

# BIOETHICS MATTERS ENJEUX BIOÉTHIQUES

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## **Natural Law in Practice**

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The Catholic tradition is strong on the validity of human reason reflecting on human experience (natural law) to express the demands of human morality. The relationship between natural law and revelation is traditionally caught in two phrases, “reason informed by faith” and “faith seeking understanding.” Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical “*Humani Generis*,” taught, “It is for this reason that divine revelation must be considered morally necessary so that those religious and moral truths which are not or their nature beyond the reach of reason in the present condition of the human race, may be known by all men readily, with a firm certainty and with freedom from all error.” (No. 3)

All of the above has reference to people of faith using their reason to explore various areas of morality. Of course, people of faith want to be able to dialogue with people without faith but of good will in order that all people might live according to a true and commonly understood morality.

What is becoming clearer to the present writer is that, without faith, natural law is often powerless to convince. Both the present pope and his predecessor say often that when our sense of God is lost, so does our correct

notion of man. (See, for example, *Evangelium Vitae*, No. 21.)

It is true that in some very important areas of morality natural law is convincing. For example, a sexual relationship between an adult and young children is morally abhorrent to the vast majority of people, whether of faith or not. Indeed, such activity is known almost universally as child abuse. The moral judgement is made and admits of no exceptions.

It is true also that bias can skew people's moral judgements, whether they are aware of their bias or not. Social justice questions are liable to be looked at differently depending on whether one is affluent or not.

There are, however, many areas of morality which, when considered by human reason alone, do not admit of common solutions. Take the matter of abortion. There are obviously different agendas at play here, including financial rewards. But, leaving these apart, there are people of good will who are convinced that women should control their own bodies totally, including the right to abort. Such persons do not have the divine guidance of revelation to propose the universal right to life of every human made in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ.

Or look at euthanasia and physician assisted suicide. Arguments can be advanced which

deal with the doctor/patient relationship, the fear experienced by older patients and so on. But, in the end, for a person who does not believe in an after-life, who thinks that death brings total oblivion, it makes little sense to suffer meaninglessly. God bless Margaret Somerville and her attempts to convince the populace about the social harms inherent in euthanasia. In the end, though, I feel that her efforts fall short of convincing people without faith.

Lack of faith would seem to be a growing phenomenon in Canada, despite the claims of certain sociologists. And the forgetting-God culture affects Christians too. It is doubtful, for example, whether the majority of Catholics now see much wrong with homosexual sexual relationships. How many would see the immorality involved in *in vitro* fertilization? Contraception? Dulled faith allows people to follow the current morality acceptable to one's culture, which in the West is characterized by relativism, secularism and individualism.

It is a matter of experience that even people of deep faith, may be biased and may differ about certain moral matters or about facts with moral implications. For example, people differ as to the moral status of the human embryo. (We leave out of our considerations here the question of the connection between the faith of Catholics and the teaching of the Magisterium.) Often what is at stake here is a philosophy/feeling divide. Who is not sympathetic towards Michael J. Fox? Media bias suggests that the only path opening to a cure is through human embryonic stem cells. So, a philosophical argument for the personal status of the embryo is given little or no

attention when a person wants to jump immediately to a possible cure.

Continuing with the same example, however, we find that people with no particular stake in the outcome of the status of the embryo other than the truth of the affair still differ amongst themselves. When this is the case, it is a matter of differing philosophies reflecting on facts. There may be defects in philosophical thinking or mistakes about the facts. In such cases, people should bow to our Almighty God and take the safest position which respects the uniqueness and value of each person.

Back to the first paragraph. Our faith seeking understanding, our allowing our reason to be informed by faith, will keep our interpretation of natural law on the right lines, at least in broad outlines (which are an essential element to any correct reasoning). The first requirement to correct natural law thinking, then, is our faith, a deeper and deeper relationship with Jesus Christ and a confidence in the Word of God.

The next step is to get to clearer, more sympathetic, natural law arguments which will appeal to people in general. As I have indicated earlier, even such arguments may not find ready agreement in a faith deprived world, where pragmatism reigns supreme. If our arguments are more easily accessible to people, however, their rejection will not rest with us. ■

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