

# BIOETHICS MATTERS ENJEUX BIOÉTHIQUES

September 2011

Volume 9, Number 4

## **Challenges for Youth, Challenges for Society:**

### **The International Youth Coalition of Pro-Life Groups**

*Moirra McQueen, LLB, MDiv, PhD*

August 12, 2011, marked the end of the United Nations International Year of Youth. At the beginning of that year, the Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-Moon, urging youth to participate in politics, said: "Youth should be given a chance to take an active part in the decision-making of local, national and global levels."

Since many young Canadians joined in the Catholic celebration of World Youth Day in Madrid this summer, it may be encouraging for them to realize that some important issues of particular relevance to all Catholics were raised at the UN by other young people.

Under the banner of the International Year of Youth, a two-day UN High Level Meeting on Youth was held by the General Assembly in New York on July 25-26, 2011, with the theme "Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding." The results of input from approximately eighty-nine youth organizations from around the world are to be collated later in a summary document. While much of the meeting dealt with youth unemployment and prospects, some of the recommendations involved sexual issues.

The International Youth Coalition of Pro-Life groups disagreed with some of the information and moral stances presented, some of which, such as sex rights for young people, were attributed to UN agencies rather than being demanded by youth representatives themselves.

The Coalition used social media including Twitter to spread their views, and presented the UN with a document called "Youth Statement to the UN and the World," signed by 120,000 people, of whom 57,000 were under the age of thirty. The statement essentially calls for policy makers at the UN and in other organizations to return to basics and away from ideas that the Coalition names as harmful to young people.

It begins by recognizing that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore possess inherent human dignity. It emphasizes that the stage of youth is the "sculptress that shapes the whole of life," and that this stage is perhaps the most critical period in the development of the human person. It reminds the UN that young people are the future of the human family, and, as such, they have a desire to strive for the common good and for a positive renewal of society. The statement then lists the principles the youth pro-life coalition intends to observe in achieving these goals.

## YOUTH COALITION'S UN STATEMENT

1. *Young People are Relational Beings, Formed in the Family — We are children of parents, and members of a family. We are relational persons, not autonomous individuals. We firmly agree with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state.*

It is refreshing and almost counter-cultural that relationality is stressed before individuality. This is in contradistinction to today's individualistic approach, and shows a mature awareness of the need to take into account the common good, as is stressed so often in Catholic teaching.

2. *Parents are the Primary Educators of Young People — Access to education is critical to our formation and our long-term success. We firmly agree with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that parents have the prior right to educate their children. Parents have the primary right, duty, and responsibility to educate us and should be assured of the proper assistance to provide for the moral, religious, intellectual, practical, and physical education of youth.*

Perhaps no one really doubts this, but sometimes educational institutions and governments act as if they have the prime responsibility for the sexual and moral education of the young. It is a major principle of Catholic teaching that parents are the primary educators of their children, and, while some may shirk this task, others

willingly take it on, since they love their children enough to correct and encourage them in the right paths, in appreciation of the beautiful gifts of sexuality, expressed in its fullness in the Sacrament of marriage.

3. *Rights of Youth are Based on Their Evolving Capacities — The period of youth comprises a critical period of development, during which time our right to make decisions for ourselves evolves according to our maturity, and, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, must be balanced with the rights and duties of parents.*

Here there is an intelligent recognition of what is age and stage appropriate. Of course young people must be encouraged to develop, but adults must remember that they are far from "finished." Growing into adulthood can be a life-long task. Young people do not know nearly as much as they sometimes think they do (it should be added, nor do we adults), nor as much as we sometimes give them credit for. They are, after all, young.

4. *The Right to Life is Inviolable from Conception to Natural Death — Many in the last two generations have been born into societies that do not protect the right to life before birth, and we consider ourselves survivors by virtue of our being born at all. Only by restoring appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth, can there be true justice and peace in society.*

When I read that these young people had addressed this issue in this way at the UN, my first reaction was, "Well, God bless them!" It is reassuring to know that there are

still so many young adults who believe this with their heart and soul, and they should be encouraged, especially after the “highs” of World Youth Day, to continue the mission of protecting the moral and legal right to life of all unborn children.

5. *Youth are Participants in Development and Employment — Being the key to the future, we should be at the center of development. Youth is the time for discerning talents that can be used for the rest of one’s life.*

This is challenging! Do we Catholics include young people in our local discussions about curriculum, catechesis, dialogue, etcetera? Where and when in our churches do we have or provide the opportunity to truly listen to youth? Perhaps youth are not “at the centre of development” as the statement claims, but they should be part of shaping future plans.

6. *A Proper Understanding of Sexuality and Healthy Relationships Must be Respected — In learning about and encountering our natural sexuality, we must be instilled with a sense of responsibility and self-respect. The full and proper expression of sexuality can be realized only in the total life-long and selfless commitment rooted in the natural institution of marriage between a man and a woman.*

Again, God bless these young people! They appear to understand these matters better than many adults, who often abandon responsibility for chastity and due reverence for the gift of sexuality in favour of quick flings and even instant gratification through “one night stands.” Let’s hope more youth will be able to see through these self-

defeating practices and opt for long term substantive relationships which truly help both men and women grow in their sexuality and develop their character through the virtues of fidelity, trust and commitment.

7. *Man and Woman are Based in Nature— Young people, like all members of the human family, are created male and female. While men and women are fully equal, each possesses characteristics that are unique to their sex, which are complementary. We affirm international agreements that gender is not a social construct, and refers to the two sexes, male and female*

Blessed Pope John Paul II has surely made an impact on youth through his Theology of the Body. His clear teaching on the complementarity of man and woman in its fullest understanding is a realistic guide to healthy relationships. These, in turn, respect the different needs and different ways of relating and developing in men and women, yet help us to reconcile and integrate these differences for the greater good and growth of the couple in the married relationship and beyond.

8. *Youth Must be Protected Against All Crimes of Exploitation — All human persons, and most especially youth, should be protected from exploitation of all forms. In particular, we should be protected from exploitation and trafficking for the purposes of forced-labor, sex trade, slavery, and from participation in military conflict, i.e. child soldiers.*

Here is one principle against which surely no one would argue. In our sophisticated

western world we must be careful that we do not expose our children to too much, too soon, risking the distortion of their views on sex and sexuality before they are capable of a more mature responsibility for their actions.

Further, the crimes listed in this section are self-explanatory in their complete denial and destruction of respect for persons, and the Coalition's entreaty to the UN to provide such protection deserves a wider audience. The Magisterium has written extensively on these issues, and this also deserves to be better known.

#### CHALLENGES FOR YOUTH, CHALLENGES FOR SOCIETY

In reading this statement, written by and for youth, it is extremely encouraging to see that there are so many young people, highly organized, who see the deep, inherent value of human beings and who are not afraid, for example, to continue to promote the dignity of marriage between a man and a woman and the complementarity of the sexes.

It would be good to hear more from them, to promote their views, and to let more people know that the whole world is not drifting towards relativism, where "my truth is equal to your truth," even when these "truths" are opposing concepts or realities, such as marriage between a man and a woman and the union of same-sex couples. So many theological, ethical and bioethical questions stem from just this one example, and I am hopeful that many organizations in our Church, including CCBI, will help youth to discern the answers in a more systematic way. In fact, CCBI is planning a DVD to engage youth in bioethics. Some bioethical issues correlate with sexual and reproductive

ethics, and perhaps we can address some of the issues raised by the Youth Coalition.

These young adults have raised some interesting challenges, not just to the UN and not just to secular society, but to all of us, and they deserve a response! ■

***Moir***

---

*More information is available.*

See the UN Website:

<http://icmyo.wordpress.com/2010/08/15/the-international-year-of-youth-dialogue-and-mutual-understanding/>

International Youth Coalition of Pro-Life Groups: <http://www.iycoalition.org>

CCBI

81 St Mary Street, Toronto ON M5S 1J4  
416 926 2335 | [bioethics.usmc@utoronto.ca](mailto:bioethics.usmc@utoronto.ca)  
[www.ccbi-utoronto.ca](http://www.ccbi-utoronto.ca)