Life Issues, Medical Choices: Questions and Answers for Catholics

by Janet E. Smith and Christopher Kaczor

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This helpful book could be called "Catholic Bioethics for Everyone." Dividing their material into an introduction and seven chapters that address fifty-seven questions, Smith and Kaczor offer a broad view of major life issues in easy-to-understand language.

In their introduction, the authors affirm their intention to be faithful to Church teaching; one of their major goals is to help fellow Catholics understand and accept the sometimes difficult teaching of the Church on medical and moral matters. They hope that their presentation of fundamental principles will guide readers in making their own decisions about issues on which the Church has not yet taken a firm stance.

The six main chapters are presented in question-and-answer format. The questions are basic and typical of those that anyone interested in Catholic bioethics might ask. The answers are faithful to Church teaching. In Chapter 1, the questions cover fundamentals—why Catholics value human life so greatly, the meaning of suffering, "prudential judgment," and the principle of double effect. They also address our duty to act in accord with conscience and our obligation to accept and respect Church teaching, in particular its teaching that some actions are intrinsically evil and never to be done. Chapter 2 answers questions about beginning-of-life issues, including Why is abortion wrong? Is it moral to have an abortion if the unborn child is handicapped? Is it immoral to use "excess" embryos for research? Is it ever moral to induce labor prematurely?

Chapter 3 discusses reproductive technologies, explaining which are immoral and why. It also answers basic and important questions about cloning, embryo adoption, genetic testing, sex selection, and ovarian transplants. Chapter 4 answers hard questions about contraception, sterilization, and natural family planning—among them, Why does the Church teach that contraception is intrinsically immoral? Isn't NFP another form of contraception? Is it morally permissible to have sex with a contracepting spouse?

Chapter 5 covers end-of-life issues, answering questions about euthanasia, how to tell the difference between ordinary and extraordinary means of preserving life, and whether to provide food and water to a patient in a persistent vegetative state. It also addresses questions about advance directives, the determination of death, organ transplantation, hospital futility policies, and the Church's sacrament of the sick. Chapter 6 answers questions about cooperation with evil. These include, How do health care workers know when they must refuse to do certain things (like assisting in abortion)? Is it moral for a Catholic pharmacist to fill prescriptions for contraceptives? Is it moral to have a healthy breast removed because of a genetic propensity to breast cancer? What if a patient cannot be persuaded to do what is morally correct?

The final chapter applies the Ten Commandments to health care challenges that professionals and patients frequently face.

The book's greatest strengths are its fidelity to the teaching of the Church; its comprehensive scope, combined with its simplicity and clarity; and the authors' sound advice (with a few exceptions) regarding questions on which the magisterium has not provided specific guidance and on which theologians loyal to the magisterium are divided.

In what follows I choose a few important issues to show the strengths of this fine work and a few in which the authors' responses raise questions.

In their answer to the first question in chapter 1—From a *philosophical* perspective, what is the value of human life?—the author's *arguments* appeal to magisterial Church teaching and not, as one would anticipate, to *reason*. Their answer is the correct one, but

I think they ought to have made their case by using properly philosophical arguments. They surely could have done so, because in the first question of chapter 2, they present these arguments. In short, they adequately answer question 1 of chapter 1 not there but in the following chapter.

The chapter on beginning-of-life issues centers on abortion. The authors argue that directly intended abortion is always gravely immoral because evidence shows that the entity in question is indeed a human being (that is, a person), that this entity has a strict right to life, and that the woman's "right" to choose does not trump the unborn child's right to life. They also show that the phenomenon of identical twinning does not falsify the claim that an individual human being was in existence from conception/fertilization, and they refute arguments to justify abortion to relieve a mother's mental problems or avoid the birth of a handicapped child as well as arguments for the use of "excess" embryos for research purposes. The authors note that reputable Catholic theologians loyal to the magisterium disagree over the use of some methods of coping with ectopic pregnancies, they accurately summarize the theologians' views, and they advise readers to pray and to form their own consciences.

In taking up similar questions (such as the adoption of frozen embryos in chapter 3) they offer the same advice after surveying different viewpoints. In my opinion, this advice smacks of an older, somewhat legalistic approach, where one was advised that it was permissible to follow a "probable" opinion. I think it better to advise readers to examine the *arguments and evidence* of theologians on different sides of debated issues to see whose arguments and evidence are better, and to see which theologians did their homework, as indicated by studies they consulted, for example. People should believe the Church, but they should *not* believe theologians or philosophers. Rather, they need to determine the soundness of the evidence and arguments that a theologian mounts.

In the chapter on reproductive technologies, Smith and Kaczor describe some of the new technologies, focusing on artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization. They mention GIFT (gamete intrafallopian transfer) without comment. I think, with others, that this procedure substitutes for and does not assist the conjugal act and is thus immoral, and so feel that the authors should have summarized and evaluated arguments for and against it. They rightly judge immoral procedures that treat the child as a product of technical expertise rather than as a gift crowning the conjugal act. They show why cloning, either for reproduction or for research, is wrong. They think it is not intrinsically wrong for a couple to seek to conceive a child with the hope that it could provide therapy for a sibling suffering some malady, but hold that there are limits to the consent parents can give for such therapy; the key factor is risk to the subject. Other issues they take up include choosing the sex of a child (not necessarily immoral) and transplanting ovaries (not intrinsically evil but dependent on various factors).

The chapter on contraception, sterilization, and NFP argues that contraception is wrong not only because it damages our physical and psychological well-being, marital relations, and relationship with God, but also because it has severed the bond (moral, psychological, and legal) between the unitive and procreative meanings of human sexuality and has led to terrible sociological problems, including an increase in divorce and in the number of children raised without fathers. Their work would have been improved if they had noted that a long Catholic tradition, to which Pope Paul VI explicitly refers in note 14 of *Humanae vitae* (in an official footnote calling attention to a passage in the *Catechismus romanus,* or Catechism of the Council of Trent), regards contraception as an anti-life kind of act analogous to homicide. The Latin text of the *Catechismus romanus* reads, "Fit ut illorum sit scelus gravissimum qui, matrimonio iuncti, medicamentis vel conceptum impediunt, vel partum abigunt; haec enim homicidarum impia conspiratio existimanda est" ("Whoever in marriage artificially prevents conception, or procures an abortion, commits a most serious sin: the sin of premeditated murder").[1]

Smith and Kaczor show how NFP differs from contraception insofar as the former does not entail the repudiation of one's fertility but rather respect for it. They reject use of condoms by spouses to prevent transmission of HIV/AIDs and assert that most "orthodox theologians" consider all condom use by heterosexuals to be contraceptive. I challenge this assertion; many theologians hold that such use is not necessarily contraceptive. (Why for instance, would an elderly couple, whose wife is past menopause, waste money on condoms to prevent conception when they know that she cannot conceive?) But the use of condoms is still gravely immoral and violates the unitive meaning of the conjugal act. What if one's spouse insists on contracepting? They note that the Church maintains that a spouse opposed to contraception who makes his opposition known and does what he can to dissuade the contracepting spouse may engage in the act if refusing intercourse would seriously harm the relationship.

In the answer to another question they rightly maintain that the use of contraceptives to prevent pregnancy after rape is permissible because the object of the act is not to contracept but to protect the rape victim from further violation by the rapist; nonetheless, no method may be used that would be abortifacient. A hysterectomy to protect a mother's life (e.g., if the uterus is cancerous) is permissible, but a hysterectomy performed to prevent problems that would arise only if the woman became pregnant are contraceptive and hence immoral. Couples who have had themselves sterilized are morally obligated to have the procedure reversed if this can be done without grave difficulty; if it cannot they may, but need not, practice a form of NFP as a penance.

In chapter 5, Smith and Kaczor's discussion of feeding and hydrating persons alleged to be in a persistent vegetative state is superb. They do a good job summarizing Pope John Paul II's important address of March 20, 2004. Since publication of their work, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has issued (in August 2007) an important defense of John Paul II's teaching.

The chapter on cooperation with evil offers sound advice, on the whole, of a wide variety of difficult issues. For example, their analyses of the morality of using vaccines originally obtained from aborted fetuses not only incorporates relevant Church teaching but provides intelligent responses to those opposed to such use. Similarly, their justification by the principle of double effect for separating asymmetrically joined Siamese twins like Jodie and Mary is sound.

I was somewhat disappointed in their treatment of the problem pharmacists face when asked to fill prescriptions for contraceptives and the problems nurses faces in giving Depo-Provera (medroxyprogesterone), a drug known to cause abortion. They note the opinion of the majority of theologians and conclude by saying some guidance can be taken from the fact that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has asked legislators to pass laws respecting pharmacists' right to conscientious refusal to prescribe contraceptives. But they do not give us their own opinion or give precise guidance.

I also think their analyses of a few cases can be challenged. An example is their argument to justify removing a healthy breast from a woman genetically predisposed to breast cancer, on the grounds that such surgery is analogous to removing wisdom teeth before they cause trouble. It seems to me that a crucial question here regards the timing of the removal of the healthy breast. If the woman is pregnant and about to give birth, would it not be better to wait, while monitoring her condition, until she has finished nursing the baby before removing the healthy breasts?

All in all, however, this is a very helpful book that I recommend highly.

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[1] *The Roman Catechism*, trans. Robert Bradley and Eugene Kevane (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1985), 332, emphasis added.