

BIOETHICS MATTERS ENJEUX BIOÉTHIQUES

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The Four Cardinal Virtues and Catholic Bioethics

Part I | 2014 Annual Lecture

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Why would one want to put these two notions together? Bioethics is a growing area, and there are many different perspectives on it, religious and secular. As Catholics, we have a distinctive way of looking at the ethical questions that are raised, and a distinctive way of framing our responses. We look to church teaching for its responses, and we are at the same time motivated and guided by the theological virtues (Faith, Hope and Charity) which can set us on a different path and approach to human life issues, and we look to those habits of living well, capable of being achieved by any human being, called “the virtues.” We all experience and practise these to different degrees, and recognize them in others: for example, patience, honesty, helpfulness, kindness, hospitality, generosity, selflessness, humility, diligence, industriousness, and so on – an almost limitless list. Over the centuries, the Catholic Church has developed a fairly large body of teaching in ethics relating to care of the body as well as care of the soul, and this continues to grow with the possibilities raised by developments in research and in biotechnology, areas that have implications not just for bioethics, but for broader areas of sexual ethics and marriage, parenthood and the structure of the family itself. Bioethics also deals with essential and everyday questions in ethics such as birthing and dying, as well as moral decision making as to when to begin or give up some medical treatments. For example, there may come a time when a person decides that he or she no longer

wants to continue dialysis, after persisting for years. There are times when people decide they no longer want to be kept alive on a ventilator. Someone may abhor the prospect of long sessions of chemotherapy.

GUIDANCE

Catholic teaching does give guidance in these areas, but it is truly at the level of guidelines, although there are some principles involved, including the most basic principle of respecting the dignity of human life from conception until natural death, a principle which is increasingly under attack from both within and without our church. We know that since we are dealing with individual situations and individual lives, decisions cannot be made by way of policies or check lists, nor are there guarantees that all our decisions will be one hundred percent accurate. I think this comes as a shock to some people, who think that the Church has every last situation covered. It also comes as a shock to those who think that the Church teaches that life must be preserved at all costs. It does, of course, insist that life must be preserved, and that life must not be deliberately terminated, nor death hastened. However, it does not insist that life must be preserved at all costs, because that would be unreasonable.

Similarly, it teaches that life must not be brought into existence apart from a natural act of intercourse between a man and a woman, since that is the only truly dignified way that a human person should be brought into being. Any other way uses means that do not conform to human dignity, and therefore the use of those means are unreasonable, or wrong.

Once we decide that something is wrong, we are saying it goes against human reason, although the word “unreasonable” sounds rather gentle. We say to each other: “Don’t be unreasonable” and we just mean “Please talk sense!” but the longer tradition of the meaning of the phrase in Catholic teaching is that if something goes against reason, our highest human faculty, it is wrong and should not be done.

CARDINAL VIRTUES

This brings us to the question of how we know that something is against reason, and it is here that we can bring in the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. I think it sounds like an unlikely list, but I would like to show how these virtues help in making moral decisions in every area of life, and, therefore, for our purposes, in bioethics, especially.

These four virtues were not invented by the Catholic Church, although it accepts and promotes them in moral theology. Philosophers came to these conclusions over two millennia ago in studying human nature. They found that, while there are clearly many, many forms of human-enhancing behavior, which we call virtues, there are four major groups, without which these behaviours cannot be virtues. We could call them fundamental or major virtues, but the ancients used the word “cardinal” from the word “cardo,” which means a hinge. That is, all the other virtues hinge on these four virtues, which are essential to all the others, just as a door cannot function as a door without its hinges.

The listing is important: they are always listed as prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, and I’m going to try to explain briefly the reason for this, and then show them in application. Now the main reason these are important is that they are, or can be, characteristics of us as people: so, when we have to make moral decisions, if we have these virtues and exercise them properly, we

are more likely to make good moral decisions. They are very important for conscience formation, but are sometimes forgotten. It is probably safe to say that we all possess and exercise these cardinal virtues, but perhaps we do not see that we do, or do not name our decision-making process in that way.

PRUDENCE

Prudence: the queen of the moral virtues, and yet it sounds unlikely. It is an old-fashioned word to us, sounding more like the way a very cautious and perhaps timid person would operate. In fact, it means the capacity to see reality as it really is, and to make wise and sound decisions. Prudence has to do with practical application, and is in some ways another word for conscience, that inner prompting that leads us in our decision-making and in our assessments of what is the right or wrong thing to do. Now that doesn’t sound too difficult or far from our experience. Yet knowing and assessing reality – what is actually going on in a given situation, can be difficult. For example, when someone is ill, and a doctor gives a diagnosis, the person sometimes gets mixed-up in recounting exactly what it was the doctor said, or even “forgets.”

While we may be very sure of the price of the bag of milk that we bought just before we went to the doctor’s office, we know that when our emotions come into play in areas where we are personally and deeply involved, we may not be able to think as clearly, and they can distort reality for a time. I think we have all heard of “denial,” too, and how it can take some time for the truth of a situation to be completely accepted by someone. In those situations, some real harm could result if it takes the person too long to reach that stage. There have been relationships where one person has turned a blind-eye to the other’s behavior, perhaps philandering or drinking too much, but has convinced himself or herself that the other will reform once they are married. When we do not want to see something,

we will often not see it, and the truth, when it dawns, will hit us like a bolt of lightning. Why did I not pay attention? What prevented me from seeing reality? If we have been deceived, that is another matter, but when the truth was there and we ignored it, then the fault was our own, and we were not prudent.

Prudence is the ability to be clear-sighted and truthful; to be open to the facts of a situation and to pay attention; to investigate and ask further questions; to try to perceive consequences of a given way of acting, both in the short and long term; to have the ability to put two and two together (and only come up with four!) to make judgments built on reality, and to assess a situation accurately. Prudence considers not just the end or goal we have in view, but also questions if the way we achieve that goal is right, in keeping with reality. As we would all most likely agree: the ends do not justify the means. For an action to be right, the means must also be right.

I think we can see that prudence is the hallmark of mature persons, regardless of age. Younger people can be prudent, but most of us realize that our moral thinking develops through practice and experience. It is a habit, a way of looking at the world that depends on critical and evaluating thinking on experience, and also, like everything else in life, it takes practice, and the more we practise, the more the habit or virtue of prudence becomes part of our make-up. People we call “wise” are usually prudent. Truly brilliant people can do some truly stupid things, but wise or prudent people rarely do. A person does not need to be incredibly clever to be prudent, which is reassuring! But we do need to use our reasoning power, and that is what is behind this virtue: using reason in the right way. If we are reasonable in assessing the rightness of our goal and the way we will achieve that goal, we are prudent.

In making some medical decisions about treatment, as mentioned above, we can see that the ability to see the reality of any given situation will help us make good decisions. Of course this may not happen instantly, but we do need to “keep our wits about us,” as we say, and not panic. We need to be able to see (or may need to have pointed out to us) when we are not seeing things straight, when our emotions are leading us, and when we are grasping at straws.

Sometimes we “shoot the messenger,” or decide that the facts cannot be as bad as presented, or we will go to extremes to find some other answer to facts that we deny. I remember an acquaintance who rejected chemotherapy (and that might have been morally justifiable), but her reason was that radiation can kill you (which is true depending on how given and absorbed, but not in cases of radiation therapy), and also that she had heard that some kind of shark oil offered protection or a cure for cancer. This was not in the least evidence-based, and she was an intelligent person, and to me this did not make sense; it was unreasonable, and imprudent. It was not based in reality. Now, if she had been offered a 50-50 chance of survival after an arduous course of treatment, treatment which she dreaded, her decision to reject treatment could have been reasonable for her, and therefore prudent.

Another important area for the practice of prudence is at end-of-life, where questions of beginning, continuing or withdrawing treatment are frequently raised. Catholic teaching says we do not need to preserve life at all costs, and therefore we have to assess every situation carefully, to see what the reality of that particular situation is.

When people have to make decisions for someone else, it’s in some ways even more difficult, and I’m sometimes reminded of this when in parishes with our “People in the Pews” program. People often speak publicly or privately about the end-of-life decisions they had to make

for a husband, wife or parent. They often say they sometimes still feel a little guilty when the person died. I hope it helps when we reframe the issue, and I say I think perhaps they are experiencing what is a very normal concern about those decisions, and it is no wonder—they literally had someone's life in their hands and that is an incredible responsibility! Thomas Aquinas' statement about anxiety is very reassuring here: according to Joseph Pieper, he says, "The certitude of prudence cannot be so great as completely to remove all anxiety." (All quotations are from *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, Joseph Pieper, University of Notre Dame Press, 1966.)

Exercising prudence is virtually interchangeable with forming our conscience. Just as in conscience, the first thing is to be clear about the factual situation, the reality or the objective truth of the situation, regardless of our perspective. Where we find that sort of information can vary. If I want to know about contraception and make an appointment at Planned Parenthood, I am likely to hear facts presented in a different way from Catholic Family Services. I am saying that different emphasis and different world views will make a difference to our presentation of facts, but we have to be alert to the given facts themselves. Will Planned Parenthood mention that some pills are abortifacient, for example? That is not a moral dilemma for their organization, so would Planned Parenthood bring that fact up? This is a small example, but is an area that has significant moral consequences, unknown to those who assume that all pills are truly contraceptive, without enquiring further.

Many women find themselves to be infertile, and decide on IVF. The most common method to try to ensure success is to fertilize multiple embryos. Do these women know in advance that in most cases the embryos are genetically tested and some discarded before possible transfer to the womb, while those not transferred are frozen? Some women decide to donate these extra

embryos to be used for experimentation. Have they thought about what that these actions are doing with human life, or do they accept the current approach that an embryo is not to be regarded nor treated as a person? Do they ever consider the possibility that that is a very convenient theory for our being able to justify these actions? Even more directly, do many people question the Canadian definition of the human person (to be completely delivered from the birth canal of one's mother) or even question why the definition of person varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction? There is surely something lacking when different societies cannot agree on something as fundamental to society as the definition of personhood, and there is clearly something to be gained for certain members of society if we accept particular versions. Can such particular agendas be interested in objective facts? All thinking other than protection from coming into existence enables the use or abuse of embryos and fetuses in some way.

SUMMARY

Prudence: knowing the facts, knowing Church teaching (facts), assessing the means and consequences. Prudence talks about reality, therefore demands a certain objectivity, a ridding ourselves of bias or seeking self-advantage, an openness to what will happen and how it will be done. It is not easy, since the conclusions may take us in a different way from our desires and what we think are our needs. It is not just a mental capacity, but involves a certain amount, then, of self-surrender to God's will. The objective truth will demand that of a subject. The virtue of prudence therefore demands the highest level possible of the capacity for objectivity (recognition of reality) integrated in the subject's (person's) decision-making, not only in bioethics, but also in all areas of life.

The text of Dr Moira McQueen's 2014 Annual Lecture, December 11, 2014, continues in Part Two.