

About Moral Relativism

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There is a letter by Dr. Frances Cole on page 32 in the December 22/29, 2007 edition of *The Tablet*, in which the writer claims that the absolute nature of certain official Catholic moral teachings makes her work as a Catholic GP and cognitive therapist impossible. It would be easy to dismiss this as one letter in one Catholic publication. The letter, however, is illustrative of a rather widespread attitude among persons in important professions who proclaim both adherence to their Catholic faith and the right to follow their own private thinking in moral matters and to adopt this in professional practice.

The letter follows the time (dis)honoured fashion of sugar-coating language. Neither abortion, the killing of the unborn, nor euthanasia, the deliberate killing of oneself in this instance, is mentioned. "Termination of pregnancy" and "ensuring a pain-free death so that emotional and physical distress is relieved" is the language of choice.

The letter contrasts being with the patient (a Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane) rather than following some "totally rigid codes and rules". This attitude of dismissing moral teaching in practice in order to propose some pastoral "solution" based on presumably genuine empathy is again widespread. There seems to be no understanding that moral teaching is based on the reality of the human person. It is seen rather as some extrinsically imposed code of conduct to be dismissed when conflicting with present desires. It is undoubtedly true that some pregnancies demand heroism of various kinds, just as some dying persons suffer greatly.

People have to be supported throughout these periods of grave trial. But to propose that the deliberate killing of an innocent in these circumstances could ever be justified betrays an ignorance of the dignity of each person. When that realization is obscured, no pragmatic solution to present suffering is to be deemed unacceptable.

Of course, pastoral understanding is an essential element of our Church's outreach to people in difficulties. Confessors have always understood and practised pastoral awareness. A person has to be embraced at his or her level of moral possibility here and now, and helped towards better moral living. A wise confessor would not dream of imposing an ideal incapable of present attainment. This is quite different from claiming that the present difficulties facing a person which limit his or her possible response change what is morally wrong to being morally right.

One final comment on the letter is warranted. Throughout, there is an understanding that deliberate choosing renders the resulting choice moral for that person. I remember once in a school of theology listening to a religious sister speaking of her blood sister who, that very day, was aborting her severely handicapped unborn child. "That is her truth," proclaimed Sister. In this example truth is viewed as relative to the individual.

Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have time and again decried moral relativism. For example, Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) deals with the notion of true democracy and the failure of a notion of democracy whose fundamental tenet is freedom of choice in moral matters, based on thoroughgoing relativism. He says

"...it is precisely the issue of respect for life which shows what misunderstandings and contradictions, accompanied by terrible practical consequences, are concealed in this position [ethical relativism]."

In an address to those attending a "Symposium on *Evangelium Vitae* and Law" (24 May, 1996), Pope John Paul II again decries a subjectivist conception of freedom, detached from moral law. The Pope emphasizes the need for freedom to be based on objective truth.

In 1991, Cardinal Ratzinger gave a talk to the American Bishops gathered for the 10th Workshop in Dallas, entitled "Conscience and Truth". This long address is founded on the conviction that truth, objective truth, is the point of reference for the individual's conscience.

Finally, by way of example, we can look at an address given by Pope Benedict XVI to the International Theological Commission on October 5, 2007:

Today a positivist conception of law seems to dominate many thinkers. They claim that humanity or society or indeed the majority of citizens is becoming the ultimate source of civil law. The problem that arises is not, therefore, the search for good but the search for power, or rather, how to balance powers.

At the root of this trend is ethical relativism, which some even see as one of the principal conditions of democracy, since relativism is supposed to guarantee tolerance of and reciprocal respect for people. But if this were so, the majority of a moment would become the ultimate source of law.

History very clearly shows that most people can err. True rationality is not guaranteed by the consensus of a large number, but solely by the transparency of human reason to creative reason and by listening together to this source of our rationality.

If, by tragically blotting out the collective conscience, skepticism and ethical relativism were to succeed in deleting the fundamental principles of the natural moral law, the foundations of the democratic order itself would be radically damaged.

There is nothing new in the Church's recognizing the danger posed by relativism. The continued warnings of these Popes, however, seem to emphasize the widespread nature of the problem. Obviously, acceptance of relativism would ultimately mean rejecting any form of objective ethical theory in favour of a completely subjective frame of reference, and is the death knell for any valid form of bioethics.

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