CATHOLIC MEDICAL-MORAL DILEMMA: Responsible Parenthood

By GARY M. ATKINSON, Ph.D.

(FIFTH OF A SERIES)

CASE: Mr. and Mrs. D are a couple in their early thirties who have three children, two boys and a girl. Both of the boys have been diagnosed as afflicted with Duchenne’s muscular dystrophy. They have always wanted a large family, but they are of limited financial means, and the care of the children they already have is straining their monetary and emotional resources to the breaking point. They realize that each subsequent pregnancy carries a 25% chance of producing another affected male and a 25% chance of producing a carrier female of this sex-linked defect. In accordance with the teaching of the Church, the couple understands that in their circumstances it would be permissible for them to refrain from conceiving any more children. Their uncertainty relates to the question of whether they have a responsibility not to procreate. Associated with the couple’s private decision is an issue of public and social importance: should laws be passed forbidding further procreation by the couple and by others similarly situated?

DISCUSSION: The Church has enunciated basic principles useful for guiding the deliberation of the couple. In the encyclical “Humanae Vitae” Pope Paul VI pointed out the norms to be respected in arriving at a decision:

In relation to physical, economic, psychological, and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised, either by the deliberate and generous decision to raise a numerous family, or by the decision, made for grave motives and with due respect for the moral law, to avoid for the time being, or even for an indeterminate period, a new birth.

Responsible parenthood also and above all implies a more profound relation to the objective moral order established by God, of which a right conscience is the faithful interpreter. The responsible exercise of parenthood implies, therefore, that husband and wife recognize fully their own duties toward God, toward themselves, toward the family and toward society, in a correct hierarchy of values. (para. #10)

Anticipating His Holiness’s statement, the Fathers of Vatican II spoke further of the necessity for responsible parenthood in decisions regarding childbearing:

[The parents] will thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which may be foreseen. For this accounting they will reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life. Finally, they will consult the interests of the family group, of temporal society, and of the Church herself.

The parents themselves should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God. But in their manner of acting, spouses should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily. They must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the

A New Key to Doors of Life

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For the past several decades scientists have produced methods and machines which have significantly improved the living conditions of mankind. Man now regards science as a key to a better life. However, as advances continue to crowd the marketplaces, problems such as pollution and energy emerge as increasing concerns. In the midst of these woes, genetic modification is foremost.

This newest product of scientific endeavor allows not only the transformation of the environment, but of man himself. Recombinant DNA research is already opening doors, showing us new understandings of how genes are organized and how they operate. It is providing industry with a new method for obtaining important drugs such as Insulin. Even more promising are the doors which such research may yet open: the door to replacing defective disease-causing genes, of finding out how genes are “triggered,” what causes particular changes to take place in our lives, of producing antibodies and vaccines to treat viral diseases, and

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