Some Right Answers, But For Wrong Reasons

Moral “Methodologies” Do Make a Difference

An increasingly sharp clash between, on the one hand, moral teachings to which the Catholic Church is officially committed and, on the other hand, the dissent which some highly publicized moralists raise against those teachings is obvious to anyone who peruses the mainstream news media (See Time, December 3, 1984, regarding “A Bold Stand on Birth Control” continued by Pope John Paul II). Anyone who pushes even a little beyond what the more popular journalism offers will realize that the rift is more than just another of the debates which Popes and other Bishops traditionally have found not only tolerable, but useful in focusing Church doctrine more clearly.

Two Doctrines

What is involved this time is, among other things, two basically contradictory doctrines about what morality is all about in the first place. One could quite appropriately label these the “exceptionless norm” doctrine (to which the Church, especially in the authoritative teaching of her pastors, has committed herself), and the “proportionalist” doctrine (a label which, at least for the present, the dissenters seem to have settled upon.)

In the “exceptionless norm” approach, the Church holds that there are some few actions, including at least certain externally visible actions, which are so fundamentally degrading to the human person that one would never under any circumstances be justified in deciding willfully to pursue such actions. Examples would be aiming to kill an innocent person, acts of homosexuality, masturbation, bestiality, contraception, etc., or the destruction of someone’s reputation by lies.

In the “proportionalist” approach, no kind of action is excluded, from the moral point of view, without exception. It is required only that one pursue the action precisely for the sake of all the good elements in its performance and its effects, and that at the same time these good elements “proportionately” outweigh any bad elements in its performance or its effects. Thus, a “proportionalist” might very well justify in a given case the decision willfully to pursue variously the death of an innocent person, acts of homosexuality, masturbation, bestiality, contraception, etc., or the destruction of someone’s reputation by lies. The proportionalist ideal is not to do these things, but in fact, he may in some instances be allowed — even obligated — to abandon this ideal.

On February 28, 1984, Pope John Paul II made reference to this type of proportionalism when he said:

It would be a very serious error to conclude . . . that the Church’s teaching (regarding contraception) is in itself only an ideal which must then be adapted, proportioned, graded according to the concrete possibilities of man: according to a “balancing of the various goods in question.” (Osservatore Romano, English edition, April 2, 1984, page 7.)

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"Same Conclusions" Equals "Basic Agreement"?

The two approaches resemble each other at times, at least in their conclusions. Both would admit that one can, for sufficient reason, pursue actions obviously good and not at all basically evil, even though some evil will result as a by-product. One may, for instance, give a needed pain-killer which will also, as a side effect, seriously depress a patient’s kidney function and thus hasten death. Both approaches would admit, moreover, that one may at times have to tolerate another’s doing a vicious thing because one has no reasonable way of preventing it: rape, abortion, slander, etc. Finally, both might agree that a concrete course of action, e.g., a medical procedure, previously rejected as immoral by moralists of an earlier age, does not necessarily conflict with Church teaching.

Thus a significant number of "exceptionless norm" moralists would justify (and other would dispute!) removing, intact, a nonviable fetus whose continued presence in the womb will soon cause the death of its mother — or would justify sterilizing a woman, at least as a last resort, to protect her from impregnation through rape.

"Proportionalist" moralists might very well come to the same conclusion but by a radically different line of reasoning, so different that, in the final analysis, one must say that the "exceptionless norm" moralist and the "proportionalist" moralist were not truly in basic "agreement" at all!

For not only is a concrete decision important, but also the line of reasoning behind it makes a great deal of difference. To use an example from another area of morality and another era — racial justice in the 1930's — it makes a great deal of difference whether one says:

"Morally, I will not take part in lynching this black man because I know that he is an innocent person."

or whether one says:

"I will not take part in lynching this black man because I know he is an innocent person and that there are not sufficient reasons in this instance to make an exception to the rule, valid in most cases, that no one should aim to kill an innocent person."

The first argument appeals to an exceptionless norm; the second, to that kind of basically proportionalist approach officially rejected by the Church. Would it be irrelevant at this point to ask: If you had been a black man living in the 1930's, which doctrine — the "exceptionless norm" or the "proportionalist" — would you have "felt more comfortable" with?

The "exceptionless norm" approach of the Church has occasionally stagnated in the past, but nonetheless also has steadily advanced over the centuries in clarifying which norms are exceptionless and which are not. The "proportionalist" approach, however, has failed to show why, in practice, even genocide or the torture of a child would in all situations necessarily have to be excluded. Indeed, its lynchpin doctrine is that no such exclusion is possible. Despite the pastoral sensitivity of "proportionalist" moralists, their challenge to think freshly about moral issues, and many correct courses of action which they approve, the Church has given every indication that their approach undermines our efforts to live in Christ Jesus. One thinks of T. S. Eliot's words in Murder in the Cathedral.

The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

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"By the Mouths of Children, Babes in Arms . . ."

Part I: "And a Little Child Shall Lead Them"

When the Lord Jesus, standing within the temple precincts in Jerusalem, spoke of little children, babes in arms, shouting their "hosannas," He must have been referring to Psalm 8:3, and/or to the Book of Wisdom, 10:21. In contemporary America, it also redounds to the praise of the Creator that very tiny babes, voiceless and defenseless, have reminded us of their right to life.