

BIOETHICS MATTERS ENJEUX BIOÉTHIQUES

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About Morality Today

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There is a photograph in an English tabloid (August, 2014) of two very attractive young women and a beautiful baby. One woman is the biological mother of the baby, having conceived through artificial insemination by her brother-in-law's sperm. The other woman is her sister who became infertile after cancer treatment, and who had longed for a second child "to make her family complete." The new baby is the biological mother's gift to her now infertile sister.

In today's world, this and similar events are hardly unique. They are always presented as acts of incredible selflessness and of love. There is no further moral consideration.

Obviously, in the subjective sphere, there is selflessness and love present. The biological mother is most likely a good person motivated by compassion.

Anyone who can see past the immediate feelings of the participants and the joy a baby brings might imagine possible future dangers. Will the child be told about his true mother? What will that mean for him? Will the relationships between the adults continue to be friendly and loving? Might the reality of the situation lead to friction between the adults? These dangers, though, are simply possibilities and few people are put off action by dangers that happen to other people, to their mind. Very little, if indeed any, consideration is given to

the nature of procreation and what this requires of human beings who desire to be procreators. The natural law arguments, those arguments from right reason open to all people, are neither easy to follow nor widely convincing. In an age where pragmatism rules and relativism runs wild, arguments from reason find it hard to get a sympathetic hearing.

In any human act, there are two realities. First, there is the act of the agent which is either in conformity with conscience or not. The act chosen against conscience is a deliberate breaking of God's law (either with explicit awareness or chosen implicitly against God's law through acting knowingly against conscience). The evil of acting against the law of God, explicitly or implicitly, is a human disaster.

Second, there is the evil attached to the act itself, either intrinsically so or from particular circumstances. It is possible that an agent choose a particular act as morally right, but is mistaken in his or her choice, though the choice was made after serious consideration. In such a case, the person does not turn from God. That evil is absent. However, ignorance does not obliterate the harm caused to the agent, other persons or society through an act which is objectively immoral.

Take a much more widespread example than the one with which we began—the high incidence of premarital sex and of cohabitation before marriage. It could be argued that most of these people act in ignorance of God's law,

at least through having no evaluative knowledge of God's law. Whether such ignorance is in fact culpable or not we will leave to the conscience of the agents involved. Let's go on the assumption that the ignorance is inculpable.

Secular studies show that marriage breakdown is much more common for couples who had cohabited before their marriage than for couples who did not cohabit before marriage. But even for couples who have given thought to the facts, again we have the “that won't happen to us” syndrome.

It would seem that for many prospective married couples, the question of cohabitation has ceased to be a matter demanding a moral choice, or has already been settled as morally right. For young cohabiting Catholic couples this is not surprising. Their parents have done the exact same with contraception. Their only questions are pragmatic too—whether to have more children or not and what type of contraceptives suit them best.

Every human act (*actus humanus*) is morally right or morally wrong. The vast majority of our actions are known to be morally right and we don't wonder about their moral status. Other actions we react to with abhorrence; their moral evil is clearly seen, like rape or child abuse. There are other actions which used to fall into the latter category that now fall into the former category. We Catholics, following secular culture, no longer react to these actions as involving moral evil, though in fairly recent history we did. Certainly, cohabitation falls into that category.

Many young Catholics don't participate in Sunday Eucharist liturgy. Among those who do, many receive Holy Communion despite their living situation. It's almost as if large

swathes of human action have no relationship to faith. This doesn't apply to all morality, of course. Not too many Catholics would separate child pornography from faith. In other areas, though, this disconnect seems to exist. Even in matters of life and death at the end of life, judgements are often made on clinical advice alone without reference to the moral teaching of the Church.

Let's return to the question of cohabitation. For many people, the Church teaching ends with a prohibition—no sex outside of marriage. All Church teaching, though, rests on a positive, here the beauty of marriage and its possibilities. To grasp this, much effort is required. One has to have faith in the Scriptures and the reality of marriage presented there. One has to trust the Church's magisterium as official interpreter of God's Word. One has to be open to natural law arguments, avoiding as far as possible the bias of modern culture. For example, without bias, one should be able to see the difference between premarital sex and truly marital sex. Premarital sex is most often deprived of its procreative possibilities and its symbolism of personal, exclusive and faithful love.

The Church is calling for new evangelization. In the area of morality, it will take faith to move mountains. Do bishops, priests and faith-filled laypeople have the courage, humility, faith, love and energy to trust the Holy Spirit and to set about the task? ■

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