

BIOETHICS MATTERS ENJEUX BIOÉTHIQUES

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The Joy of Bioethics

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Pope Francis' recent encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel," is educative, faith-filled and inspiring. Francis encourages us to develop and live out our faith in every facet of life, and he urges us to be more open in living it. Following last year's emphasis on the New Evangelization, which concentrated on our own Catholic people, as well as asking us to be missionaries to the world, the responsibility for Catholics who take their faith seriously is made clear. Faith is not a private matter. While it is fundamental for us as individuals, it is also meant to build up the Body of Christ as well as the local and global communities to which we belong.

As a theologian, I find it natural to want to discuss and share what I have learned and am learning about the Catholic faith, especially the ethics of sexuality and marriage and bioethics. I want to bring that information to people who are seeking it, but who do not have the same access to it, given their other commitments in life. Acquiring a deeper knowledge of the faith is a little different from the day-to-day practice of the faith common to all of us: the need to pay attention to prayer, meditation, reception of the Sacraments, conscience examination, practice of virtue, charitable works, and so on. And added to all this: we must be joyful! Pope Francis reminds us of this frequently,

and he is right to do so. After all, our faith rests on the joy and hope of the Resurrection. Jesus proclaimed: "The Kingdom of heaven is now!" We have to ask ourselves: are we playing our part in bringing about the Kingdom now, even to a small extent? The Pope asks: and are we joyful as we do so?

This set me to thinking not only about the way I practise my faith, but also about how I write, teach and discuss ethics in general and bioethics in particular. "The Joy of Bioethics" seems somewhat farfetched, but in fact should not be so, given the Pope's clear exhortation. The call to joy is not new, of course; St. Paul also exclaimed: "Rejoice always!"

I admit that sometimes when I am discussing bioethics in a parish setting, I feel a little like "the Grinch." Questions are often asked or statements made that seem to concentrate on all that is *wrong* with certain actions, sometimes with an expectation that any other point of view should be denounced, as against Church teaching. While wrong actions certainly have to be identified and people's questions have to be clarified, I sometimes think we have it back to front.

The more important task of Catholic ethics and bioethics is to point out the reasons why the Church is *right*, through helping people find a deep-seated appreciation of the Church's positive view of the human person.

The fact that we are created by God in His image, and therefore have inherent dignity and worth, is cause for rejoicing! These are the aspects of Church teaching that show its love and desire for the well-being of the people of God.

From a Catholic perspective, ethics (the term “moral theology” is truly more accurate, because it puts the emphasis on our faith perspective) is *not* first and foremost about right and wrong actions and following rules. Rather this aspect of theology stems from a deep desire on the part of human beings to do the right thing, which is to follow God’s will for us. We proclaim: “Thy will be done on earth,” and the challenge is to find what that will is. Some things are revealed to us in Scripture, but otherwise we must rely on natural law, on that experience-based philosophical reflection, analysis and critique that result in the Church’s objective teaching.

Contrasted with this, as Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI frequently says, individualistic, subjective thinking is less than adequate, although it can and does contribute to truth if it turns out to be well founded. Following God’s will should always be primary for us, and it is that which will bring us joy, if not immediately, then eventually.

In seeking God’s will, the Church puts great emphasis on the gift of conscience and our responsibility for forming it properly. There is a section in one of the documents from the Second Vatican Council that highlights the gift aspect of conscience. Section 16 of *Gaudium et Spes* (“Joy and Hope”—there’s that “joy” word again!) says:

Deep within their consciences men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves and which they must obey. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity rests in observing this law, and by it they will be judged. Their conscience is people’s most secret core, and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of one’s neighbour.

“There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths.” What an incredible gift conscience is, yet we often do not see it as the gift that it is—to be alone with God...almost like being in the Garden before the Fall.

This gift is not, of course, licence to do what we want. We need to remember the importance of forming our conscience in light of GOD’s will. As we know, that can be quite different! We have to be prepared to eliminate bias, rationalization and distortions as much as possible from our thinking, and that often means looking for information and clarification from other people whom we know to be well-versed and well-formed in Church teaching. This sharing of experience is invaluable, and I cannot imagine making a truly serious decision on my own, without first consulting knowledgeable people. We do that in every other area of our life—medical, legal, financial, etc. Why would we think we have such a deep level of faith and

knowledge that we can do without advice in this area? That itself could be a matter for our conscience to examine. Nonetheless, assuming that we do inform our conscience properly, the results can only bring the joy and the peace that come with knowing we have done our best to do the right thing.

JOY AT THE BEGINNING OF LIFE

Our Church places great importance on procreation, not for its own sake, but because of its appreciation of God's gift of life. Some of us tend to take this gift for granted, and some even may tend to think of it as a burden. Yet life is the gift that should be prized above all other gifts. We can't always see that, perhaps depending on our age, stage and circumstances.

I remember when my husband and I taught marriage preparation classes, and couples would be surprised to hear that we had six (later seven) children. Not that we were always referring to that, but the fact would emerge. One young fellow couldn't relate to this at all. "But you're a doctor!" he exclaimed to my husband, as if to say: you should know how to avoid these things. He could not comprehend that we had made a choice, so different from the choice he was making at that point. Couples would say things like "We want to buy our house first before we think about having children." (Well, of course!) Or, "We want a good car, we want this, we want that..." Babies could wait, since their mindset was sometimes a little too focused on material goods.

Our Church has the right perspective. Children can be demanding, but what lasting joy is there in a house or a car? Pleasure, perhaps, but joy? It takes people for that.

ORGAN DONATION

I recently read about a young Toronto woman who donated a part of her liver to her neighbour. To her neighbour, not even a family member! This young woman is only twenty-two, yet she has shown her love for her "neighbour" in a way most of us will never achieve. When people tell of the long term joy they discover in donating their own or a loved one's organ to a recipient, it resonates with us. When we meet a person who has been fortunate enough to be a recipient, and see their gratitude and underlying joy at the gift they have been given, that make us appreciate life more, too. Yes, there are substantial questions about the ethics of organ donation. There are questions about the timing of the donation—was the donor truly dead? Were the legal and medical definitions of death satisfactory? Some questions will always need analysis, but we can see why the Church approves of organ donation in principle: it ensures life for those receiving the gift, while the givers experience the joy of helping a neighbour.

END-OF-LIFE ISSUES

Many of the discussions about end-of-life issues centre round decision-making about wanted or unwanted treatments. This is often accompanied by a high level of concern and anxiety, since we want to be sure we are doing the right thing, whether for ourselves or for someone else. We want to have a clear conscience about what we decide, partly for our own peace of mind, but first because we value the life of the person involved, and we want to be sure we are doing our utmost to make the best decision.

When people talk about the reasons for their decisions, it can be inspiring. The observer

can see the self-transcendence experienced in putting another person's needs first, sometimes in making the difficult but wise decision to "let the person go." So many caregivers live up to their name fully: they care, and they are givers. It is amazing how so many people respond to the challenge of caregiving, often on a full-time basis. Even although it is often stressful and exhausting (a little like raising a baby—the ongoing demands, lack of sleep and lack of time for oneself) most people carry on, demonstrating fortitude, patience, self-giving, fidelity and so on—all joyful ways of loving their neighbour as themselves.

Those who work in palliative care, ensuring that the last days of terminally ill people are as happy and joyful as possible, are not just caregivers, but joy-givers. A palliative care nurse friend often remarks that she has gained so much over the years from accompanying such people, and that she most often feels inspired by their witness.

Even in our last days, then, joy can be given and experienced. It is not always so, of course, and too rosy a picture would not be accurate, but joy is found not only in the happy and inspiring situations, but also in the knowledge that, in more trying circumstances, the caregiver has done the best he or she can do. People should rejoice in the knowledge that "doing one's best" is a very high standard!

THE FULLNESS OF LIFE

The reality of people's lives is at the centre of ethics and bioethics. First, the people themselves must be considered, with the myriad relationships, circumstances, joys and problems that surround them. Then the

Church looks to how it can best develop answers or solutions to those problems, reflecting the wisdom of the Gospel, of the ages of the faith, and its own teaching.

That teaching should be, and is meant to be, joyful in its efforts to help people attain the fullness of life. It is not meant to control, or to be a burden. It is meant to advise and to give counsel.

At heart, our Catholic teaching expressed in ethics and bioethics is a way of helping us love our neighbour, of helping people to be the best they can be, of giving advice in situations where clear thinking is difficult, of giving inspiration when people do not think they have the moral fortitude to continue, of providing reassurance in matters of conscience, of being in solidarity with a neighbour who needs support. Catholic teaching reaffirms the Pauline teaching that we are all part of the one Body of Christ and must take care of that body—an immense privilege and an immense responsibility. We are to *be* that Body with a sense of joy and of gratitude to the Lord. Scripture tells us that the most fundamental ethical task of our life is to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves. Where there is love, there is surely joy—even, then, in bioethics understood in that light. ■

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