitment that makes every other vocation possible. By far the greatest number of priestly and religious vocations come from good and stable families founded on a bond between husband and wife which mirrors the bond between Christ and His Church. Similarly, every other human commitment, every unbroken act of the will to

sacrifice and serve, is strengthened in the school of marriage and family.

It is with very good reason that St. Paul stated point blank: “To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife.” (1 Cor 7:10) This bond of commitment is so critical to everything human and divine that we cannot possibly be surprised at Christ’s own choice of the wedding feast at Cana to enter into his “hour”, that hour which would lead him to redeem his bride on the Cross (cf. Jn 2:4).

### **Making Right What Is Wrong**

The evils of the world are symbolized by the great harlot of the book of Revelation (cf. chapters 17 and 19). Included in this enormous image of rampant prostitution are all the distractions, impurities and sins which render the soul incapable of that self-giving to another, that disciplined support and protection, that pure commitment to good which lie at the heart of marriage.

In our time, so deeply afflicted by the same evils, marriage has indeed become the forgotten vocation. It has been replaced by an anemic substitute, a relationship of convenience, a sham. In restoring marriage, we would do a great and wonderful thing, but not just for its own sake. For if we wish to honor, enrich and increase all of God’s callings, we must begin by making marriage what it is supposed to be.



# Gay Marriage and the Next Gulag

July 05, 2011

In a [Mexican case](#), Fr. Hugo Valdemar was found guilty on July 1st of illegal political activity because he stated that Catholics should not vote for candidates who support same-sex marriage. Fr. Valdemar's defense is that he wasn't speaking against a particular party but was merely stating the teaching of the Catholic Church. But the particulars of charge and counter-charge do not make a great deal of difference, apart from the strategies they suggest for legal maneuvering. There have been many similar stories over the past few years from around the world, especially in Canada and Europe. The writing is on the wall. Gay marriage is the lie that will create the next Gulag.

Indeed, gay marriage is the perfect totalitarian wedge, not least in a country like the United States, which has been capable of believing itself uniquely dedicated to liberty even in the midst of slavery and abortion. We Americans, it seems, will be quite willing to sing the praises of our liberty no matter how many of us lose it. It is our national myth, something we worship. But the cause of gay marriage fits the myth better than most issues because it really does seem that those who oppose it are denying life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to others. This denial can be accepted for the unborn, in the name of the liberty of their mothers, as it once was accepted for African Americans, who shared judicial non-personhood with the unborn. But gays are well-educated, wealthy and—above all—a logically favored projection of our moral culture. To inhibit their happiness, for any reason, seems just plain wrong.

Why should this be? First, it is necessary to note that the word “gay” refers not to those with homosexual inclinations but to those who champion behavior based on these inclinations as good. In fact, homosexuals who are not gay are a sign of contradiction to the gay world. They are scorned accordingly, in ways that even straights are not. The key to understanding the whole matter is that to be gay or to support the gay lifestyle is to approve and promote sterile sex.

The Western world in general has been hard at work promoting sterile sex for nearly a century now. We began by sanctioning the break-up of families through ever-easier divorce. Divorce is a kind of pretense that the marital covenant is ultimately sterile, in the sense that children do not matter. Next we embraced contraception so that our sexual pleasures could not be diminished through responsibility. Promiscuity inevitably

followed, and with it abortion, which is simply fruitfulness in denial. We've covered our eyes and stopped our ears. "Nyah, nyah, nyah, I can't SEE you! I can't HEAR you!"

A culture like this, a culture which embraces these values, has no argument against homosexual sex, no case against homosexual marriage. A huge percentage of our marriages are deliberately and totally sterile; most of the rest are deliberately sterile much of the time. Huge numbers of marriages, by deliberate design, result neither in children to preserve the race nor in future citizens to enhance and develop the social order. There is no conceivable public interest in such unions, and no significant personal interest in them either, apart from the fuel they temporarily provide for the couple's doomed *egoism à deux*.

Far from having a natural revulsion against homosexual intimacy, modern Western culture can hardly help seeing it as the jewel which crowns and protects its own warped vision of sex. We recognize and defend a right of men and women to engage in sexual intimacy without fruit. It follows that rank prejudice must be the only reason anyone could possibly oppose the same freedom between men and men or women and women.

No group is more hateful to modern society than the perceived moralistic prigs who, out of what most perceive as religiously-motivated prejudice, seek to diminish the personal sexual liberty of others. Nothing could be more obvious in our current culture than that such people must be silenced and, if necessary, restrained. Moreover, it seems only right and just that their denunciation of the gay lifestyle and their opposition to gay marriage should be criminalized. In fact, it should be criminalized in the name of liberty. That is why gay marriage is the lie that will create the next Gulag.

The insistence on ignoring vice is the hallmark of a debased culture, but the insistence that a lie be publicly affirmed as true is the hallmark of ideological totalitarianism. Such lies are always accompanied by the monopolization of education and other forms of thought control, and this is always made easier by the sad fact that huge numbers of people are convinced that those who are targeted are getting exactly what they deserve. The slightest intellectual resistance is perceived as a grave threat to peace and order. The truth becomes subversive. To speak the truth makes one either a social pariah or a traitor. The most obvious of realities must be denied. The most obvious of facts must be hidden. The most obvious of statements must be unsaid.

It is difficult to see anything that can be done about this without massive personal reform. Within the dominant culture, there is really no way to gain any traction to push back. The only thing that can possibly help is for those who oppose gay marriage to start living according to the understanding of sexuality communicated by the natural law. And almost the only way to do that in a culture incapable of recognizing the natural law is to

seek the clarity and strength provided by Christian Revelation and grace. In other words, the only way to reverse the trend is to live the whole truth, sustained by Faith, rather than merely to argue about this or that part of it.

This means creating families and even whole communities marked by permanent marriage and fruitfully responsible sex, a lifestyle which—once one recovers from the initial shock—leads first to a deep sense of security and ultimately to a rich happiness. It is fair to say, I think, that commitment to and communication with reality invariably produces these remarkable results. But the time for lip service is long past. The ultimate answer to every Gulag is the affirmation of truth through life—a vibrant demonstration that Christians have more heart to lose than pagans have to win.

It is important, too, that this witness be corporate, that is, visible not just in a few individuals but in a community which professes a Creed. This is another reason for continuing to improve discipline in the Church, and quickly. The Church need not (and should not) encompass only perfect Christians, but within broad limits, her members need to be at least willing to try the life she offers them.

After all, if we accept the Truth, we also believe, though perhaps sometimes only in a dim sort of way, that we will suffer under the impact of thwarted reality in this life and under divine punishment in the next, if we simply ignore what we believe. On precisely this point, St. Peter offers the wisest of counsels:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong. (1 Pet 3:13-17)

Too often those who revile the behavior of Christians have no cause to be put to shame. This must change. Nothing else will work.

# Why Gay Marriage Is Straight Business

July 06, 2011

The most common complaint from drive-by shooters about my recent essay [Gay Marriage and the Next Gulag](#) is this: Letting gays marry doesn't prevent me from living out my own vision of marriage, so why don't I just leave other people alone? Here are ten good reasons why this issue has immense public repercussions, in which everyone has a stake. It is simply not an option for good citizens to ignore the problem of gay marriage.

1. **Denial of Reality is Deadly:** The idea of marriage for same-sex couples is a denial of the nature of marriage. As a general principle, the public denial of any reality does significant harm not only to all those in denial but to the culture as a whole.
2. **People Ought Not to be Forced to Affirm a Lie:** Legal recognition of gay marriage carries with it an insistence that everyone recognize its validity and cease to articulate key portions of the moral law. Political power should never be used to force citizens to affirm what is false.
3. **Education Should be Free of Propaganda:** Acceptance of gay marriage increases the pressure to affirm the gay lifestyle and promote alleged gay rights in public education. Parents have both a duty and a right to keep their children's education free of propaganda and ideology.
4. **Devaluing Authentic Marriage Damages Society:** By its very nature, gay "marriage" further devalues any society's bedrock institution, an institution which in most cases is already reeling. The demise of true, monogamous, life-long marriage between one man and one woman is a sociological and psychological disaster in any culture.
5. **Tax and Benefit Laws Should Serve Positive Purposes:** To privilege gay marriage in tax and benefit laws simply supports an institution which serves no possible benefit to society. Citizens have a very legitimate interest in how taxes

and benefits are levied and applied.

6. **Gay Adoption Puts Children at Risk:** The very least that can be said about same-sex “parents” raising a child is that it is an unnatural arrangement. This cannot fail to do psychological damage to the vulnerable children who will be placed as adoptees with gay “families”.
7. **A Gay Culture Leads to Sexual Abuse of Children:** The inside story of gay denunciation of the sexual abuse of children is that many gay groups promote man-boy “love” and persistently advocate for lowering of the age of consent. This advocacy is, at a minimum, tolerated by nearly the entire gay community. In this matter the script is almost always doubled, that is, one thing is said for public consumption, with the opposite affirmed on the inside. *(Note: In this connection, note that while the percentage of priests involved in sexual abuse of children runs below the average for other institutions, eighty percent of this abuse is homosexual abuse, thereby making the percentage of gay priests involved in sexual abuse extremely high. All indications are that this is typical.)*
8. **Gay Sex is a Public Health Disaster:** Legitimizing gay marriage clearly legitimizes gay sex. Not only is gay sex extremely dangerous to the health of its participants, about whom we ought to be concerned, but its public health costs are enormous.
9. **Gay Marriage Demeans Chaste Homosexuals:** Approval of gay marriage makes it even more difficult for those with homosexual tendencies to live chastely, as the laws of both nature and God demand. This sends all the wrong signals. Society should support chastity among those with homosexual inclinations, not harass them by classifying these unwanted inclinations as the stuff of which marriage is made.
10. **The Law is a Strong Teacher:** All persons have an important interest in the teaching value of the laws by which they are governed. While the law may sometimes ignore evil without fault, as not every evil can be hindered effectively by government, it must never deliberately enshrine or promote a moral evil. Every citizen has both a right and a duty to oppose laws which promote moral evil, leading people astray and weakening the social order.

I have tried to limit myself to reasons embedded in the natural order, including the civil order. Much could be said about the supernatural order as well. When a human law

enshrines a vice, it makes it harder for those tempted by that vice to learn virtue, and harder still to realize their need for God, that they might turn and be saved.

Moreover, when those claiming to be Christian (including some Catholics who have written to me) subscribe to a convenient indifferentism on this issue, they exchange true charity for mere niceness. They demonstrate that they are not animated by the Spirit of Christ, who desires the ultimate good of each of His creatures in an ecstatic union with the holiness of God forever.

# The War Against Pornography

December 19, 2006

What is the great plague of the 21st century? Bird flu? Terrorism? Global warming? No, none of these. The pandemic of our century is pornography. This scourge was already severe in the twentieth century with the development of color photography, moving pictures, and cable television. But with the advent of the Internet age, pornography is freely and effortlessly available in nearly every home.

## Fighting to Keep it Out

In the previous generation, kids and even adults generally had to expend considerable time, effort, expense and subterfuge to find pornography and smuggle it into the home. Now, computers attached to the Internet take care of that automatically. In any given household, concerned individuals have a major battle on their hands just to keep pornography out. All of that time, effort, expense and subterfuge must now be employed on the side of purity.

Even last year's advice for controlling computer access is now outdated and ineffective. Today, all you need is a personal digital assistant (PDA) or a cell phone to connect to a network where the number one commodity is porn. Wireless access is rapidly growing universal and devices that can be used to access pornography are now so much a part of both our domestic and our commercial lives that they are difficult to do without.

Moreover, our concentration on the Internet's hard-core pornography should not blind us to the general lowering of the bar. Mainstream entertainment venues routinely incorporate soft porn without so much as a wink of the eye. Even the fashions of dress among everyday people continue to degenerate in this universal trend. Something as simple as walking through a shopping mall is impossible without being exposed in one way or another to the problem of porn.

It is no wonder that increasing numbers of marriages are being destroyed by pornography and increasing numbers of young people, mostly boys, are developing true pornography addictions, addictions which require not only personal commitment but professional therapy to overcome. Parents, if they are willing to make significant sacrifices, can still do much to protect their children, but our culture has reached the

point where anything approaching complete shielding from pornography is now impossible.

### A New Strategy

Let me repeat that last statement: Anything approaching complete shielding from pornography is now impossible. I do not mean to imply that we should give up the effort to protect our children, our spouses and our friends. Nor should we abandon political, social and legal efforts to control pornography. But these efforts are complicated enormously by the internationalism of the Internet. Even if a community could be found that shares sound values, effective protection is likely to be impossible for a long time to come.

This is why we need to take the battle against pornography *to the spiritual level*. Insofar as we have concentrated in the past on mere physical protections (*i.e.*, shielding), we need to recognize once and for all that physical protection is only one front of the war, and probably not the most important front. An effective battle certainly includes as much shielding as is reasonably possible, but true spiritual combat also includes four other vital components:

1. **Disapproval.** Silence in the face of pornography is deadly. It needs to be clear to children that their parents do not approve of immodesty or impurity in any form, that they oppose the pornographic exploitation of others, and that they are willing to correct deficiencies in this area. These attitudes need to be reflected in speech, dress and behavior at every level. This advice is not limited to parents. The same applies to spouses in relationship to each other, and for those living in community. At-risk behavior patterns should be noticed. Appropriate corrective action must be taken.
2. **Vision.** Everyone needs to understand why pornography is seriously wrong in the context of the Christian vision. Each person is a unity of body and soul destined for true human friendship and eternal life with God. We must explain clearly how pornography divides persons against themselves, alienates them from others, and cheapens relationships; how it substitutes fantasy for reality and leads to physical and commercial exploitation of others; how it destroys love and true intimacy; and how it impedes maturity, personal integration, and spiritual development.
3. **Formation.** Children need good practical advice on caring for their bodies,



minds, souls and friendships in a way which limits occasions for sin, encourages healthy activities, and fosters positive relationships. Both children and adults should stay in touch with pastors and friends (and, if necessary, counselors and therapists) who genuinely care about their personal development and spiritual growth. Everyone needs to work at an ever-deepening spiritual life centered around the public worship of the Church and the sacrament of the Eucharist. Sound spirituality includes avoidance of despair through a profound trust in God's mercy and a willingness to turn back to God after a fall, especially in the sacrament of Penance.

4. **Prayer.** With specific reference to spiritual growth and purity of heart, parents must pray throughout their lives for their children. Wives must pray for their husbands just as fervently, and husbands for their wives. Friends must also pray for each other. Moreover, lay people must pray for their priests, who have made the sacrifice of celibacy for a life of service. Priests must likewise pray for their brothers in sacred ministry. And those in community life must certainly pray for the other members of their community. In addition, we must all pray for our own purity, our own single-hearted commitment to the will of God. These prayers must not be merely occasional. They must be a key portion of our daily habit of prayer.

### Winning the War

In our culture, each person will have to fight his own war with pornography. Each person, or at least each male, will also very likely experience a certain measure of failure in this war. Complete shielding is not possible and, quite frankly, some battles are going to be lost. But the entire nature of the war can be transformed from a campaign of shielding and isolation to one of spiritual growth and self-mastery. Once prosecuted in this way, the war against pornography can be won.

The war may be long and hard, but every moment of genuine struggle is a dart of burning love sent from the soul to God. Our Lord counts the occasional fall as nothing compared with the love we offer when we struggle in this way. In response to His grace, our efforts will forge bonds of unity so strong that, in the end, Christ Himself will become our champion. It is Christ who will fight for us. It is Christ who will fight in us. Thus may we all go joyfully to war, where none may doubt the victory.

*One of the best places to start your personal war on pornography is to read the remarkable pastoral letter by the Bishop of Arlington, Paul S. Loverde, issued on the eve of the Immaculate Conception, December 7, 2006: [Bought with a Price: Pornography and the Living Temple of God](#).*

# On Humanitarianism and Animal Rights

September 14, 2006

I was reading a collection of sailing stories the other day (have I mentioned that I enjoy sailing?), one of which was written by the late Cleveland Amory. The introduction described Amory as a “famed humanitarian” because he “devoted much of his life to animal rights.” What? Let me read that again. Yes, it said Amory founded The Fund for Animals, which makes him a humanitarian.

## Cultural Confusion

The career of Cleveland Amory is interesting, and we will return to it in a moment. But the confusion in our culture over animals is even more interesting. It is no doubt representative of our culture to have an editor assert that someone is a humanitarian because he devotes himself to the well-being of animals. But it doesn't make very much sense. I don't mean that it doesn't make sense to anyone at all, for it would make perfect sense to Princeton philosopher Peter Singer who believes that, after all, animals are people too.

But it doesn't make sense for anyone with an otherwise undarkened mind. Animals, in fact, are not persons. They lack intellect and will and are completely incapable of entering into personal relationships. This doesn't mean that they can't become attached to those who take care of them (or, more significantly, that pet owners can't become attached to their pets). But animal affection, where it exists, operates at the level of sense perception. Animals cannot think about love and commit themselves to it by an act of will.

## Love and Relationship

As the nature of love is something which also confuses our culture, we tend to forget that love in the most complete sense is not mere affection but an act of the will. If all our relationships are based on physical attraction and convenience, they will be essentially animal relationships which, because they are not ultimately satisfying to real persons, will not even last as long as they would among animals. The ability to understand what

something is and to engage oneself with it in the proper way—that is, the ability to employ both intellect and will—constitutes the unique relational ability of persons. This relational ability reaches its summit in authentic, self-giving love. Only God, angels and human beings are capable of it.

In other words, only God, angels and human beings are persons. Everything else in creation is what we call a “thing”, and persons have been given dominion over things, both by God’s prescription and by the order of nature. Though it may sometimes be hard to admit, our favorite dog is a thing, as we know perfectly well when we refer to it, on certain occasions, as “that damn dog”. For most of us the distinction between things and persons becomes immediately clear when we reflect on the fact that we are morally free to buy or sell our dog, or even exchange it for a parakeet. We are not morally free to buy, sell or trade persons.

## Stewardship

Of course, this does not mean that we have no reason to think about how to behave toward animals. As stewards of creation, we have every reason to give careful consideration to our management of living things that are not persons, as well as non-living things. But the issues must be considered in relation to those whom we serve as stewards, and our stewardship is more important for what it says about ourselves than for what it means to the animals. For example, there are reasons not to be cruel to an animal, but they have little to do with the final disposition of the animal itself. Animals cannot have rights, because rights inhere only in persons. Animal management is a question of stewardship only.

A proper understanding of stewardship will certainly include an understanding that higher animals can experience pain, that they can both feel and express emotion, and that they are therefore capable of a certain level of affection. Appropriate treatment of animals in proportion to these capacities (and their degree of development by association with humans in particular cases) is rightly considered “humane”, not from the animal’s point of view, but from the point of view of what it means for the human person to act in a knowledgeable and responsible manner which both evinces and enhances moral integrity. Stewardship implies a responsibility to know well the objects of one’s stewardship, and to make one’s dispositions for the general and particular good of persons, that is, for man.

## Cleveland Amory

To return now to Cleveland Amory, it is unfortunate that his alleged humanitarianism

did not extend to those who understood what I have explained above. For example, he publicly described hunters as “blood thirsty nuts” exhibiting “an antiquated expression of macho self-aggrandizement, with no place in a civilized society.” Personally, I have no interest in hunting and very little in fishing (which is a matter of personal taste) but it is at least typical of hunters and fishermen that they understand the difference between persons and things. Now, admittedly, not everyone who understands this distinction is a humanitarian, but one cannot possibly be a humanitarian without it.

Cleveland Amory’s accomplishments were numerous. After working in military intelligence in World War II, he wrote a trilogy of classic social history studies beginning with *The Proper Bostonians* (1947). He edited and wrote extensively for such publications as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *TV Guide*, *Saturday Review* and *Parade*. In 1974, his book *Man Kind? Our Incredible War on Wildlife* sparked America’s anti-hunting movement. He did social commentary on *The Today Show* and his daily radio essay was called *Curmudgeon at Large*.

Presumably, Amory never squashed a bug that chanced to stray across his desk. Undoubtedly, he never dined on steak. Along with these very modest deficiencies of character, occasional invective towards others may perhaps be tolerated in a man who was both a self-proclaimed curmudgeon and, in fact, a humorist. In addition to his frequently-humorous commentary, Amory wrote many imaginative and whimsical stories, and not all about animals, as the opening of this column attests. However, his most famous tales, written in his seventies, featured his cat (remember *The Cat Who Came for Christmas?*).

In any case, animal rights were for Amory not a passing whim but a long-term cause. He launched The Fund for Animals in 1967, and he served as its president without pay for 31 years until his death in 1998 at the age of 81. So he was intelligent, funny and capable of commitment. The evidence shows that Cleveland Amory was, well, a *person*.

But he was not a humanitarian.

# The Problem of Animal Rights

July 15, 2009

In a recent issue of *First Things*, Mary Eberstadt raises the question of why the pro-animal folks are not more pro-life. She identifies several significant historical and ideological reasons for this divergence of interests, but she also argues that there ought to be a strong correlation between the natural impulse to be concerned about animals and a corresponding impulse to be concerned about babies (“Pro-Animal, Pro-Life”, June/July 2009). In some ways Eberstadt’s analysis is a laudable attempt to find common ground. But in the end, I believe her approach falls into the sentimentality trap.

It seems to me necessary, in any discussion of our concern for animals, to minimize the role of mere sentiment. In fact, I would say the same about our discussion of abortion. While there may be many things that we can do to move this or that person to abhor abortion, what we really want is for people to oppose abortion because they have made a correct moral judgment that abortion is seriously wrong. In contrast, Eberstadt takes the opposite tack, citing the similarity of emotional reactions to the abuse of babies and to the slaughtering of animals. She views these separate reactions as manifestations of a common human intuition which ought to breed allies.

As an example of what she means, Eberstadt cites a revelatory experience about his own convictions recounted by *First Things* editor Joseph Bottum :

In his case, [a pro-life intuition] came knocking one day when, as a student in the Georgetown library, he sat watching idly through the window as a mother wrestled fruitlessly with her dog, leash, and baby stroller: All the while, as he watched, the baby laughed with delight, “clapping her small hands at the slapstick world into which God and her parents had unexpectedly delivered her.... It was at that moment,” Bottum writes, that there arrived “the sudden, absolute conviction that babies are good.... Always for me it comes back to this touchstone: Anything that participates in the murder of a child...is wrong. All the rest is just a working out of the details.”

Eberstadt likens this to the enlightenment many young vegetarians suddenly experience when they begin to see the connection between meat and animals; recognizing that animals are good, they are suddenly repulsed by the idea of their destruction.

## The Mind and the Will

But to preserve Joseph Bottum's otherwise exemplary intellectual reputation, one must surely suppose that Eberstadt misreads him if she thinks that his "conviction" that babies are good depends on his emotional reaction to the scene he observed. Rather, the emotional reaction—his sharing in an experience of childlike delight—was simply a specific circumstance through which his own understanding of the gift of personhood was more deeply impressed upon his character. It is certainly possible that Bottum was in a certain mood or had received a special grace which made this, for him, just the right psychological and spiritual moment to dramatically reinforce a pro-life intuition. In other circumstances, the whole thing could easily have passed beneath his notice, or even bored him. Moreover, another observer might just as well have been powerfully moved by the mother, or (perhaps more to the point) by the dog.

In the final analysis, we must acknowledge that Bottum's intuitive flash became a sustained conviction only when his mind and will were sufficiently well-prepared, and his emotions were sufficiently well-disciplined by both his mind and his will. Without these conditions, Bottum's ultimate response to the scene would have been significantly different. The initial spark of recognition may never have occurred, it may never have made a powerful impact, or it may have been instantaneously and almost instinctively diverted or suppressed. After all, the common problem with those who would, under the same circumstances, first intuit the value of the dog is not that the dog has no value but that their minds, wills and emotions are so often insufficiently well-disciplined to rightly understand the value of the dog in relation to the totality of values represented by the scene.

For this scene cannot be interpreted morally without a great respect for the concept of *personhood*. Unless we understand the concept of personhood, there is simply no morally intelligible way to differentiate between dog and man or to make coherent distinctions anywhere else along the continuum of being. It is natural, I suppose, for most people to be concerned about dogs more than they are about ants, because dogs are more "like us" and many of us become emotionally attached to them. Peter "Chickens are people" Singer would call this a species-based prejudice, and (for a refreshing change) he would be right. We can see the point immediately if we recognize that most people would not naturally value the ant more than a rose, though the ant is far more like us than the rose. These attachments are primarily about who we are, not about what their objects are. Only with a disciplined mind and will can we make proper moral sense out of such attachments.

## Personhood

Both the baby and the mother in Bottum's scene have an intrinsically and even infinitely higher moral value than the dog because they are persons. There are various ways to get at what it means to be a person, but all of them depend on the person's likeness to God. Essentially, every person has both intellect and will and so is at least potentially capable of entering into relationships of love. Note that I do not speak of relationships of "affection". Love must not be explained either as a feeling or an action motivated by sensory attraction or instinct. Love must be understood as an act of the will based on a proper intellectual valuation of the other, a valuation through which the intellect instructs us to love, that is, to will the other's good.

Neither a dog, nor a dolphin, nor a chimpanzee, nor any other embodied being besides man is capable of this. Everything these other creatures do can be explained in material terms. They give no evidence either of intellectual analysis or of moral judgment. They have not been made in the image of God; they are not persons. Only man has the ability to know, to morally evaluate, and to love. This is precisely why God Himself gave man dominion over everything else in His material creation, and why *Genesis* teaches that man alone can name the other creatures (that is, know and evaluate them properly), whereas no other creature can name man.

A proper understanding of personhood is essential to the proper moral valuation of nature, and to the correct moral action that can derive from it alone. This is also the point most often left out of the discussions of the two heated controversies of our time which bear most upon this essay: abortion and, you guessed it, animal rights. The bottom line is that all non-personal being is at man's disposal in his role of the steward of nature for the God who created it. But no personal being is at man's disposal. It is the shedding of an innocent man's blood alone that cries out to heaven for vengeance. If men could kill angels, the same would be true.

Thus it is essential to understand that our emotional responses to the various "scenes" of our life vary widely in their moral relevance. Insofar as we react emotionally to the slaughter of animals for food and choose to become vegetarians, we are free to act in accordance with our emotions. But insofar as we react emotionally and elevate that emotion into a moral principle which evaluates animals as if they have rights, we must discipline our emotions in order to avoid an immense moral error. This error arises either from a disordered intellect or a weak and rebellious will, for persons alone are the subject of rights. To think and act otherwise means that we have not schooled ourselves in the reality of personhood. As a result, we are driven hither and yon not be rich and



enduring intuitions that have matured into settled convictions, but merely by how we feel.

## **Dominion**

It is not my purpose to justify everything anyone wants to do with nature (or creation). Everything we have received is a gift to be used for the glory of the Giver. Thus we are to exercise our dominion over nature in accordance with a proper understanding of our own being as children of God, possessing a destiny which transcends this world and looks forward to the new heaven and the new earth; and with an understanding of all the living and non-living things over which we exercise this dominion. The manner in which we use, conserve and enhance nature tells us a great deal about our own self-understanding, our own recognition of the gifts we have received, and our own commitment to right judgments about the moral order. It also tells us much about whether or not we appreciate that this moral order is rooted in personhood.

The first stage of fruitful dominion, whether with respect to a king and his domain or to man and nature, is to exercise dominion over oneself, to discipline the mind and will so that, among other things, we become emotionally susceptible only to those experiences and insights that correspond to right reason and tend toward right action. Any of us at any time may encounter what Bottom encountered and be powerfully moved by the woman, the child or the dog. Indeed, certain people at certain times could, without fault, be struck most by the stroller or the leash. For a great variety of reasons, such things may at any given moment be of personal, professional or even metaphorical interest.

But only a confused or unjust observer concludes, on the one hand, that the dog should be severely beaten for jumping about excitedly in a very “doggy” way or, on the other, that the dog’s offspring should be protected by law whereas the woman’s should not. And only a confused or unjust observer will even remotely imagine that the first error (the beating of the dog) is more significant than the second (the “restriction” of the woman’s offspring). But our world is full of confused and unjust observers. Indeed, they appear in all kinds of interesting places—at dog-fights on the one hand, on university faculties on the other, mostly in accordance with their position on the social scale. But perhaps that is a story for another day. The point here is that only the confused or the unjust deny the meaning of personhood. Only the confused or unjust seek to put the dog in the stroller, and the child on the leash.

# Don't Kill Those Who Can Feel Pain

March 11, 2011

I couldn't help but notice last Wednesday that Oklahoma has followed Nebraska and Kansas in attempting to pass a law which protects unborn children capable of feeling pain. In Nebraska, this has become law, but in Kansas and Oklahoma it has thus far gotten through only one of the two legislative bodies. This is another example of the peculiar stratagems pro-lifers must employ to protect the unborn, in this case babies 20 weeks or older. They have been proven to be able to feel pain.

It is what I was talking about in late February (see [Virginia's Attempt to Close Abortion Clinics](#)). In politics, we must try all sorts of techniques to gain objectives which, otherwise, might be out of reach. On the whole, since we live in a very imperfect world, I would have to be in favor of this law were it to come up in Virginia. But it carries an interesting danger.

Have you ever heard of animal rights? I have gotten some heartfelt messages from those who believe it is morally wrong to do anything to an animal which causes it to feel pain. The ability to feel pain is also seen as a differentiator for some animal rights activists (and others, who simply love mammals) between those animals we ought to take special care of, and those we don't need to worry so much about. Certain aspects of this position are seriously wrong.

The presence of pain cannot serve as a moral determinant of an action. Not only is pain morally neutral (it is not always even a natural evil, since it is a protection mechanism for those creatures which can feel pain), but it can also be perfectly moral—even morally required—to inflict pain for appropriate reasons, such as when we perform an operation to save someone's life. So the presence of pain only draws attention to the need to have a rationale for determining when we may properly inflict it, and when we may not, and on whom.

Now the desire to inflict pain, or avoid inflicting it, has its own moral trajectory, either good or evil, based on what it says about the moral character of the person who entertains such a desire. The little boy who tortures cats tells us far more about himself than he does about cats, and he even offends against his own humanity more than he does against the being of the cat, since (though it is an argument for another day) the boy is a person and the cat is not. Cats are ultimately disposable (hold your emails) in ways

that human persons are not.

But can we honestly expect twenty-first century Western men and women to sort all this out, when they are so culturally closed to the transcendent dimensions of personhood which all other embodied creatures lack? I think not. And I would hate for an argument to be developed that suggests it is perfectly all right to kill someone if only we will take the trouble to anesthetize him first. And, of course, we know (or at least we think we know) that there are many ways to kill without inflicting pain at all.

# Principles of Catholic Environmentalism

September 30, 2010

Because of the excesses associated with environmentalism in an increasingly pagan West, many Catholics shy away from formal involvement with the “environmental movement”. At the same time, Catholics are (or ought to be) by the very nature of their Faith deeply committed to responsible stewardship over nature, cultivating and even improving God’s patrimony for the common good. This understanding of man’s God-given responsibility for creation lies at the heart of Pope Benedict’s emphasis on a proper response to environmental concerns.

While the Pope has mentioned environmental concerns frequently in various homilies and addresses, he has also articulated a complete Catholic approach to the environment in two documents last year: First, in his great social encyclical, [Caritas in Veritate](#), particularly the fourth chapter, in July 2009; second, in his [Message for World Day of Peace 2010](#), issued in December 2009 on the theme “If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation”. In this *In Depth Analysis*, I can do no better than to provide an outline of Catholic environmental thought by relying heavily on Benedict XVI’s own words.

## Integral Human Development

Benedict situates environmental concerns in the context of rights and duties on the one hand, and integral human development on the other. Thus Chapter Four of *Caritas in Veritate* is entitled “The Development of People, Rights and Duties, the Environment,” and it opens with a quotation from Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio*: “The reality of human solidarity, which is a benefit for us, also imposes a duty.” Benedict goes on to explain that it is necessary to understand that rights presuppose duties if rights are not to become licentious:

Duties set a limit on rights because they point to the anthropological and ethical framework of which rights are a part, in this way ensuring that they do not become license. Duties thereby reinforce rights and call for their defense and promotion as a task to be undertaken in the service of the common good. (CV 43)

Moreover, the Pope notes that “the sharing of reciprocal duties is a more powerful incentive to action than the mere assertion of rights” (CV 43).

One of the first duties of man is a responsible stewardship of Creation, which he has been given by God. In both the encyclical and the World Day of Peace message, Benedict points out that “human development is closely linked to the obligations which flow from *man’s relationship with the natural environment*.” Thus, the environment must be seen “as God’s gift to all people, and the use we make of it entails a shared responsibility for all humanity, especially the poor and future generations” (MWDP 2). He also immediately cautions that whenever human persons and nature as a whole are viewed as products of chance or evolutionary determinism, “our overall sense of responsibility wanes.” To the contrary, “seeing creation as God’s gift to humanity helps us understand our vocation and worth as human beings” (MWDP 2, cf. CV 48). Hence a proper understanding of man’s relationship to nature is essential to integral human development.

### **The Grammar of Nature**

Within this context, the Pope distinguishes two false viewpoints concerning the environment which are very common today. It is contrary to authentic development, he says, “to view nature as something more important than the human person.” This leads to neo-paganism and a new pantheism, as if salvation can come from nature alone. But it is also contrary to authentic development “to aim at total technical dominion over nature” because nature is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure (CV 48, MWDP 13). Instead Benedict emphasizes that man enjoys a reciprocal relationship with nature: “As we care for creation, we realize that God, through creation, cares for us” (MWDP 13).

The Pope refers frequently to the “grammar” of nature which we must learn to read, a grammar by which nature expresses a design of love and truth which is prior to us, and which has been given to us by God as the setting for our life. This grammar sets forth “ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation”:

Nature speaks to us of the Creator and his love for humanity (cf. Rom 1:20). It is destined to be “recapitulated in Christ at the end of time (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20). Thus it too is a “vocation”. Nature is at our disposal not as “a heap of scattered refuse”, but as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). (CV 48)

In his World Day of Peace message Benedict offers a beautiful exegesis of the Book of Genesis to demonstrate that God’s original command to subdue and fill the earth “was not a simple conferral of authority, but rather a summons to responsibility” (MWDP 6).

Following Benedict’s thought, the Catholic cannot escape seeing that all the great problems of our time, including environmental problems, have at their heart questions that are fundamentally moral in character. Quite often, in fact, they reflect a moral crisis. In *Caritas in Veritate*, the Pope stresses that “much in fact depends on the underlying system of morality”, and that this is why the Church’s social doctrine can make such an important contribution (CV 45). Later, he exclaims that “there is a *pressing moral need for renewed solidarity*” (CV 49); he also notes in the World Day of Peace message that Pope John Paul II had called attention to the “primarily ethical character” of the environmental crisis as early as 1990 (MWDP 4).

Indeed, Benedict insists that “our present crises—be they economic, food-related, environmental or social—are ultimately also moral crises.” A superior model of development is demanded, he says, not only by “the ecological health of the planet” but by “the cultural and moral crisis of humanity whose symptoms have for some time been evident in every part of the world” (MWDP 5).

### **Human Ecology and Environmental Ecology**

This grammar and moral framework provides the basis for what Benedict calls a “human ecology”. In both documents, as in many other places, he insists on the need to get human ecology right if we want to have a constructive environmental ecology. Early in the fourth chapter of the encyclical, he emphasizes that “morally responsible openness to life represents a rich social and economic resource” (CV 44). A little later he reminds us that “the way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa”, and he lays down the principle that “when ‘human ecology’ is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits”:

[T]he decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: It takes in not only

the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. (CV 51)

He repeats this in the World Day of Peace message: “Young people cannot be asked to respect the environment if they are not helped, within families and society as a whole, to respect themselves.” Our duties toward the environment “flow from our duties towards the person, considered both individually and in relation to others.” An authentic human ecology must affirm “the inviolability of human life at every stage and in every condition, the dignity of the person and the unique mission of the family, where one is trained in love of neighbor and respect for nature” (MWDP 12).

The Pope calls for nothing less than a new culture based on a Christian human ecology as the key to addressing successfully our concern about the environment.

### **Solidarity and Its Lack**

Within a culture which properly values God, man, creation and man’s position as a steward of nature, Benedict emphasizes repeatedly that the willingness to deal properly with the environment depends on the social virtue of solidarity. Recalling John Paul II’s insistence on the “urgent moral need for a new solidarity” in his own Message for the World Day of Peace in 1990, Benedict calls for a “*profound cultural renewal*” marked by “sobriety and solidarity” (MWDP 5). He also notes that “every violation of solidarity and civil friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society” (CV 51).

Again and again Benedict emphasizes the need for inter-generational and intra-generational solidarity, that is, solidarity which is extended in both time and space (MWDP 8). A lack of solidarity causes severe environmental problems, makes them impossible to solve, and places the burden on those least capable of dealing with them. In the World Day of Peace message (MWDP 4), the Pope lists the following problems as meriting particular concern:

- Climate change
- Desertification
- Deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas
- Pollution of rivers and aquifers
- Loss of biodiversity

- Deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions
- Increase of natural catastrophes
- Growing numbers of environmental refugees
- Conflicts over natural resources

In *Caritas in Veritate* he also notes that when “States, power groups and companies hoard non-renewable energy resources” they pose a “grave obstacle to development in poor countries”, which leads directly to the kinds of conflicts mentioned at the end of the preceding list (CV 49). He makes the same point about water as well (CV 51).

### **Benedict’s Program**

It is a fundamental axiom of Catholic social teaching (namely, the universal destination of goods) that the earth, water and air are gifts of creation that belong to everyone. In response to all those environmental situations which seem to undermine this principle, Pope Benedict affirms that there is an “increasingly clear link between combating environmental degradation and promoting an integral human development.”

Consequently, he advocates the adoption of a model of development based on the following (MWDP 9):

1. “The centrality of the human person”;
2. “The promotion and sharing of the common good”;
3. “Responsibility”;
4. “A realization of our need for a changed life-style”;
5. “Prudence, the virtue which tells us what needs to be done today in view of what might happen tomorrow”.

Within this context, there are a number of practical points he particularly stresses. First, he observes that while responsible procreation is necessary, far more problems are caused today by population decline, which reduces the financial resources needed for investment, reduces the availability of qualified laborers, and narrows the brain pool. Therefore, “States are called to enact policies promoting the centrality and the integrity of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society” (CV 44).



Second, in order to work well, development programs must be flexible so they can be adapted to local situations, “inasmuch as there are no universally valid solutions,” and they must be marked by the social virtue of subsidiarity. Thus the people who benefit from such programs “ought to be directly involved in their planning and implementation” (CV 47). International cooperation requires participation through solidarity, supervision, training and respect. Those who receive aid must not “become subordinate to the aid-givers”, and the poor must not be used “to perpetuate bureaucracies which consume an excessively high percentage of funds intended for development” (CV 47).

Third, “it is necessary to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination” (CV 27). There needs to be an international effort to ensure the availability of food throughout the world, and “similar attention also needs to be paid to the world-wide problem of water and to the global water cycle system, which is of prime importance for life on earth and whose stability could be seriously jeopardized by climate change” (MWDP 10).

Fourth, significant environmental concern needs to be directed toward the energy problem. “The technologically advanced societies can and must lower their domestic energy consumption, either through an evolution in manufacturing methods or through greater ecological sensitivity among their citizens” (CV 49). Research into alternative forms of energy should be encouraged (CV 49). But “a worldwide redistribution of energy resources” is also needed “so that countries lacking those resources can have access to them” (CV 49; MWDP 9).

Fifth, when making use of natural resources, we must be concerned about their protection for use by others, and we must “consider the cost entailed—environmentally and socially—as an essential part of the overall expenses incurred” (MWDP 7). Thus the economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources must be “recognized with transparency and fully borne by those who incur them, not by other peoples or future generations” (CV 50).

Finally, we must promote forms of agricultural and industrial production capable of “respecting creation and satisfying the primary needs of all” (MWDP 10). This requires a new culture, a shift in mentality leading to the adoption of new lifestyles, replacing hedonism and consumerism and making “the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth... factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments” (CV 51). This is required “not only because of the chilling prospects of environmental degradation on the horizon” but by a profound need for “authentic world-wide solidarity inspired by the values of charity, justice and

the common good” (MWDP 10).

## Conclusion

Having relied heavily on Benedict’s own words to increase our understanding of the Church’s position on the environment, I wish to be consistent and conclude with a major quotation. Near the end of the World Day of Peace message, the Pope offers these thoughts, which essentially summarize all the major principles of this essay, and so provide a basic charter for Catholic environmentalism:

Nor must we forget the very significant fact that many people experience peace and tranquility, renewal and reinvigoration, when they come into close contact with the beauty and harmony of nature. There exists a certain reciprocity: as we care for creation, we realize that God, through creation, cares for us. On the other hand, a correct understanding of the relationship between man and the environment will not end by absolutizing nature or by considering it more important than the human person. If the Church’s Magisterium expresses grave misgivings about notions of the environment inspired by ecocentrism and biocentrism, it is because such notions eliminate the difference of identity and worth between the human person and other living things. In the name of a supposedly egalitarian vision of the “dignity” of all living creatures, such notions end up abolishing the distinctiveness and superior role of human beings. They also open the way to a new pantheism tinged with neo-paganism, which would see the source of man’s salvation in nature alone, understood in purely naturalistic terms. The Church, for her part, is concerned that the question be approached in a balanced way, with respect for the “grammar” which the Creator has inscribed in his handiwork by giving man the role of a steward and administrator with responsibility over creation, a role which man must certainly not abuse, but also one which he may not abdicate. In the same way, the opposite position, which would absolutize technology and human power, results in a grave assault not only on nature, but also on human dignity itself. (MWDP 13)

# The Green Pope's Dilemma

June 27, 2011

Criticism tends to run high on CatholicCulture.org whenever bishops speak out on environmental issues, though it is generally more muted when it comes to the statements of the Pope. It seems to me that there are two legitimate reasons for this concern. But as we'll see, these reasons do not get beyond the surface of things.

The first legitimate reason for concern is that environmentalism in the modern West is associated primarily with those who regard the human person as a blight on the landscape. In the prevailing environmentalist view, man has no particular spiritual destiny. Instead, too many environmentalists seem to be trending toward a sort of pantheism as a means of regaining the harmony with nature they feel has been lost in a technocratic world.

The second reason for concern is that there seems to be little practical connection between environmentalism and the more pressing clear-cut moral issues which haunt our time, such as abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage and unbridled sexual license. To be getting involved in inconclusive debates over the best way to deal with the environment can all too easily be compared with fiddling while Rome burns.

## Pope Benedict's Approach

Simple as this may seem, when we blink our eyes and look again, we find a good deal more at stake, including key issues which place environmental debates squarely in the Catholic wheelhouse. For the right view of environmentalism both derives from and nourishes a proper vision of the human person. Pope Benedict made precisely this point in his great social encyclical, [Caritas in Veritate](#). In the most general terms, his argument is as follows:

The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or

otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God's creation. (48)

Thus the Pope stresses that we must guard against two errors:

1. **Nature is greater than man:** The neo-pantheistic attitude which finds a kind of salvation in nature is misguided because the human person has a supernatural destiny which nature is destined to help him to achieve.
2. **Nature is raw material to be manipulated:** Nature “is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation.” Without this understanding, we do violence to all of nature, including the nature of man himself.

But these two mistakes are culturally systemic. Therefore, the dilemma faced by Pope Benedict—who is commonly nicknamed the “green” pope for his interest in environmental stewardship—is how to communicate a constructive attitude toward both man and nature without having every environmental discussion co-opted either by the pantheists or the technocrats.

### **Endemic Confusion**

Benedict, of course, is perfectly capable of making the necessary distinctions, but those who listen to him, and I suspect we must include ourselves, will very frequently hear only what they want to hear, latching onto whichever concepts are already part of their own worldview, no matter how distorted these may be.

In other words, we have a nearly overpowering cultural tendency to extract the Pope's very Catholic ideas into the service of the usual secular debates. This afflicts far more than merely secular commentators. Bishops, priests, theologians, catechists, and Catholic voters—all of us run the risk of thinking first in terms of the partisan notions we have inherited from the recurring dialectic which defines our public life. The result is that we will most often either approve or decry this or that proposal according to our secularized intellectual affiliations, without at all challenging the mistaken ideas about man and nature that are almost always at stake. The most significant part of Catholic thought on the environment is simply this: Whether a particular environmental policy is

instituted or not, if our culture's attitudes toward man and nature do not change, neither the policy nor its absence will do any appreciable good.

The Green Pope's dilemma arises from the loose division of contemporary Western social discourse into categories of left and right (the range of available options will vary from place to place, but the categories will be the same). It is painfully difficult for both conservative (right) and liberal (left) Catholics to get beyond their knee-jerk reactions to environmental concerns in order to closely examine the Catholic vision of the human person which absolutely must be engaged.

While it is thankfully true that opinions on the environment cross party lines more than opinions on most other things do, in general we still face here exactly the same problem which afflicts conservative and liberal Catholics in discussing economics. Western discourse over the past several hundred years has been progressively locked into a left-right duality of collectivism and individualism in which nearly everything has been forgotten but human freedom and the resulting question of who ought to (or gets to) do what to whom. The paradoxical result is a licentious society governed by nearly totalitarian states. This is where the incomparable thinness of our social discourse has led. And sadly, every one of us is more bound by our prevailing cultural categories than we care to admit.

### **Spiritual and Moral Vision**

Our own cultural constriction, of course, merely makes the Pope's dilemma worse. We can resolve, or at least lessen, that dilemma only by being willing to step outside of our prevailing socio-political box in order to base our options on a Catholic understanding of the human person and a Catholic understanding of nature.

In the same chapter of *Caritas in Veritate* in which the Benedict treated environmental questions, he made the point that "morally responsible openness to life" represents a rich resource, the lack of which is killing and crushing our most affluent societies (44). He also pointed out that "the economy needs ethics in order to function correctly—not any ethics whatsoever, but an ethics which is people-centered", for "much in fact depends on the underlying system of morality" (45). In all development programs, he further noted, "the principle of the centrality of the human person, as the subject primarily responsible for development, must be preserved" (45). It is only after all this that he took up the environment:

Nature expresses a design of love and truth. It is prior to us, and it has been given to us by God as the setting for our life. Nature speaks to us of the Creator (cf. Rom

1:20) and his love for humanity. It is destined to be “recapitulated” in Christ at the end of time (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20). Thus it too is a “vocation”. (48)

These same principles were outlined somewhat more succinctly in Benedict’s recent address to six new ambassadors to the Holy See (see [Human Ecology Is an Imperative](#)). On that occasion, he said that “man comes first, as it is right to remember. Man, to whom God entrusted the good stewardship of nature, cannot be dominated by technology or subjected to it.” The Pope went on to insist:

[I]t is necessary to review our entire approach to nature. It is not a place solely for exploitation or for play. It is man’s native land, in a certain sense his “home”. This is fundamental for us. The shift of mentality in this domain, that is, the constraints it brings, allows us rapidly to become more proficient in the art of living together that respects the alliance between man and nature, without which the human family risks disappearing.

The Pope pointed out that it is the human worker who is “responsible for [the] dynamic of progress”, and not mere technique. In contrast, to “stake everything on technology or to believe that it is the exclusive agent for happiness brings a reification of the human being which results in blindness and unhappiness when powers it does not possess are attributed and delegated to it.” *Reification*, in this context, means to turn man into a “thing”. Moreover:

Technology that dominates human beings deprives them of their humanity. The pride it engenders has brought an inflexible economic focus into our societies and a certain hedonism that determines behavior subjectively and egotistically.

By now the penny is dropping, and the larger connections are being made.

### **Those Really Important Issues**

Now, indeed, we begin to see that even the pressing problems I mentioned near the beginning—abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage, and unbridled sexual license, among others—while having their roots in human passions and selfishness, take their peculiar shape in the modern world from a faulty view of man and an equally faulty view of nature. It is as if both of the errors the Pope delineated in *Caritas in Veritate* are continually at work at the same time. On the one hand, we place ourselves on a par with the purely natural, as if the human person lacks a transcendent identity and so may be

disposed of in the same way we might dispose of an insect or a leaf. On the other, we encourage the technological manipulation not only of others but of our own bodies, as if we are gods who can invest the natural order with new meanings that will permit us to indulge our most disordered cravings without the inevitable disastrous consequences.

As the Pope put it in his diplomatic address, “the weakening of the primacy of the human being brings existential bewilderment and a loss of the meaning of life.” Indeed, “a vision of the human person and of things without a reference to transcendence uproots man from the earth and fundamentally impoverishes his very identity.”

Thus it is “urgently necessary”, says the Pope, “to succeed in combining technology with a strong ethical dimension, for the human capacity to transform and, in a sense, to create the world through his own work is always based on the first and original gift of things that are made by God. Technology must help nature blossom according to the will of the Creator.” But in this he is once again immediately caught on the horns of our dilemma, and the reason is painfully simple. Our left-right box is in fact essentially a naturalistic box, a secularist box, a box that effectively excludes God.

That is why the Pope insists modern states must stop squeezing God out of what we might call the natural social order, seeking to reduce Him to a mere sentiment in the private mind. We too must stop thinking of religion as an “inside the Church” phenomenon with no bearing on the natural order—as if environmentalism must be taken as a value-neutral concept about which God has nothing useful to say. Or as if it is obvious that priests, bishops and even the Pope ought to just shut up about things that don’t concern them.

Instead, we tend to keep the Green Pope firmly on the horns of his dilemma. Some of us tell the Pope to go do his real job, and in so doing we lose a signal opportunity to engage our culture’s attitudes toward man and nature. Others of us jump on the papal bandwagon as an excuse to praise the platform of our favorite secular party. But here again we fail to challenge that party’s attitudes toward man and nature. Neither of these responses can do any possible good. No, the only way to help is to pour the Pope’s new wine into new skins. In his diplomatic address, Benedict warned that the this new wine will have a decidedly heady impact on our social discourse. “Life in society,” he said, “must be considered first and foremost as a spiritual reality.”

Wait, what’s that again? “Life *in society* must be considered first and foremost as a spiritual reality.” Isn’t this the direct opposite of what our culture dictates? Yet if you want to end the Green Pope’s dilemma—and you should—I recommend you start with this clear and ringing assertion. You will explode the box.

# The Bishops, Justice, Health Care and Social Change

May 29, 2009

Bishop William Murphy's letter to members of the US House of Representatives endorsing comprehensive health care for every inhabitant of the United States (including illegal immigrants) raises an important question about the involvement of the United States bishops in politics. Granted, the letter comes from Bishop Murphy as chairman of the Domestic Justice and Human Development Committee of the USCCB. It is not, apparently, a mandate of the body of bishops as a whole. Nonetheless, the letter once again raises the critical question: Where is the line between moral principles, which the bishops must enunciate clearly and forcefully, and public policy, which the bishops have neither the charism nor the competence to formulate?

This question has long haunted the Church in America, especially in the heady post-Vatican II years when many bishops apparently believed that Catholic doctrine itself was in the midst of a major reformulation, resulting in episcopal political statements that were sometimes not so very well grounded in Catholic moral principles. But the main issue is not whether the bishops have a firm grasp of Catholic moral principles, but whether they have a superior grasp of how effectively this or that public policy embodies those principles. According to Church teaching, they don't. In both theory and practice it is up to the laity, formed by Catholic principles, to determine the best prudential response to various public issues.

The episcopal office does not confer any particular special insight into either the feasibility or the effectiveness of proposed public policies; nor is there any historical warrant for suggesting that, in practice, bishops as a body are better at this sort of thing than laymen. In fact, both by training and experience, one would expect politically active lay persons to have a better grasp of the art of the possible in implementing effective public policies, just as one would expect bishops to have a better grasp of Catholic faith and morals.

## Social Justice and Social Change

When the Church involves herself in politics, she is wont to talk about "social justice"



rather than charity. However, as Pope Benedict XVI clearly stated in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, the special province of the Church is charity. It is the State which has justice as its proper end. This does not mean that the Church should not teach the principles of justice. Justice derives from the moral law, which Revelation helps the Church to enunciate with unmatched clarity. But there is a blurry line between charity and justice in the public context, even when both aim at the same goal.

For example, consider these questions: Is it a matter of charity or justice that free education should be available to all citizens? Or that the poor should receive a high level of housing and food benefits? Or that health care should be free? There is no “right” answer to these questions; the answers depend very much on the social context. In previous eras, nobody would have argued that the State had an obligation in justice to provide these things. The scope of the State was utterly insufficient to the purpose, and economic conditions were such that it simply could not be expected that a very large percentage of citizens could ever have access to such benefits. But if one person denied to another person a benefit to which he was ordinarily entitled—stealing a noble’s inheritance or riding roughshod over a peasant’s right to common acreage and shared equipment—then a matter of justice was clearly present. For the rest, the charity of friends, neighbors and the Church herself was essential to get people through difficult times.

In Western affluent mass societies, the general level of material well-being is far higher, and it is not (in theory) based on rank or class. Universal public education is a fact of life, and in a non-agrarian society education is seen as a key to making one’s livelihood. We tend to think, therefore, that everyone has a right to be educated; hence it is a matter of justice if someone is denied schooling. But we carry this only so far. It does not apply to college or graduate school. In other words, a moment’s reflection reveals to us that issues of justice are not always absolute. Instead, many issues take on a dimension of justice by virtue of the conventions of the social context in which the issues are raised. The most important point to recognize here is that the term “social justice” is very malleable; it is what the ancients recognized as distributive justice, and it must take circumstances into account. Thus it depends only partly on the natural law and to a much greater degree on the expectations, customs and capabilities of the society in question. (In contrast, charity faces no such conceptual problems: It is always a personal response to another’s need out of love.)

## Health Care

Health care is an excellent case in point. The very dream that all people should have

access to a high level of professional health care depends on the peculiar features of particular societies: the widespread availability of competent professional care; a generalized familiarity with such care throughout the social order; a high percentage of persons already enjoying the advantages of this care; a significant understanding of public health; the advancement of medicine to the point that the difference between those who have medical care and those who do not is both significant and predictable; and of course tremendous affluence.

But for this dream to be the proper province of the State, we must somehow translate it from the sphere of desire to the sphere of justice. One would expect that the special gift of bishops would be to articulate the principles which make a given potential benefit a matter of justice; the case needs to be made because there is very little absolute about this sort of social claim. Thus the bishops might suggest (as I believe they would be right to do) that the claim to health care (or any other social benefit) becomes a matter of justice in a given society when that society begins to perceive, in its own context, that health care is unnecessarily unavailable to defined groups of people who—again, in the culture’s own particular context—would ordinarily be expected to have access to it.

The example of education may again prove useful. At a certain point in Western history, it became a feature of our common Western culture that the vast majority of people could be educated. A variety of philosophical, social and economic circumstances led to this cultural shift, and it took a very long time for the availability of education to reach anything like what we might call critical mass. Once critical mass was reached, it became the norm that all persons should be educated in a certain way (so much so that people gradually lost a great deal of personal control over the matter). Once this became the norm—and not before—society was in a position to judge it an injustice if anyone was prevented from going to school. Health care is perhaps now on a similar trajectory. However, it is not a matter of absolute principle but of socio-economic-political judgment whether, in fact, our culture is in a position to demand a certain level of health care as a matter of justice.

## Problems

Once again, the primary role of bishops is not to endorse a particular policy proposal or a particular demographic result, but to explain the various principles and related considerations which might be sufficient to make health care a justice issue. Such a case may well be worthy of serious consideration, given the current characteristics of our society. Moreover, I would suggest that the bishops ought to be uniquely qualified to make this case—just as they are generally unqualified to endorse any particular method

of embodying such principles of justice in public policy.

After all, there are grave problems with any specific implementation of these principles in health care. Costs, quality of care, and personal liberty in determining the nature and scope of one's medical treatment are among the more obvious. But the very involvement of the public order in medical care raises problems of its own, just as it has in education. It is no secret that a very large number of bishops were reared in the social traditions of modern liberalism. Perhaps as a result, many bishops assume that if a social problem exists, the Federal government must be put in charge of solving it. But he who lives by the Federal government may well die by it, for the Federal government is deeply involved in and supportive of quite a few grave moral evils in the realm of standard health care.

Bishop Murphy recognizes this difficulty, sort of. He warns that "no health care legislation that compels Americans to pay for or participate in abortion will find sufficient votes to pass." But this is only another political judgment that no bishop is qualified to make. The smart money, I think, suggests that a universal medical system, if it were to pass all the other objections, would not be long subverted by such "petty" concerns as contraception, abortion and the use of aborted embryos in medical treatments—or even by assisted suicide, should that become the secular norm. One needs only to consider how we have fared in keeping such things out of insurance coverage. In any case, the main point is that Bishop Murphy, who only "sort of" sees the problem, does not see it as something that would deter him from demanding that the Federal government institute comprehensive health care now. The same ideological problems that undermine the values of the American citizenry in public education will be at work in the actual giving and taking of life in public medicine.

It probably isn't necessary to raise the question of costs; the public is very sensitive to cost issues at the moment anyway. But Bishop Murphy's letter does endorse the provision of "*comprehensive and affordable health care for every person living in the United States.*" This hides a hornet's nest of questions, many of which revolve around the question of how much health care we can afford for how many. Alas, Revelation does not touch upon this issue. Questions of efficiency and quality are equally complex. For example, would it be unjust to allow persons of means to seek additional or better health care than the universal system provides? This would, after all, give them a social advantage. And would doctors and hospitals be permitted to provide such health care outside the system? Another huge consideration is the impact on illegal immigration of ever-greater public benefits for every man, woman and child residing on American soil.

### **Willy Nilly Doesn't Cut It**

Again, my point is not to argue against a better solution to health care in our society. As I have indicated, my personal assessment is that, although the best course is far from clear, our society does possess the combination of characteristics which make it morally necessary to think hard about this question, and to consider what might be done. As societies grow and change, along with their resources and their methods of using resources, different questions come to the fore, and sometimes circumstances do change enough to require the application of principles of justice to new areas of life, areas in which the question of justice was quite rightly inapplicable in another place and another time.

But it goes way beyond what we can know in our current context to assume willy nilly that these questions of justice are clear and easily applicable, or that one particular solution is obviously the best course. By all means, the bishops should lead a penetrating discussion of how and when certain social realities push new questions into the sphere of what we might call relative justice. They should apply this discussion very particularly to health care. And they should also point out clearly any absolute moral imperatives they see as critical to the discussion, such as not being forced to participate in murder. Then, based on an ever-deepening understanding of moral issues provided by cogent episcopal teaching, the bishops need to back away and allow the laity to do their own proper job: The formulation and implementation of specific public policies.

# A Barren Beach

December 15, 2009

I confess it: I just don't see how it is possible for a good Catholic to favor the Federal takeover of health care. This is so obvious that we shouldn't even have to be debating it. Completely apart from funding for abortion, each bishop in the United States should see the problem with a clarity so pure and crystalline as to hurt his eyes. (For just a few of the reasons, see Phil Lawler's [The Catholic case against health-care reform](#).)

Look: Anyone who understands the secularist trajectories of contemporary American polity, the increasing tendency in the West toward totalitarianism, the violation of human freedom and dignity which necessarily follows the abandonment of subsidiarity, and the dramatic push toward a culture of death by Western culture in general, and by the American courts and Democratic Party over the last generation in particular—well, anybody with even an inkling of the factors in play, if he has significant Christian values at all, should be running as far away from Federally-controlled health care as possible.

The new world that anyone with eyes should see coming is a world in which genuinely religious people, who take Revelation seriously rather than making it all up as they go along, will be increasingly marginalized; where extreme moral evils will not only be permitted but protected by law, and not only protected by law but required; where the bulk of those evils are bioethical and therefore inescapably medical; and where those who object to such evils must either participate in them or lose the right to practice their profession, to remain at liberty, or even to remain alive.

We have been through wave after wave of this sort of thing since faith and reason were divorced in the eighteenth century: first the French Revolution and the Terror, then the rise of Communism and Nazism, and now the increasingly ideological progressions of the European Union and the American judicial system. Every one of these manifestations of the secular rationalist state has been greeted as beneficial to mankind by a significant number of citizens, who have fervently blessed slavery as freedom, and called black white.

If the effort to put health care fully under Federal control is not, under contemporary circumstances, a major step along this path, then I am incapable of analytical thought. Does anyone seriously believe this will not amplify and multiply the full range of horrendous bioethical evils which afflict our dying culture? Does anyone really believe it

will not strengthen the culture of death, ultimately punishing those who oppose it? How is any other interpretation possible? Whence comes a realistic hope that the result could be something other than this? Where are the historical trends to support such a vanity?

And what infuriates me is that so many, including many who claim the Catholic name, still purport not to see this; still claim they can support it with complete consistency as Christians; still dissemble; or, at best, still convince themselves that by riding this new wave of power they can escape the ultimate drowning of their own souls.

Ah! See them riding that monstrous wave, boasting as if seizing a higher and firmer ground! Observe the teeming insignificance of so much life swept below! Pause to watch the mighty water as it arches and froths, and hear presently their exultant shouts turn to terror as the wave curls and crashes, spilling even the mightiest into its shimmering maw. Listen at last to the diminishing roar as the wave recedes, revealed only now as the ebb tide of history, leaving its dead upon the barren beach.

# Concern for the Poor in Health Care

December 21, 2009

There's a lot I've wanted to write about over the past several days, but I've been totally bogged down in snow removal and final fundraising activities for the year. Writing is more fun than either (and hopefully more ultimately useful). With both of these less-enjoyable activities now in the rear-view mirror, I think the first item I'd like to take up is concern for the poor in health care.

I received another one of those emails over the weekend which suggested that it would be hard to persuade others to support us in view of our callous indifference to the fate of forty-five million poor Americans who cannot afford adequate health care. This sort of assertion continues to amaze me, because it so very completely misses the entire point of everything Phil and I have written about health care reform in the United States.

From the first time I addressed this issue, I asserted that, in our culture, the ubiquity of good health care and the expectations concerning its availability had reached the point that we needed to do something, as a matter of social justice, to improve health care for the relatively small percentage of Americans who were still without health insurance (for my essay on the proper way to reach this conclusion, see [The Bishops, Justice, Health Care and Social Change](#)). Both Phil and I have argued repeatedly that there are right ways and wrong ways to achieve this goal. Unfortunately, we have been forced to concentrate most of our editorial firepower on opposing one of the wrong ways, in order to clear the way for one of the right ways.

I'm sorry, but I refuse to be blamed for the deliberate insertion of false ideas about the value of human life, including support for abortion, into the very packages and programs which should have a proper respect for life at their core—and which, in fact, lose their very meaning as “health care” without that fundamental respect for the life, rights and dignity of each person. I will not be backed into that corner. I will not stand accused of indifference to those less financially fortunate because I balk when somebody presses an ideological gun to my temple and calls it “concern for the poor.”

In that gun there are at least six bullets: Abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, harvesting of human embryonic materials, gender-change procedures, and medical rationing by those who serve an anti-life ethic. None of the major issues which are being debated, including the astronomically high cost of these Federal proposals, has very

much to do with insuring the poor. There are far cheaper ways to get that done which do not carry all this ideological baggage. To my way of thinking, those who insist that the culture of death be injected into every health discussion are the ones who are showing a callous disregard of the poor.

They are, in fact, allowing their ideological passion to impede the process of helping the poor and (as Phil notes today in [The abortion distortion](#)) they are intent upon setting up a system that must be dismantled as soon as less ideological heads prevail. Look: With 85% of Americans already insured, and some portion of the remainder capable of, but opposed to, insuring themselves (for many young and healthy people choose not to use their income in this way), we find ourselves within striking distance of full coverage even through existing mechanisms. That striking distance is so close that it would apparently cost considerably less simply to insure the poor through existing carriers than to approve any of the sweeping Federal proposals to date. Tax incentives and other pressures and inducements could bring this about even more cheaply.

The Catholic Medical Association thinks the Federal government needs to start over, and to quit ignoring both life ethics and the benefits of subsidiarity. So let's not kill any more poor people than necessary to get this done, shall we? And let's stop calling a spade a heart, and a heart a spade.



# The Challenge of Bio-Medical Advances

September 01, 2010

Contemporary biological research continues to raise questions about what it means to be human. New bio-medical technologies now permit the manufacture of some replacement organs, not by building them from parts foreign to the body, but by using a person's own cells to generate the organs in a laboratory. Do advanced bio-medical developments create moral problems?

It all depends. We are already well aware of the moral problems associated with embryonic stem cell research, in that the destruction of living human persons (embryos) is required to obtain the cells. Creating offspring to harvest their body parts, or hastening another's death to do so, are also examples of immorality. But when Anthony Atala of the Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine builds a "cell delivery vehicle", coats it with healthy cells from a patient's bladder, and incubates it, then the cells multiply and eventually form a new bladder. The new bladder can replace a diseased bladder, and will not be rejected by the recipient because it was grown from his own cells. There is no moral problem here.

The mapping of the human genome has enabled doctors to diagnose some diseases by analyzing a person's genetic structure, and scientists are learning that they can alter genes to turn certain capabilities on or off. Current research on the genetic changes that take place when healthy cells become cancerous may provide sufficient knowledge to make genetic changes to halt the process. Some hope that the ability to regenerate lost limbs, which exists in some lower animals but not in higher ones, will one day be able to be turned on for humans.

If such research can be carried on without some persons harming or killing others to make the research possible, there is no intrinsic moral problem with the process, and there may be significant moral benefits. For example, heart transplants are useful only if the heart can be taken before the donor's bodily functions cease, which requires a diagnosis of brain death. But it is a serious question whether brain death is really death. An organically grown heart would entirely bypass this problem. In other areas, of course, the application of new medical capabilities may just as easily raise significant

moral questions. One is the question of a person's identity. Clearly it doesn't alter a person's identity to regrow a limb any more than it alters his identity to lose a limb. He is still himself. But using medical techniques to contradict our identity, such as an attempted sex change, is immoral—a repudiation of the gift of ourselves.

There is also the issue that all significant change introduces new sets of problems. For example, the ability to easily replace substantial numbers of defective organs could have another major impact on life span. As we now know, increasing the average life span can create all sorts of social problems, which frequently become a source of moral dangers. In this connection, it will be interesting to see whether aging can be substantially forestalled by the mere replacement of parts. If a newly grown bladder is inserted into an elderly person, does that bladder soon begin to exhibit the characteristics of aging? To what degree would it ever be possible to replace enough parts to largely eliminate the consequences of aging across the board?

In any case, the quest for bodily immortality raises intriguing questions about what it means to be human, and this has always been the case. Clearly our mortality is an important part of what makes us who we are. It colors our notions of self-sacrifice and heroism, and it comes as close as possible to forcing us to concentrate on our spiritual nature, on our essential nobility as persons, and on our ultimate destiny. It is unlikely that an increase of the average lifespan from 75 to 120 would fundamentally alter that dynamic; but the hope of eliminating death entirely is another matter.

It is also unclear whether there is something fundamental in the human person which causes him to tire of earthly life at some point, no matter how healthy he may be. One wonders, too, whether the sacrifice of one's life to save another (a possibility which cannot be eliminated by mere advances in medical care) is essentially greater for, say, a 35-year-old if his expected lifespan is 110 instead of 65. Can we strictly quantify life?

For the Christian, all of these questions boil down to two: First, is there something about a particular bio-medical process that is specifically immoral (in terms of material or spiritual harm to others or oneself)? Harvesting materials from others in a deleterious way without their consent is clearly immoral, as is changing certain things about our own bodies for immoral reasons (such as denying our own given sexuality or choosing to enhance some aspect of our bodies in order to more successfully behave immorally).

Second, do I still yearn for God and give myself freely to Him? In prayer I may decide to have a heart transplant. That decision is not fundamentally different from choosing to use an antibiotic, except for the risk/reward ratio. But if I am in denial about my own nature and the relationship I am supposed to have with the loving Father who created me, then I am in spiritual and moral trouble. And if I am pursuing bodily

immortality because of my disdain for God's plan, then I'd best give up the quest.

# Is It Ever Right to Lie?

April 11, 2008

The moral question of lying is one of the most interesting and most difficult to resolve perfectly and precisely. It has occupied the attention of moral theologians since the Patristic Age, yet we still don't have a complete understanding of what "lying" means. Most of us have a deep intuition that it is morally acceptable to speak falsely in some circumstances, but the Church has not yet offered an official explanation as to why this is the case. Presumably, there is room for doctrinal development here, and I find the question fascinating.

## The Lie Problem

Using an example to illustrate the chief difficulty, let's consider the case of a man with a house guest whom a group of thugs wants to murder. The thugs come to the door. Because they don't wish to create an outcry before they're sure they've found their quarry (giving him time to escape, for example, from a neighboring house), they don't force their way in to search. Instead, they knock on the door and simply ask whether their intended victim is within. Note that this case is not unlike the classic example of Christians hiding Jews from the Nazis. In both cases, the problem is simple: If you answer the door, and you don't trust the thugs' intentions, do you have to tell the truth?

The vast majority of well-formed Catholics would answer this question in the negative. Under these circumstances, it is perfectly permissible to deceive the thugs at the door. But even well-formed Catholics can't explain why this is the case, or at least they can't explain it in a way which is universally-accepted by sound moral theologians down through the ages, nor in a way that has (yet) been endorsed by the Magisterium of the Church. Most of us believe we can (and indeed should) lie under these circumstances, but we don't know exactly why. This problem so agitated Catholic thinkers during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries that their less subtle Protestant brethren began to question whether Catholics believed in telling the truth.

## What Constitutes a Lie?

It is best to begin our own examination with a definition of "lying", and indeed some theologians believe that the solution must be found in the definition, much as "murder" is

always wrong but “killing” is not. One of the stronger theological traditions, endorsed by Aquinas and rooted in Augustine, is that lying is speaking deliberately contrary to one’s own mind. (Throughout this discussion, “speaking” means any sort of communication.) This was the most common definition among the Scholastics, and it became a staple of theological manuals in the first part of the 20th century. As Fr. John Hardon puts it in the *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, “When a person tells a lie, he or she deliberately says something that is contrary to what is on that person’s mind; there is a real opposition between what one says and what one thinks” (an opposition that cannot be merely apparent, explained by ignorance or misstatement).

The first thing to notice is that this definition emphasizes the *moral intentionality* of lying; the truth itself is not necessarily contradicted. If a person thinks something is true and deliberately states something to the contrary, he has incurred the moral guilt of lying. While this may be so subjectively, it leaves open the possibility that such a person, believing a falsehood, could actually speak the truth by speaking against his own mind.

Because this definition is divorced from the objective truth or falsity of the statement, many theologians have sought an alternative definition. Some have proposed that the proper definition of “lying” is “speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving.” In the early 20th century, the article on “Lying” in the highly-regarded *Catholic Encyclopedia* dismissed this definition (though it is also traceable to Augustine) as a new and minor opinion which raised more problems than it solved. By the late 20th century, however, it was precisely this definition that made it into the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see #2482).

The definition in the *Catechism* has the virtue of anchoring a lie in objective reality. To be properly termed a lie, a statement must fulfill two conditions: (a) It must be objectively false; (b) It must be spoken with the intention to deceive. This definition also makes it easier to dismiss falsehoods obviously told in jest (though supporters of the other definition could argue that a falsehood told in jest is not in any meaningful way contrary to one’s own mind), but it does not as easily capture the moral failure of the person who intends to lie but, because his understanding is wrong, inadvertently tells the truth. And neither definition appears to address the question of why it is moral to lie to murderous thugs.

## Refined Definitions and Exceptions

Some moralists have argued that we are obliged to state the strict truth no matter what the consequences, on the principle that the end does not justify the means. But this makes a presumption that most thinkers would not admit: that the only reason to shy

away from the truth is fear of an evil consequence. In the case of the murderous thugs, however, most people really believe it would *bemorally evil* to reveal the location of the intended victim. It is, in fact, something that only an unimaginative coward would do. Other moralists argue that we are not strictly obliged to speak the truth, but we must not speak falsely. We may, for example, try to change the subject, keep silence, or openly refuse to answer. However, even very moral onlookers might well ask, somewhat contemptuously, whether this was the best we could do. Therefore, to more effectively address this critical problem, a great many moralists have tried either to tweak the definition or to suggest grounds for exceptions.

For example, proponents of the first definition have sometimes argued that a person is not really speaking against his own mind if his conscience instructs him to say something false (for example, to save an innocent person). This is internally consistent, and we must certainly follow our conscience, but the explanation does not provide any principle by which to properly form the conscience. Therefore, its very subjectivity renders it morally unhelpful.

Other proponents of the first definition have proposed that the problem can be resolved through mental reservation. For example, if you ask an attorney whether his client is guilty, he may properly answer “I don’t know”, and intelligent people in his culture will understand that this means “I have no communicable information to impart.” Hence the attorney uses a mental reservation about what he means by the words “I don’t know,” but it is a mental reservation understandable by all parties (termed a “wide” mental reservation). The problem with mental reservation theory is that it can make truth-telling dependent on one’s capacity for spur-of-the-moment mental sleight-of-hand (often called “strict” mental reservation). For example, if you’ve been playing baseball in the street (again!) and you break your neighbor’s window, the neighbor may run out and demand to know whether you did it. Under some theories of mental reservation, you can answer “No” if you are really thinking “No, I did not break it with my bat; it was the ball that broke it.” Such equivocations, whose true sense is determined only by the mind of the speaker, were condemned by the Holy See as early as 1679, but more serious explorations of mental reservation have continued. Some versions of the theory were widely endorsed well into the 20th century.

Still other thinkers have taken a completely different tack, arguing that the immorality of lying admits of exceptions. Some have argued that one is not obligated to tell the truth to an enemy, or that political leaders may speak falsely for reasons of state. Most thinkers in this camp would argue that, just as one can morally kill in self-defense or in defense of another, one can morally lie to save a life. The problem here is that once

murder is properly defined, the need for exceptions disappears. Murder is a special class of killing, commonly defined as the deliberate taking of “innocent life”, and it is not murder to kill an unjust aggressor, for the unjust aggressor has lost his “innocence”, that is, he has forfeited the right to have his life preserved in these circumstances. The better question, then, is whether a more precise definition of “lying” can be situated within a broader category of “speaking falsely” in order to achieve similar clarity.

One effort to do so has gained considerable favor among theologians in the last hundred years. This is the proposal to tweak the definition of lying as follows: “To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead into error someone *who has the right to know the truth*.” This sentence, in fact, is taken from the *initial* edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2483). When the *Catechism* was first published, there was some speculation that the Holy See had finally decided to throw at least a modicum of Magisterial weight behind this solution to our dilemma. For this definition enables us to handle lying and falsehood in a manner very similar to the way we handle murder and killing. Through a person’s intention to use particular knowledge for an evil end, that person would presumably forfeit his right to know. Thus it would be morally acceptable to speak a falsehood to the murderous thugs. But we would no more call this “lying” than we would call an act of self-defense “murder”.

### Not Yet Resolved

Alas, the matter is not so easily resolved. For, as it turns out, when the official Latin text of the *Catechism* was released (after a process of revision in the original vernacular languages), the right to know was dropped. The operative sentence now reads simply: “To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error.” This does not mean that the original formulation was wrong, but it does mean that the editors of the *Catechism* were not prepared to endorse it in an official Catholic reference work. One can imagine that a great deal of consultation and discussion preceded the very few textual changes that were finally made. In the end, then, the *Catechism* does not directly address our problem.

The *Catechism*, of course, is not an infallible text. In promulgating a catechism, the Pope does not intend to issue a series of definitive magisterial teachings on every topic it covers; rather, the book is intended as a convenient reference work, carefully assembled, reviewed and monitored by Church officials. Nonetheless, the *Catechism* represents a considerable weight of ecclesiastical opinion on the side of a definition which incorporates both objective reality and human intentionality: “A lie consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving” (a citation from Augustine), and “To lie is to

“speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error.” (Again, see numbers 2482 and 2483.) And while our question is neither directly addressed nor ultimately settled, the emphasis on the intention to deceive does suggest another possible line of thought. For, when we speak falsely to our murderous thugs, we may at least question whether our intention is to deceive. Presumably, that intention—if it consciously exists at all—is very secondary. What we primarily intend is to prevent them from doing evil.

It would satisfy a well-formed conscience, I think, to permit the speaking of falsehood when it is the only means we can think of to prevent someone from committing an immoral act. But if so, it is hard to reach such a conclusion only by denying the intention to deceive. There must be something more than that, for we could also say that when we lied to our boss last Wednesday, our intention was not to deceive but to save our skin. Clearly this is just one more possibility for exploration, and so far all the possibilities in history have not led to a formal doctrinal development which can settle the matter. Often such developments occur only when specific concerns (or errors) become so severe that the Magisterium is more or less forced to study a question and make a pronouncement. Happily, I am not aware that the Church’s imprecision on this question has ever led to a great heresy or to a widespread and dangerous confusion. For most of us, the moral challenge is to find the courage to tell the truth instead of “spinning” it for our own petty purposes. Still, the question is very interesting and not at all unimportant. At the very least, it reminds us of the need to attend carefully to our own moral formation, while relishing the sheer intellectual adventure of exploring Truth.



# Readers on Lying

April 15, 2008

The response to last Friday's column on lying has been remarkable (see [Is It Ever Right to Lie?](#)). Many readers have offered their own viewpoints on this complex matter in an exchange of ideas which has been both pleasant and instructive. Every opinion was worth serious consideration. I'll summarize a few of these observations here.

The question at the center of the column was whether it can ever be morally right to communicate false information. Most correspondents saw the difficulties this question presents, and enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on it. Among those offering solutions, the vast majority addressed only the "thugs at the door" scenario, making no attempt to apply their proposed solution to other kinds of falsehoods commonly considered legitimate (e.g., jokes, misleading statements to protect privacy, undercover police work, reasons of state, wartime intelligence operations, and so on).

Of the solutions proposed, the most common was what I would call "wide" mental reservation. A number of readers suggested that we must interpret what the thugs are really asking (*i.e.*, they appear to be asking if someone is present to be killed), and then we must answer that question with a simple "No", meaning "No, there is no one here you can kill." Similar solutions have been proposed by the moralists of the mental reservation school, and this is not a position that can be dismissed lightly. Nonetheless, this sort of equivocation is so internal to the speaker's mind that it is difficult to escape absurdity when we apply it to more ordinary situations. May we really mentally construe the meaning of any conversation as we please and then respond with words which, while apparently clear to the other party, really mean whatever we want them to mean? Taken as a general norm, this raises serious questions.

Some other respondents thought that the right to know must be part of the solution, even if the *Catechism* did not commit to it. Their argument is that the *Catechism*'s definition of lying (speaking falsely with the intention to deceive) is correct but perhaps not yet complete. This definition might, without essential contradiction, be one day developed into the definition temporarily found in the initial edition: speaking falsely with an intention to deceive one who has the right to know. This is certainly a possibility, and it would cover many—probably all—hard cases. (The one category this would obviously not cover is jokes, but it can be argued that jokes do not constitute a real

difficulty, because deception must be both exceedingly transitory and immediately followed by truth in order to qualify as innocent humor.) However, as several correspondents pointed out, the “right to know” raises its own questions, and a further application of that right to the problem of lying might have to await a better understanding than we now possess.

Others wondered whether the key to the riddle could be found in the motive of the speaker. On this reading, if our intention is to do serious moral good by communicating falsely (as opposed to acting from petty motives, for mere self-aggrandizement, or in order to do evil), the intention alone may be sufficient to color the morality of our speech, such that at the very least we may avoid the subjective guilt of sin. Still others speculated on whether an analysis of the lesser of two evils might not come into play in some situations, for example in choosing to lie rather than be complicit in a murder. Finally, two correspondents affirmed categorically that all falsehoods are lies and that all lies are evil. These maintained that one may either speak the truth or avoid speaking it, but never speak falsely. If this opinion is correct, then the fact that most well-formed Catholics do not hold it (as seems confirmed by the correspondence) simply means that most of us are wrong. As I said at the outset, each of these positions is worth serious consideration.

# Capital Punishment: Drawing the Line Between Doctrine and Opinion

June 07, 2004

Abortion has been the defining pro-life issue and, for this reason, those who find themselves on the anti-life side of the abortion debate have been very eager to turn the tables by elevating capital punishment to the same status. Thus, when a particular candidate is praised for his pro-life record, someone may remark that, no, this candidate is not pro-life, because he supports the death penalty.

## Something Happened in 1995

Before 1995, most pro-lifers were able to respond easily and clearly by pointing out that Christian tradition in general, and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church in particular, upheld the right of the State to inflict the death penalty for grave crimes. Therefore, it was incorrect to use one's position on the death penalty as a litmus test for being pro-life.

However, something extraordinary happened in 1995 which has left Catholic pro-lifers deeply confused about the Church's teaching. In that year, Pope John Paul II argued against the death penalty in his landmark encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, the same encyclical which formally condemned abortion and euthanasia while brilliantly reaffirming the Catholic culture of life.

## Understanding Changes to the Catechism

To see the magnitude of the impact of *Evangelium Vitae*, one need look no farther than the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The *Catechism* was developed over a period of years and issued in various languages before the definitive Latin text was complete. Thus, the text was first published in English in 1994, but the definitive Latin was not promulgated until 1997, at which time all the various earlier vernacular language editions were revised to match it.

Article 5 of the *Catechism* deals with the fifth commandment (“You shall not kill”). Numbers 2263 – 2267 cover legitimate defense, including the right of the State to defend itself— even to the point of inflicting death—against both hostile nations and

criminals. Hence the death penalty is treated in this section. In the 1994 text, the traditional teaching is set forth in number 2266: "...the Church has acknowledged as well-founded the right and duty of legitimate public authority to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the crime, not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty." The next section (2267) goes on to recommend that "if bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority should limit itself to such means...."

But *Evangelium Vitae* was promulgated the next year, and the official Latin text of the *Catechism* was revised in the light of its teaching. The material covered in paragraphs 2266 and 2267 was reorganized somewhat so that 2267 alone deals with the death penalty. The revised and final English translation of 2267 is worth quoting in full:

Assuming that the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person. Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm - without definitely taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself - the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity "are very rare, if not practically non-existent."

### *Evangelium Vitae*'s Impact

All of the ideas in the second half of this paragraph, including the quotation, come from *Evangelium Vitae*. Some of the phraseology is drawn from *EV* 27, but the core is taken from two points made by the Pope in *EV* 56:

Point 1. "It is clear that, for these purposes to be achieved, *the nature and extent of the punishment* must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society."

Point 2: "Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent."

In the next paragraph, the Pope reaffirms Point 1 by quoting the original text of the *Catechism* itself: “In any event, the principle set forth in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* remains valid: ‘If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person’.”

### **Traditional Doctrine Affirmed ...**

The first step in properly interpreting these developments is to note again that the Church’s traditional teaching on the death penalty has been upheld. It is unnecessary to reiterate the applicable texts of the Old and New Testaments, the Fathers, prior Popes and Councils, because the *Catechism* still begins its discussion by upholding this teaching. In fact, in *EV 55*, just before making the two points cited above, the Pope reaffirmed and explained the traditional doctrine:

Moreover, “legitimate defence can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another’s life, the common good of the family or of the State”.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately it happens that the need to render the aggressor incapable of causing harm sometimes involves taking his life. In this case, the fatal outcome is attributable to the aggressor whose action brought it about, even though he may not be morally responsible because of a lack of the use of reason.<sup>45</sup>

### **... and Developed**

The second step is to recognize that the Pope has genuinely developed the Church’s teaching on capital punishment. The Church had always taught that punishment must be proportionate to the crime, and that the death penalty must necessarily be reserved for grave matters. But in *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope stresses an additional condition. He teaches that the death penalty must be reserved for cases of “absolute necessity”, and he defines absolute necessity as meaning “when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society.”

In his affirmation of the original *Catechism*’s text on this same point, note that the verb “should” has (in the English) been changed to “must”. It is no longer a recommendation but a requirement to use bloodless means when they are sufficient to the purpose. The final official text of the *Catechism* took the entire encyclical into

account and revised a good deal of the wording of this section, without further altering the meaning. The English translation now uses the equally strong verb “will”. In connection with these textual changes, it is important to note that, like all true doctrinal developments, this one both conserves and refines the traditional teaching; it does not contradict it.

### **The Critical Third Step: Where Many Go Wrong**

The third and final step is to address properly the Pope’s second point about modern penal systems. The key here is to understand that, in his first point, the Pope had already gone as far as the Church can go toward bridging the gap between moral teaching—over which the Church has complete authority—and prudential judgement—over which it has no authority. Point 2 is purely prudential.

It is this which has confused not only many ordinary Catholics, but also careless theologians and even bishops. For, from the standpoint of Catholic doctrine, too few seem to understand that the discussion is closed by the conservation and development of the Church’s teaching outlined above. Anyone who forms his judgements within these parameters has satisfied the demands of the Magisterium. However, from the standpoint of prudential judgement, there is considerably more to be said.

### **The Place of Prudential Judgement**

In matters governing social stability and public safety, prudential judgement is inevitable. Moreover, the authority for judgement in this sphere is not given to the Church. It is the province of the “secular arm”—the legitimately constituted civil authority—to decide what is and is not sufficient to protect public safety.

Now, since the Church teaches that non-lethal means of punishment must be used whenever they are sufficient, no Catholic politician or ruler worthy of the name will attempt to impose the death penalty in cases where he does not believe it necessary to protect the public safety. But politicians, rulers, States and, indeed, the man in the street, may reasonably differ over whether capital punishment is necessary to protect the public safety in our time and under our circumstances.

In *Evangelium Vitae* 27, the Pope states that “modern society in fact has the means of effectively suppressing crime by rendering criminals harmless without definitively denying them the chance to reform.” And, as we have seen in Point 2 cited above, in *EV* 56 he argues specifically that the improvement in modern penal systems renders the death penalty unnecessary for the protection of public safety.

It is, I think, unfortunate that this prudential judgement was added to the *Catechism*.

No matter how valuable it may be, the protection of the Holy Spirit does not apply to it, nor can such judgements ever be part of the Church's Magisterium. The Church has no special gift for discerning the capabilities of the modern age in comparison with past ages, the quality of the world's penitentiaries, or—to return to the main point—what is necessary for the protection of the public safety. For this reason, her opinions on this subject do not properly belong in catechisms.

### **The Eternal and the Provisional**

Happily enough, the particular judgement about penal systems did not make it into the final *Catechism* text. But the larger judgement of modern capabilities did. The Pope himself acknowledges, I think, the provisional nature of such judgements. In the critical prescriptive passage (*EV* 56), immediately after making his comment on penal systems, he continues into the next and definitive paragraph with the transitional words “in any event”. John Paul II seems to be saying that regardless of the merits of his opinion about contemporary conditions, the key point is that bloodless means must be used when they are sufficient. As indeed it is.

But within these parameters, the debate quite legitimately rages on. Is anything more than restraint of the guilty required for public safety? Is deterrence necessary? Is capital punishment a deterrent? Is a recognizable balancing of the demands of justice required for a culture to avoid imploding into lawlessness? Does that recognizable balance require execution? Does incarceration of murderers put other prisoners at risk? Can guilt be sufficiently well-established to justify execution? Is the death penalty typically reserved for the poor and marginalized, while the rich and popular avoid it? Is reprieve a form of mercy which is often reformative?

### **Unavoidable Decisions and Continued Debate**

It is worth noting that the ecclesiastical chorus against capital punishment did not start with John Paul II. As early as 1980, a majority of the United States Bishops issued a statement which, while upholding the right of the State to inflict the death penalty, offered a number of arguments against using it. Many other bishops and theologians around the world have argued against the practice under contemporary circumstances.

In addition, the current Pope's aversion to the death penalty did not begin or end with *Evangelium Vitae*. In fact, the Pope's principal argument seems to be that, given our current culture of death, the affirmation of the importance of preserving the life even of those convicted of grave crimes, while not strictly necessary, may serve as another candle against the darkness.

All of this is more grist for the layman's mill, but it is not the stream of water which turns the grindstone. To the laity belong such judgements. We cannot escape them. Still, if our current great pope has taught us anything at all, he has taught us to be both serious and cautious in how we decide. He has given us the task to consider carefully whether we do in fact have the means to suppress crime without denying criminals the chance to reform.

**Further information on capital punishment at [CatholicCulture.org](http://CatholicCulture.org):**

- [John Paul II, \*Evangelium Vitae \(On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life\)\* \(1995\)](#)
- [List of Catechism Changes \(1997\)](#)
- [Cardinal Avery Dulles, \*Catholicism and Capital Punishment\* \(2001\)](#)
- [Avery Dulles and His Critics: \*An Exchange on Capital Punishment\* \(2001\)](#)
- [John A. Hardon, SJ, \*Capital Punishment\* \(Source unknown, but clearly before 1994\)](#)
- [Arbp. Renato R. Martino, \*Death Penalty is Cruel and Unnecessary\* \(2001\)](#)



# Opposition to the Death Penalty

November 09, 2007

On November 2nd the Community of Sant'Egidio and the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty delivered a petition to the United Nations calling for an end to capital punishment. The petition was signed by five million people from 154 countries.

Opposition to the death penalty has been growing around the world over the past ten years or so. Pope John Paul II expressed the view that modern penal systems made the need for the death penalty exceedingly rare or even non-existent, and ever since that time Catholic Church leaders have been in the forefront of the movement to seek an end to the practice. The Sant'Egidio Community frequently works closely with the Holy See on issues of peace and justice.

I confess to being conflicted about both the death penalty and the extremely widespread support for its abolition. On balance, I agree that it should be outlawed, but my chief reason is not that it is intrinsically immoral in all situations (according to Church teaching, it isn't). Rather, I believe it is too often misapplied to take the risk of having it as an option. I recognize the legitimacy of disagreement on this issue, yet disagreement is not the source of my own internal conflict.

Two things primarily concern me. First, I don't like the way Pope John Paul II's prudential judgment about the advisability of capital punishment has led in many places to a great confusion over the settled Catholic teaching on the matter. John Paul II did develop the doctrine on the death penalty slightly, clarifying that it must be necessary for the protection of society, but his thoughts on the efficacy of modern penal systems are not part of the Church's special competence. This doesn't mean they are not valuable; they just aren't part of the Church's official teaching. (For a fuller treatment, see [Capital Punishment: Drawing the Line Between Doctrine and Opinion.](#))

Second, I don't like the way opposition to the death penalty can be seized as a sort of pro-life moral high ground, as if this is just as valuable as being against abortion. The death penalty is not intrinsically immoral; abortion is. The two problems are incommensurable morally, and abortion is also quantitatively more significant by many orders of magnitude. It concerns me that opposition to the death penalty is growing more widespread and more vehement almost in direct proportion to the spread of the culture of death. Some people might have the best of reasons for their opposition (and, indeed, I

have stated my own), but I can't avoid the sneaking suspicion that for the vast majority this is simply another flight from reality—another refusal to accept the axiom that actions have consequences.

Indeed, if the massive opposition to capital punishment were based on any sort of logic, a similar opposition to abortion would even now be bringing whole political systems to their knees. This, ultimately, is what makes me conflicted about the death penalty. Of course, one should support the good despite any misunderstanding and hypocrisy which come along for the ride. But there is a great deal of such baggage in this case. It bothers me. It makes me very nervous. I don't like it.

# Going to War: The Citizen, the State, and Ambiguity

June 26, 2006

Fox News reported last week that over 500 weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq since the US went to war there in 2003. This information has just become available through the declassification of a portion of a report by the State Department's National Ground Intelligence Center. The disclosure strengthens the Bush Administration's case, but my purpose here is not partisan. Rather, I wish to make a point about the relationship between the citizen and the state in going to war and, by extension, about civil discourse concerning war in general.

## Not a Personal Decision

One of the more interesting features of Catholic social theory is that while a citizen has a serious obligation to inform himself and make personal moral decisions when it comes to casting votes in elections, he does not have that same responsibility when deciding whether or not to fight in a war. This is because the decision to go to war does not properly belong to the individual citizen but to the government. In relationship to acts of government, the citizen has a moral obligation to obey unless there is a significant impediment to his doing so. Where doubt exists, the presumption in favor of the citizen's obedience to civil authority eliminates his culpability for participating in an unjust war.

Criticism of war and state military action is, of course, well within the framework of responsible citizenship. The immediate question here is simply whether the citizen who disagrees with his country's policies has a moral obligation to refuse service. To this question, the Catholic answer is generally negative. Because it is the province of the state to decide whether to go to war, and because the citizen has a presumptive obligation to obey the laws of the state, the citizen who fights in his country's wars can rarely be faulted for doing so just because a war is judged by others or by history to be unjust.

## The Knowledge of Citizens

The only exception is when the citizen knows (or should know) beyond doubt that the war in question is unjust. This judgment cannot be made by assuming that all wars are

unjust, since that proposition contradicts Catholic teaching. So the question arises as to whether a citizen can ever know for certain that a particular war is in fact unjust. If a government clearly announces an immoral purpose or states its intention to engage in the mass destruction of civilian populations, of course, the citizen would be morally obliged to refuse to serve. Typically, however, governments explain war in highly moral ways, and equally typically it is not possible for a private citizen to have sufficient access to everything the government knows in order to make a determination on his own.

A very highly placed official might have access to all the data and reasoning on which a decision to go to war is based, and such a person might legitimately conclude that he has no recourse but to refuse to participate. For the rest of us, though we often profess ourselves certain—even indignantly certain—we cannot really lay claim to any such certainty, and so the presumption in favor of the government remains. Once in combat, the citizen may not be able morally to comply with every order; that is a separate question. It is sufficient here to establish, again, that a citizen cannot ordinarily be morally faulted for agreeing to go to war at the command of his legitimate government.

### Right to Refuse

Nonetheless, the moral presumption in favor of obeying one's government means only that in the midst of uncertainty one is under no moral *obligation* to disobey. But does one have a moral *right* to disobey? Or will such disobedience be morally wrong? Here the answer is equally clear. When a citizen finds himself asked to participate in a war which he generally believes to be evil, he may choose to refuse even though he has no moral obligation to do so. He may, of course, have to suffer the penal consequences of his decision, but the refusal will be morally valid (if properly motivated) even when it is not morally required.

Note, however, that the same caution is required as before. Just as it may be true in some rare cases that the evil of the government is so obvious that one would have a moral obligation to refuse to participate, so also the rightness of the cause and the need of one's fellow citizens might be so obvious that one would have a moral obligation to participate. Apart from extreme situations on either side, however, the same uncertainty which enables a citizen to participate in war morally also enables him to refuse to participate morally.

In the latter case, we need to add the uncertainty concerning not only the ends and means of a particular war but the need to kill a fellow human person. One may under certain specific circumstances be morally obliged to kill, such as when there is no other means to stop an attacker from murdering one's wife or child, but this sort of direct,

obvious, one-on-one justification is rarely present in the larger context of war. The soldier may not know why he is fighting, why the enemy is fighting, or what the objectives on either side may be. For this reason, a citizen may morally refuse to kill on behalf of the state under all reasonably conceivable circumstances.

In general, then, given his limited responsibilities and the confusion of available information, the ordinary citizen has neither the responsibility to decide whether his country will go to war nor the ability to arrive at the kind of moral certitude which would render either his participation or his refusal sinful. Therefore, if on due reflection and with an honest understanding of his own limited role, he becomes convinced that it would be immoral for him to participate, refusal to do so becomes a perfectly legitimate moral option. Once again, the very uncertainties which ordinarily free him from guilt in obeying the command of the state also free him from guilt if he refuses to fight.

### **Hold the Outrage**

Claims, arguments, and information concerning war are so various, contradictory and contested that it exceeds the ability of most of us to sort them out infallibly. Last week's new disclosures concerning Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (which are apparently not mythical after all) simply underline the perils and the arrogance of those who think they have all the facts necessary to form certain moral judgments while condemning the judgments of others. The inevitable claims and counter-claims about these weapons on the part of those for and against the war in Iraq will further demonstrate a large degree of inescapable confusion. War, though a natural evil, is not always a moral evil. Therefore it is far harder to assess than absolute moral evils, such as abortion or rape.

Our political discourse on matters of war and peace ought to reflect this inescapable uncertainty about most wars. In our discussions of foreign policy, we ought to learn something from the moral dilemma of the would-be soldier that will enable us to temper our discourse with a refusal to confuse prudential judgments with moral absolutes. The citizen soldier may have to suffer no matter what he decides, but either decision can be morally justifiable given the right motives. Thinking and acting in the same cloud of doubt, we should be prepared to find that good people support both positions. We should choose both our arguments and our tone accordingly.

# Respecting the Right to Choose Death

August 10, 2009

I've heard it twice this week. In a boating magazine, a reader wrote to lament the passing of a noted sailboat designer while "respecting the decision he made to end his life". And in a reasonably thoughtful essay in *Time* (as such things go), columnist Nancy Gibbs raised serious questions about the right to die while at the same time "respecting" the right of Sir Edward Downes, the former conductor of Britain's Royal Opera, to fulfill a suicide pact with his wife, holding her hand as they drank poison together.

Gibbs, to her partial credit, responds to euthanasia activists' emphasis on autonomy by wondering whether autonomy ought to be absolute. "This view," she says, "rejects the idea that society might ever value my life more than I do or derive a larger benefit from treating every life as precious, to the point of protecting me from myself." She is on the right track. She also cited a case worth thinking about, the case of a doctor in the Netherlands who, assuming that a nun in his care was prevented from requesting euthanasia because of her religion, decided to make the decision for her. But she still ends with the obligatory statement of respect for Sir Edward's decision.

Now, me, I don't feel obliged to offer statements of respect. I make no bones about the fact that I have no respect whatsoever for the "right" of people to end their own lives, any more than I respect the right of others to end their lives for them. I completely disrespect such decisions as being falsely justified by a totally non-existent right. And as Exhibit A in the defense of my position (not that any defense should be necessary), I offer Gandalf the Gray's response in *The Lord of the Rings* when Frodo asserts vehemently that Gollum deserves death. I will quote the passage at length:

What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!  
Pity? It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well-rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.... ...I cannot understand you. Do you mean to say that you, and the Elves, have let him live after all those horrible deeds? .... He deserves death. Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment.

For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many - yours not least.

This statement refers to killing someone who does not wish to die, but the logic of the argument applies equally well against claims of personal autonomy. Can I give life to myself? No? Then clearly I have not come by it autonomously. And if it is not autonomously my own, how can I claim autonomy in giving it up, in rejecting it?

There are higher and deeper authorities at work here than our own. A pox, then, on all who respect the right to die. This does not belong to us. To claim it is an unfathomable iniquity, a usurpation so great that it defies the imagination. To Him alone who has given life does the right to withdraw it belong. Every man, while he lives, is still “bound up with the fate of the Ring”, having “some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end.” The fate of the Ring stands for the outcome of the struggle between good and evil. None of us knows what role we might yet play in that struggle when the desire grows in our breast to give up our life, or in another’s to take our life away.

There are higher and deeper matters at stake. We need something outside ourselves to die. We need the will of Another. We need... *permission*.

# The Rights and Laws of Suicide

January 24, 2011

The recent [European Court ruling](#) that it is a fundamental human right to freely commit suicide raises all kinds of questions. In another context, the very image of a tiny body of men and women getting together to make up fundamental human rights would be highly amusing. But of course, this is just another example of the paganization of Western culture.

When you think about some older laws from a more Christian era, the question of whether there is a right to suicide can be confusing. Until relatively recently, suicide was considered a crime in many U. S. states and in England, a clear reflection of the prevailing Christian belief that suicide is a gravely immoral act. This criminal law exposed to prosecution those who unsuccessfully attempted suicide, though in the United States (and I imagine also in England), there was a strong reluctance to prosecute. In these cases, we may safely presume that the law was intended to be more of a teacher than a disciplinarian.

But thinking about the potential *criminality* of suicide does raise the rather obviously legitimate question of whether suicide should be a matter of criminal law at all. Unfortunately, for many, it would appear to be a short step from the premise that suicide ought not to be against the law to the conclusion that suicide must be a human right. But short though this step may be, it is hardly logical. It merely confuses the absence of legal restraint with rights.

In a positivist system of thought, such faulty logic might not be obvious. Legal positivism holds that right and wrong are determined by law, rather than the other way around. The “other way around” is that our understanding of right and wrong is prior to human positive law. Instead, this understanding derives from the law of nature (assisted, in Christian and Jewish societies at least, by the light of Revelation), and so positive law is to be derived from a higher law, and is actually invalid when it contradicts it.

In careless speech even the most adamant natural law champion might say, “I have a right to do this or that, and you cannot stop me, because it is not against the law. It’s a free country!” Indeed, as youngsters my friends and I used to chant this *ad nauseam*, little knowing, first, that our countries were not so free as we thought and, second, that the absence of legal restraint is an insufficient definition of a human right. Careless



speech, it seems, is not the same as logical argument.

Pope Benedict has frequently stressed that in discerning whether something is a human right, it is helpful to consider the duty (if any) to which that right is linked. In *Caritas in Veritate*, the Pope wrote:

[I]t is important to call for a renewed reflection on how rights presuppose duties, if they are not to become mere license.... Duties set a limit on rights because they point to the anthropological and ethical framework of which rights are a part, in this way ensuring that they do not become license. Duties thereby reinforce rights and call for their defense and promotion as a task to be undertaken in the service of the common good. (43)

A right might be ascribed to another person as a reflection of the general duty of all men toward others, or it might be ascribed to ourselves as a reflection of our own duties. For example, parents have a duty to educate their children; therefore we ought to be able to see that they have the right to do so without debilitating interference from other parties or the State. Or again, every human person (*i.e.*, society generally) has a duty to provide the necessities of life to those in need (insofar as reasonably possible), and so we ought not to be surprised that a person who steals food because he is starving is not guilty of theft: in general, he has a right to the food.

It is impossible to situate a “right” to suicide within such an ethical framework of rights and duties. Manifestly, no person has a duty to die, whatever rapacious or weary care-givers may think. Rather, the impetus to take one’s own life arises not from a desire to serve, but from a desire to avoid service, that is, to avoid suffering. Suicide is very frequently considered noble or even obligatory in pagan societies precisely because such societies recognize neither the value nor the very real service of suffering.

However, while reflecting on duties is helpful, duties are not the source of rights; they are simply a key part of the ethical framework within which rights operate. Clearly, the parent’s right and duty to educate his child derive from his special relationship with the child; and the right of those who are starving to obtain something to eat, along with our duty to provide it, arises from their dignity as human persons—that is, from their nature and from the ends for which they were created, and for which the world and everything in it was created. It is such deeper reflection on the nature of things which leads us to formulate clear principles, such as the universal destination of goods.

In a Godless society, many important reflections become all but impossible. Nonetheless, in the last analysis the fact that we are incapable of bringing ourselves into

existence ought to give us pause. This elemental fact strongly suggests that we must look beyond ourselves for an understanding of our nature and of the ends for which we exist. Moreover, it would seem to be a rather fundamental intuition of any sound mind that if we are not the authors of our own lives, then we can have no right to terminate them.

We may well be confused about these matters, but there is little excuse for being just plain stupid. At the very least, a little reflection ought to teach us that rights are much deeper than laws, and that nothing may be presumed about rights based on laws. All the presumptions ought to run the other way: Suddenly, it becomes necessary to think things through.

# Conscience: Its Strengths and Limits

September 21, 2011

When Father Hermann Geissler of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [called attention to Blessed John Henry Newman's teaching on conscience](#), he was making an important point. This is the kind of story which we put at the very bottom of the day's headlines, because it does not amount to a great deal as news. But as apologetics, well, that's another story, for in our culture, conscience is most often seriously misunderstood.

I have already written more than once on Newman's famous argument from conscience, which he develops in his brilliant but difficult *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. (That column, [The Argument from Conscience](#), is also available in the second volume of my [collected apologetics essays](#).) Newman argues that the conscience gives every person the nagging sense that his actions are being judged as either right or wrong, that there is some sort of law built in to human affairs, and that this provides an intuition of the existence of both a Lawgiver and a Judge.

Fr. Geissler's point is a different one, which I have not yet mentioned in my own writings: Newman correctly regarded conscience as completely without authority in truths which depend solely on Revelation. What this means is that conscience is a natural faculty, an interior perception of the structure and meaning of the natural world, that is, of the natural law. In this realm, conscience makes strong claims which every person is bound to heed. But the faculty of conscience is not the recipient of Revelation; it has no direct knowledge of supernatural truths, and no authority to judge their veracity on supernatural grounds.

This does not mean that conscience plays no role in our spiritual development, or in our assent to Revelation. The moral promptings of conscience certainly moves us to presume the existence of God, to understand that a God who cares how we act must wish to reveal Himself, and to look for that revelation. Conscience also rightly makes us suspicious if a revelatory claimant (*i.e.*, a claim about what has been revealed) appears to conflict with what we know naturally to be good or evil. But conscience is a moral compass, not an intellectual one. It has nothing to say about whether Mary was conceived without Original Sin—or whether Christ rose from the dead.

Fr. Geissler does not state the matter with absolute precision for all persons when he says that “to refer to Newman's words [on the importance of conscience] with the

intention of pitting the authority of conscience against the authority of the Pope is incorrect.” That is certainly true among believing Catholics, however, with the word “believing” indicating the acceptance of the truth that the Pope, as the Vicar of Christ, is infallible on matters pertaining to our salvation, that is, on faith and morals. For example, if a believing Catholic reads *Humanae Vitae*, in which contraception within marriage is defined to be intrinsically evil, he recognizes at once that any contrary intuitions of his own conscience in discerning the natural law are not as strong an indicator of moral truth as the certain teaching of the Catholic Church on faith or morals.

But someone who is not yet Catholic, if his own imperfect grasp of the natural law tells him that contraception is good, would rightly be suspicious of a revelatory claim which offends his own native moral sense. Although the person in question would be wrong, this is a legitimate obstacle to conversion, and it will remain so until the competing claims are resolved. On the other hand, for anyone to claim to be Catholic while rejecting some teaching of the Church in the name of “conscience” is nonsensical, because conscience is a potentially-erroneous natural faculty depending on sources outside itself, while the Magisterium of the Church is a supernatural faculty which is never wrong. For a Catholic to make a claim of conscience against the Magisterium merely proves that he does not really accept the Faith; this painful fact imposes a duty to decide whether he is, in the last analysis, really in or out of the Church.

For Catholics and non-Catholics alike, however, Fr. Geissler is exactly right in insisting that conscience has nothing whatsoever to teach us about those matters which can be known only through Revelation. For this reason, when someone says, “I can’t accept the Church’s teaching on the Real Presence” or “I’m sorry, but my conscience tells me that the Church’s teaching on Mary as Mediatrix of all graces is simply wrong”, that person is really using the idea of conscience as a defense for preferring his own private opinion to the official teachings of the Church. As a natural faculty, conscience has no independent access to information that can be known only supernaturally.

Knowing that we must receive supernatural knowledge from a supernatural authority through our intellects is very important, because it removes the temptation to think that everything we feel an interior urge to accept or reject must come from conscience. The idea of “following our conscience” has become a powerful mantra in our day, not because we feel an enormous responsibility to truth or moral rectitude, but because it is our standard excuse for thinking and doing whatever we please. Even when something is a question of morality, it can be hard to distinguish a dull, unexercised conscience from the messages sent by our own passions. The careful use of the intellect is needed to sort these things out and, indeed, the intellect can and ought to be used to form conscience in

the first place.

At its best, then, conscience can take us only so far. Its purpose is to point us toward God and Revelation, and to keep us from going astray morally when situations (and temptations) arise to challenge our virtue. It draws its standards instinctively from the intellect's fundamental apprehension of the natural law; it creates moral benchmarks from this apprehension and from whatever else we learn intellectually about goodness over time. When we fail to heed what we really know is right, conscience accuses us. But left unattended, it deteriorates, and fed on falsehood, it deceives. Therefore, while following conscience is an obligation, it is an obligation which presupposes a serious responsibility. Conscience works better and better as it is progressively informed and perfected by what we discover of the truth in other ways. Ultimately, it is a springboard to something deeper and more certain than itself.

# What This Means: Christian Witness in the Modern World

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In classical apologetics, arguments proceed step by step toward something which at least approaches a proof. The arguments are important, but they cannot logically force someone to believe. If that were possible, then Faith would not be Faith. Rather, what classical apologetics is best at is clearing away mental obstacles to belief. The arguments demonstrate either that it is not unreasonable to believe this or that point of Christian doctrine, or that the ideas, perceptions and arguments we've used to buttress our non-belief will not pass close scrutiny.

Typically a strong argument makes people feel vulnerable, and so it puts them on the defensive. While their defensive posture may change in private, in the silence of their hearts, classical apologetics is essentially an adversarial enterprise. By its very nature it tends to buttress the confidence of the believer while minimizing any possible sympathy on the part of the non-believer. (Explanations in response to sincere questions, of course, may amount to the same thing but be exceedingly well-received.) Another problem with this sort of argumentative approach is that, in an age of pervasive media, we are so surrounded by constant argument that we have long since learned to discount it. Part of us fears that if we take arguments too seriously, we'll never be able to affirm anything.

People often confuse argument with assertion, but the problem remains. Nobody likes to be talked at, and most of us are very good at filtering out what we don't particularly want to hear. Even more to the point, few people find when they are not seeking. So there has to be a better way.

## The Meaning of What's Missing

Our Lord became incarnate in order to share our weakened human condition, to experience with His creatures not only all that they had but all that they lacked, the better to show the way to fill in the gaps. Catholics are called to do the same, not by living immorally certainly, but by recognizing and in some sense sympathizing with what is lacking in the lives of those to whom we wish to offer the greatest imaginable gift. Postmodern men and women have been trained to believe Faith is a myth, but they also

have a long and weary experience of the endless cacophony of what passes for reason. In consequence, they are left pretty much with feeling, and with the movements of the will which are stimulated by feeling. What they invariably most miss, therefore, is *meaning*. To this we must become supremely sensitive.

A lack of meaning, of course, is not always recognized. In affluent societies, with endless gadgets and stimulants of every kind, it is as easy as it is instinctive to substitute stimulation for meaning. This invariably leads to binges of stimulation, whether stimulation by new things, by entertainment media, by sex or by drugs. This tendency even reveals itself in its absence—obvious discomfort with silence or stillness, shakiness in the absence of drugs or alcohol, self-loathing following excesses of every kind, depression, psychoses, or just a general discontent that there is not somehow more to life.

Insofar as we are human, and insofar as we also sin, Christians experience all of these things in a more or less muted form, and we are no strangers to the sense that there ought to be something more. But we understand this sense as a kind of practical demonstration that we do not yet fully possess God. The point is that Christians can identify with these feelings—this emptiness, and the various tricks one learns to keep it at bay. But the Christian also knows a trick that others do not: He knows prayer, and all the means of grace.

### **Life Is Not Satisfying**

Every morning I wake up with a sense of futility, which usually fades throughout the day. Others may experience this on a different schedule. But we all have those moments when the constant effort of living and working seems futile. We're often too close to the things that matter most, and we may not discern our own progress. Worse, if we don't keep a proper spiritual perspective, we may not have any progress to discern. Moods come and go, of course, but our less elastic moods also put us in touch with a reality which underlies all of human life: Life just isn't good enough to completely satisfy our deepest yearning, a yearning we find it naturally impossible to name.

We soon learn to put the zing back into life in countless little ways: getting together with friends, buying new clothes, celebrating special occasions, taking a day off work or going on a trip, perhaps even drinking too much or slipping into other stupid habits. As Christians we know that insofar as we do these things to feel more satisfied, they are all simply distractions—though not all necessarily unhealthy ones—and we recognize that to keep the need for distraction within legitimate bounds, we must also frequent the sacraments and grow in prayer. We find, within limits, that prayer and works of mercy

both strengthen us and bring a deeper satisfaction. Yet we remain natural creatures who also need natural changes of pace, and natural forms of recreation and delight.

Now, if even we who are Christian experience and deal with life in this way, how much more must those without Faith struggle to balance the stresses and uncertainties of life with their thirst for meaning and fulfillment! This ought to be a great point in common between Christians and all others. But Christians, who understand suffering and trust God, respond to the human experience not frenetically or through excess, but with integrity, balance, discrimination, purity and purpose. Though buffeted like others in a thousand ways each day, we remain fundamentally at peace. When we are living rightly, we appear to others to be fixed points, even beacons, in the rough seas of life. Thus will others wonder at us, turn to look, and ask us questions.

For this reason, we must avoid standing off, acting superior, passing judgment. We must instead live as if we thirst for those questions. “We also are men, of like nature with you,” cried St. Paul, and so we are. But we “bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God” (Acts 14:15).

### **And Death Comes at the End**

I have said that the mere prospect of living is daunting enough, but the prospect of dying is more formidable still. We Christians do well to ask, “O death, where is thy sting?” (1 Cor 15:55), and to ask frequently. The question is a good reminder that we are not to fear death. But even so, being still so far from perfection, we do fear it just a little. What then of the unbeliever?

The modern world excels at postponing death, at hiding it, and at maximizing the comfort of life. But death remains all around us. Those who cannot look forward to life with God may convince themselves that death will one day be conquered for the human race as a whole, but only madmen believe they will not be among those who must die before this conquest is achieved. This is a source of great sadness—this natural understanding that we can never hold life closely enough to cheat death. And this sadness can also drive those who feel it to the various methods of forgetfulness, to all the stimulations which enable them to forget, at least for a little while, the mortality they so abhor.

Here too the Christian is no different. He understands the clutch of death; like others, he has felt it at his throat. But the Christian quickly awakens from his momentary fear as from a bad dream, reaffirming his confidence in God. And so again, he avoids hysteria. He lives in secure peace; he faces death in exactly the same way as he faces life, full of quiet strength and deep integrity. Not for him the wild excesses. Not for him the leaden



despair. Yet one day he will die, and so he remains the unbeliever's brother, and he must show his brother the way. He must show—he will show, if he is truly Christian—that he possesses something others must inevitably want for themselves. The Christian is noticed in his joyful calm. Again the great question is raised. Again the great answer must be given.

### **My Peace I Give to You**

Here we have non-classical apologetics, if you like, the apologetics not so much of argument as of life itself. As the world grows more militantly secular, there can be a tendency for the Christian and the unbeliever to separate. But this separation must not be of the Christian's doing. It must not be of the Christian's choice. The Father "sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him" (Jn 3:17). And did not the Son say to you and me, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21).

But before He said this, He said: "Peace be with you." This peace is His gift. "Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (Jn 14:27). This is what I have been saying. We are "under the same sentence" (Lk 23:40), to live and to die, but we are not afraid. Indeed, we are something seldom seen in this world; we are happy. That is arresting. It is even stupendous. We must never forget that the non-believer yearns to know what this means.

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