

Bioethics—Summer 2008

Moira McQueen, Executive Director

Over the summer I have been involved on behalf of CCBI with several different groups dealing with different topics in bioethics.

BIOETHICS AND SEXUAL ETHICS

I was fortunate to be part of discussions with teachers' groups from three Catholic school boards—Durham, York and Dufferin-Peel. The discussions were in some cases about sexual ethics, which has ramifications for bioethics. I think we all concluded—at least I did—that there is a great need for ongoing discussion about Catholic sexual ethics and conscience. Clearer explanations are needed about the Catholic approach to objective and subjective teachings, so that we can all have a better understanding in these areas. Too often, people cite magisterial teaching (official Church teaching) as something "to be obeyed", and this can give the wrong impression to those who are unfamiliar with the way in which the teaching is presented.

Objective teaching tells us when something is wrong, or, as is often said, intrinsically evil. This means that certain actions can never be right, in any circumstances. They are evil in themselves, and therefore cause some kind of harm. On the subjective side, conscience is recognized in Catholic teaching as being of supreme importance, but we have to be aware that it is not a mechanism for letting us off the moral hook.

The use of conscience in moral decision-making is not an easy "out". We must examine the facts of the matter, relevant Catholic teaching, and our tendency to be biased in our own favour. Conscientious decision-making requires diligence and a prayerful attitude. It is often difficult to be in that frame of mind. We must also have the attitude of what moral theologians call "docility". This does not mean passivity, but rather having an open-minded approach which accepts that I just might be wrong and the Church

might just be right. In any event, we have to be open to ongoing re-evaluation about our conscience decisions in important matters, perhaps especially about sexual ethics, where there is so much controversy.

For example, one of the topics that came up in these discussions was that of in vitro fertilization. This involves the foundational teaching of the Church on the inseparability of the unitive and procreative dimensions of the marital act. Vatican II and Pope Paul VI explain these dimensions in the context of a permanent, covenantal love relationship between a man and a woman. Any other relationship, however fulfilling to the people involved, cannot encompass these specific dimensions. When Pope John Paul II talked about a "theology of the body", he was referring to this type of relationship. In terms of permanence, fidelity, procreativity and unity, it is this relationship that Catholic teaching recognizes as the Sacrament of marriage.

The Catholic concept of natural law is demonstrated in its teaching on marriage, which has also been long recognized by society as being the most adequate relationship for the fulfillment of a man and woman, taking into account their drives towards union and procreation, and providing permanent shelter for the raising of children in the atmosphere of love embodied by the love of their parents.

The intimate, personal nature of this relationship is paramount for the child who will be born of it. Hence, *Donum Vitae* condemns IVF, not for being technological per se, but because it replaces that personal act of intercourse between the man and woman by a clinical act fusing their obtained gametes, thus bypassing the unitive element tied to the procreative element.

Many people see little or no significance in this, but the Church stresses that the child deserves to be born of that special act of its parents, and

anything less is inadequate. We can see the importance of conscience here—the parents must evaluate all that the Church says in light of their own circumstances. It is not enough to declare that the Church is wrong about this matter, and that one cannot agree on this issue. What is needed is an informed moral decision, as briefly outlined above.

(This year is the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, a document which truly challenges our moral decision-making. Please see the excellent paper by Fr. Leo Walsh discussing this encyclical and its implications.)

AIDS

The CCBI strongly commends the work being done by the African Jesuit AIDS Network (AJAN) ministries, co-ordinated by Michael Czerny, SJ. When one reads about their work and how much needs to be done, it can be seen how much those suffering with and through AIDS need our prayers and support. Although medications against this disease have changed the face of the outcome in Western society, the same cannot be said of other parts of the world. Current statistics show an increase in suffering in many parts of Africa. We must not forget the struggle going on against this in those parts. The reversal of this disease is far from universal, and the AJAN is striving to bring that about.

(If you would like to help in a small way, please call us to order a copy of AJAN's last full report in book form. It costs \$10.00 including postage. We have bought the reports from AJAN to show our support.)

END-OF-LIFE ISSUES

The national convention of the Catholic Women's League of Canada was held in Winnipeg in August. I had the honour of addressing it along with Alex Schadenberg of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, and Senator Sharon Carstairs. The topic was End-of-Life Issues, and I was struck by the strength of the Catholic stance on these issues as manifested in this group, about 700 strong. Small groups working on case studies came to different conclusions on some of these issues, highlighting the difficulties that exist in

reality in making decisions in these areas. In turn, this shows the importance of having accurate facts to work with, as well as clear explanations of Church teaching, before we can make adequate moral decisions. The CWL can be proud of its work in many areas that involve political and moral effort, and we hope it continues to pursue these issues in its characteristically dynamic and thoughtful way.

(See Fabiano Micoli's paper on the case of Mr. Samuel Golubchuk, which involves end-of-life issues)

PHYSICIANS AND CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

A document sent to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO) from the Ontario Commission on Human Rights would seem to suggest that it could be difficult in future for doctors to refuse to treat patients on the grounds of what the College calls "personal belief". Several Catholic physicians in the newly-forming Federation of Catholic Physicians brought the affair out into the open, challenging the College on this. Some wrote to the newspapers, and an official of the College responded, saying that it is not the College's intention to remove conscience rights. Nonetheless, the actual policy remains to be determined, and this continues to be a sensitive issue, depending on current legal interpretations of discrimination. All Catholics and those of other religious beliefs who see the need to guard their right to conscientious objection must continue to monitor this situation.

(Please see the CCBI website for more information on this topic.) ■

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