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# **Issues of Medical Ethics in the Catechism of the Catholic Church**

by

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*Christ's preferential love for the sick has not ceased through the centuries to draw the very special attention of Christians toward those who suffer in body and soul. It is the source of [their] tireless efforts to comfort them. (#1503)*

This brief passage, found under the heading "Christ the physician" in the chapter on the Anointing of the Sick, exhibits the value which the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides for professionals in health care. Succinct and brief, the statement locates their type of intervention on behalf of the suffering and vulnerable, within a long tradition of dedicated Christians inspired by Jesus' public ministry of compassion and care. In a document which never employs the word "hospital" or "health care agent", nor "physician" in reference to anyone but Christ, health care personnel can find ample guidance, inspiration and clarity. Rich reflections on the testimony of the Scriptures and the living tradition of the Church make this Catechism particularly appealing, as references below may clearly indicate.

## **The Papal Introduction**

In grand and measured phrases steeped in biblical allusions, our present Pope John Paul II concludes his Apostolic Exhortation *Fidei Depositum*, written to announce the publication of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and published as the official "Foreword" of the text.

May the light of the true faith free humanity from the ignorance and slavery of sin in order to lead it to the only freedom worthy of the name: that of life in Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit . . .

From his perspective, our world requires the illumination which only true faith can provide in order for us to be liberated from ignorance (Some commentators have been prompted to generalize about our present young adults as religiously illiterate and a kind of "lost generation", since many were deprived of a substantive diet of solid catechesis and adult witnesses in their most formative years.).

It is only life in Christ that can deliver their generation and ours from what this Pope often characterizes as "slavery to sin". His recent encyclicals have furnished graphic examples of this. In *Reconciliation and Penance*, (1984) he pinpoints hatred and violence, and alienation from God, from oneself, from others including especially one's family, Church and social environment. In *On Social Concern*, (1987) Pope John Paul speaks of sinful structures and offers two typical examples: "the all-consuming drive for profit, and the thirst for power . . . at any price." (#37)

The true, liberating freedom to which he alludes he has addressed most recently in *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), the encyclical which, because of its content, was designed by the Pope to follow closely on the heels of the new Catechism. In this further refinement of John Paul's thinking in moral theology, he emphasizes a freedom which is not simply absolute autonomy, self-determination, nor license. Authentic freedom, he insists, is fundamentally dependent upon the truth. Only faith can provide it, the true faith which prompts us to embrace the Gospel and disposes us to receive respectfully the catechesis, i.e., the broader explanation and ongoing interpretation of this Gospel in the living tradition of the Church. This is the catechesis which the teaching Church has been furnishing to each generation of Christians from apostolic times. The new Catechism is but the most recent in a long and distinguished line of official formulations providing a basic understanding of our religious heritage.

The Catechism, called for at the 1985 Synod of Bishops, is intended to serve as a "compendium of all Catholic doctrine regarding faith and morals . . . (and) suited to the present life of Christians." (*Apostolic Constitution*, p.3) Working under a commission chaired by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the editorial committee composed nine successive drafts throughout their consultation with Bishops, theologians, exegetes and catechists.

In 1989, the provisional text, entitled *The Catechism of the Universal Church*, was shared by Archbishop Weakland of Milwaukee, Wisconsin with a committee of local theologians and catechetical experts, a group in which I was privileged to participate. We were asked to examine that text and offer constructive suggestions and respectful criticism individually and then jointly to the Archbishop in an effort to contribute to the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the final document. Our contributions, we were assured, and those from Bishops and their consultants world-wide would be taken into consideration in subsequent drafts. The final text displayed noteworthy improvement in orientation, content and style, in the judgment of many us.

The sources for this Catechism, as identified by the Pope, are the "teaching of Sacred Scripture, the living Tradition in the Church and the authentic Magisterium, . . . the Fathers, Doctors and saints". (p.4) Well chosen passages are drawn from the more familiar documents of the recent Second Vatican Council (which Pope Paul VI considered the great catechism of modern times), the less



familiar but no less significant early Western and Eastern Fathers, and remembered outstanding Catholic persons such as St. Therese of Lisieux and John Henry Cardinal Newman. The book includes extensive quotations from addresses and writings of the present Pope and statements published by various Vatican Congregations during this papacy.

This document, states Pope John Paul, was intended to "illumine with the light of faith" issues and problems which have only recently emerged. As we will see below, the Catechism addresses a number of those which in recent years have been confronted by Bishops, health care personnel, ethics committees and ethicists, ex. gr., euthanasia, medical care of the dying, artificial contraception and in vitro fertilization.

### **The Christocentric Orientation**

Pope John Paul II explains that as we read this Catechism we are able to recognize the unity of the *Mystery* of God, which the Pope elaborates as:

God's saving purpose, centering on Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, sent by the Father, . . . to be our Savior. Having died and risen, Christ is always present in his Church, especially in the sacraments; he is the source of our faith, the model of Christian conduct, and the Teacher of our prayer. (p.5)

In this passage, John Paul is again specifying the four major sections or parts of the Catechism, an organization which reiterates the traditional order followed in the "Roman Catechism" completed under St. Pius V within three years (1563) of the conclusion of the historic Council of Trent. But while the organization may be long familiar, the Pope also insists that "the contents are presented in a 'new' way in order to respond to the questions of our age." (ibid)

Part One addresses the Christian Mystery, as this is articulated in our Profession of Faith; here Christ is presented as the model of our faith. We will be attending to Article II, "I believe in the Resurrection of the Body", specifically, regarding "Dying in Christ Jesus."

Part Two focuses on this Mystery as it is celebrated and communicated in our "sacramental economy"; here, Christ is acknowledged as always present in his Church, especially in the sacraments. We will be studying Article 5, "The Anointing of the Sick", in which the reality of illness is directly addressed.

Part Three presents the Christian Mystery as enlightening and sustaining all God's people in our behavior; here Christ is viewed as the teacher and model of Christian conduct. We will be noting, among the relevant presentations regarding the theological virtues, the requirements of the common good that all have access to health care (#1908), the emphasis upon the "Magisterium of the Pastors of the Church" as endowed with the authority of Christ regarding moral matters (#2034), only the presentations of respect for life and for health, under the Fifth Commandment, and of the fruitfulness of marriage, under the Sixth Commandment.

Part Four, finally, focuses on this Mystery as it grounds all our prayers, principally the Lord's Prayer; we meet Christ as the teacher and exemplar of our

prayer. Here we will note how we are invited to address to Jesus and unite with Jesus our prayers for healing our infirmities as well as forgiving our sins. (#2615-6)

(It is my hope that my effort to include representative passages from each of the four Parts will provide some overview of this highly comprehensive text.)

## **The English Text**

The recently published and long awaited English edition of the new Catechism places in the hands of thousands of readers ready access to the official Roman Catholic approach and stance on a variety of traditional and contemporary concerns, including, as we shall see, those arising in the arena of medical ethics and in the ministry of caring for the sick. The Catechism addresses many of these pressing, contemporary issues in the light of recent official pronouncements. But even more significantly, it enables us to consider these medical issues explicitly within the larger theological context of our Catholic Faith as presented in Part I; our understanding and celebration of the Sacraments, in particular, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, in Part II; the exposition on the Ten Commandments, especially the Fifth and Sixth Commandments, in Part III; and the Lord's call to pray for the sick and the dying, in Part IV.

The very fact that the new text has been purchased at such an unprecedented pace - it is a "best seller" - certainly suggests a long-standing hunger in the minds and hearts of so many, a hunger for clarity, comprehensiveness, perspective and accessibility regarding the principal tenets of our Catholic Faith and way of life, and following the many well-publicized theological debates of the recent past.

## **The Prologue**

Because this introductory section so succinctly explains the source, shape, and process of catechesis, and so profoundly influences the entire document, I want to give sufficient attention to each segment.

### *I. The Life of the Human Person - to know and love God.*

Powerfully this document begins with the divine initiative — the Mystery — God in sheer goodness freely created us to become sharers of divine life, and draws close to us, calling us, individually and as a community, to seek God — to know and love God in response to this divine initiative. Because of the tragedy of sin and estrangement, God's continuing call came through God's Son, sent to be our Savior. Through him, God continues to invite us, in the Holy Spirit, to be God's children and heirs of divine life.

(This very basic consideration from Christian anthropology sheds important light upon the troubling situation of persons who no longer seem to have any capacity to fulfill life's purposes as expressed here — to know and love God. Hence, it seems clear to me, the type and extent of medical intervention cannot be determined adequately without pondering this foundational insight of our faith.)

Christ commissioned his apostles to proclaim this same Gospel of redemption



and reconciliation. This treasure:

has been faithfully guarded by their successors . . . (who) are called upon to hand it on from generation to generation, by professing the faith, by living it in [communal] sharing, and by celebrating it in liturgy and prayer. (#3)

## *II. Handing on the Faith: Catechesis*

Catechesis, we are told, refers to the "totality of the Church's efforts to make disciples", more specifically "an education in the faith . . . including the teaching of Christian doctrine, imparted in an organic and systematic way." (#4) Its purpose is to initiate us into the "fullness of Christian life." It is closely aligned with the Church's pastoral mission of:

initial preaching of the Gospel to arouse faith; examination of reasons for belief; [the] experience of Christian living; [the] celebration of the sacraments; integration into the ecclesial community; and apostolic and missionary witness.

A telling statement in the fine print reads: "Periods of renewal in the Church are also intense moments of catechesis . . . [which] draws fresh energy from the councils." (#8 and #9) Hence the current concern for catechesis in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

## *III. The Aim and Intended Readership*

The aim is stated clearly: to present an "organic synthesis" of the basics of Catholic teaching in both faith and morals, "in the light of the Second Vatican Council and the whole of the Church's Tradition".

We must be reminded that the primary intended audience is the Bishops, to assist them in their responsibility as the teachers of the faith and pastors of the Church. Next are mentioned writers of catechetical material, priests and catechists, and then "all other Christian faithful", for whom, I would add, this document should serve more as a reference text as we await a more specifically adapted, inculturated version of the content to be authorized by the National Council of Catholic Bishops. Envisioning as it does, then, a general readership, the text cannot be expected to pursue extensively any particular area, for example, medical ethics. But it does provide a brief treatment of some specific official positions on highly controverted matters, statements which may be, for many of its readers, new information.

## *IV. Structure*

The four sections mentioned above are described here as the "four pillars" upon which catechisms have traditionally been constructed, respectively, the profession of faith, the sacraments of faith, the life of faith, and prayer in the life of faith. This format far exceeds in explanation and depth the question and answer presentation of the catechism of my childhood. While the locating of some of the material might

seem debatable, ex. gr., treating "Christ the physician" under "the resurrection of the body" rather than "Jesus' public life", the Table of Contents and the Subject Index preclude any real difficulty for the reader. Furthermore, the overall arrangement will often encourage the inquirer into some topic of particular interest to browse further in the surrounding pages and find this to be both enlightening and rewarding.

## *V. Practical Directions*

Again the concern appears that we regard this opus as a single, interconnected presentation. Cross-references appear in the margins to make us conscious of this deliberate organization of the material. The analytical index at the back of the book enables us to regard particular themes of interest within the larger context. (In preparing this study, I found this Subject Index extensive, highly readable and particularly helpful: ex. gr., "Abortion", "the Anointing of the Sick", "Medical Treatment", "Science", "Suffering" and "Tobacco - abuse".)

Summaries appear at the conclusion of each unit, entitled in English "In Brief", and are intended as formulae which could be memorized - (a reminder for many of us of our childhood bouts with the *Baltimore Catechism* and of an ancient learning device which still carries a significant value when employed prudently).

## *VI. Necessary Adaptations*

An important disclaimer appears here. "By design, the Catechism does not set out to provide the adaptation . . . required by the difference of culture, age, spiritual maturity, and social and ecclesial condition" among its thousands of readers. (#24) Such adaptations and adjustments will be the challenge for the particular churches as they prepare local catechisms based upon this text, according to the Pope's directives. The creative abilities of writers, publishers and religious educators in the particular and local churches will be required to accomplish this.

## **Particular Health Care Issues**

### *Part I*

In Part I we are reminded that "Christ's whole earthly life is *Revelation* of the Father" and "a mystery of *redemption*", including his healings and exorcisms. (#516-7) This profound orientation places his healing ministry, and ours, within the larger scope of God's saving purpose which is there being unveiled and accomplished.

Under Article 11, "I believe in the Resurrection of the Body" we read: "the believer's body and soul already participate in the dignity belong to Christ", hence we should treat our bodies with respect, "but also the body of every other person, especially the suffering." (#1004)



The Catechism speaks of "Dying in Christ Jesus", but only within the larger context of rising with Him. The quotations are from Paul's Epistles, Genesis, Wisdom and the Pastoral Constitution. The text is sensitive and inspirational. Bodily death is "natural", "the normal end of life", lending urgency to our present existence. But death is also shrouded in doubt and is "our last enemy". Yet it is transformed by Christ: "By his death he has conquered death". (#1019) And Christian death "completes our incorporation into" Christ. (#1010). We can desire death, which can become our "act of obedience toward the Father." (#1011) Appropriate quotations from Ss. Ignatius of Antioch, Teresa of Avila, Therese Lisieux and Francis of Assisi, and the *Imitation of Christ* provide solid testimony and inspiration.

Finally, we read "the Church encourages us to prepare ourselves for the hour of death." (#1014) The text, while not mentioning it, certainly could encourage us to incorporate some form of "Advance Directives" in this preparation, especially in an era when not just a "sudden and unprovided death" but also excessively prolonged dying is a source of great anxiety for many people.

## *Part II*

In Part II, under the Anointing of the Sick, we find a sensitive but brief treatment of illness and suffering. Here we experience our "powerlessness . . . limitations . . . and finitude", and these can lead us to "anguish, self-absorption sometimes even despair and revolt against God." (#1500) The Church's explicit understanding of these feelings can be immensely reassuring to those who struggle and those who accompany the sick.

On a more positive note, this same illness may mature a person, helping one to "discern" and avoid the non-essentials in one's life, and even "provoke a search for God and a return to Him." (#1501) Whatever attention can be directed to this deeper drama of human existence, even amid the pressures and tensions of health care interventions, can be both liberating and consoling for all parties, it seems to me.

The Catechism presents Christ as the physician, whose:

compassion toward the sick and his many healings of every kind of infirmity are a resplendent sign that God has visited his people. (#1503)

We are further reminded that Christ did not heal all the sick: his healings "announced a more radical healing." They were "signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God." (#1505) Here we are given, or confirmed in, the deeper insight that healing always in some way points to God's saving purpose, which in some instances, may include not healing but another kind of deliverance.

This service of health care will always include, for disciples of the Lord, both a "new outlook on illness" and a "share in his ministry of compassion and healing." (#1506)



After a paragraph on the charism of healing, we are reminded that the Church received the Lord's charge: "Heal the sick" and continues to care for and accompany the sick with her prayer. The Church "believes in the life-giving presence of Christ, the physician of souls and bodies." (#1509)

The document then reminds all of us of the shift in focus of this sacrament from "Extreme Unction" to the anointing of those in danger of death from sickness, or old age, and prior to a serious operation. (#1511-15) We are also reminded that one of the effects of this sacramental celebration is the Holy Spirit's gift of "strengthening, peace and courage" in serious illness or frailty, and in the face of "temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death." This sacrament may lead to the healing of the soul, "but also of the body if such is God's will." (#1520)

### Part III

#### *You Shall Not Kill*

"Human life is sacred", we are exhorted, from one of a number of paragraphs quoted from *Donum Vitae*. No one can claim "the right directly to destroy an innocent human being", the Catechism states, in a traditional formula. Intentional homicide, infanticide are of course precluded, and further: "Concern for eugenics or public health cannot justify any murder, even if commanded by public officials." (#2268) Even indirect action in this regard is forbidden. The text is brief and pointed:

The moral law prohibits exposing someone to mortal danger without grave reason, as well as refusing assistance to a person in danger. (#2269)

It speaks of proportionate reasons, in language reminiscent of the *Declaration on Euthanasia*.

Under "Abortion", we read: "Human life must be protected absolutely from the moment of conception." Appended to this statement is a further insight: from the first moment of existence, "a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person." (#2270). The Church's long tradition is alluded to with references to Didache, Tertullian and others as well as the Pastoral Constitution. The notion of "formal cooperation" and the canonical penalty of excommunication are emphasized, in view of the gravity of the crime. Further quotations from *Donum Vitae* are incorporated, regarding advancing civil legislation, and also opposing any prenatal diagnosis which is open to "the thought of possibly inducing an abortion." (#2274)

Without references to the *Declaration on Euthanasia*, the next section incorporates the heart of that excellent document, and provides readers with a ready synopsis:

Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment. (#2278)

While this series of specifiers is not further defined, significant steps toward resolutions of difficult cases are taken here.

With the continuing advocacy of "physician-assisted suicide", it is helpful to see: "Voluntary cooperation in suicide is contrary to the moral law." (#2282)

All health care personnel should be pleased to read the "Respect for health" section, which recognizes this gift entrusted to us for which we must exercise reasonable care, while "taking into account the needs of others and the common good." (#2288) (The specter of Generalissimo Franco's deathbed being attended by, allegedly, over thirty physicians always seemed strange to me.)

While rejecting the contemporary neo-pagan "cult of the body" the document invokes the virtue of temperance in regard to our use of "food, alcohol, tobacco and medicine." (#2289-90) Drug use, other than on "strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offense." The "clandestine production and trafficking in drugs are scandalous practices." (#2291)

Scientific, medical or psychological research on humans "can contribute to healing the sick and the advancement of public health" the Catechism states in a solid endorsement. It also provides reminders regarding "fundamental moral criteria." (#2294) Considerations of proportionality are essential here. (#2295)

Specific requirements regarding organ transplants, which "can be meritorious", are presented: the donor's informed consent, proportionality, conformity to the moral law. (#2296)

Under "respect for the dead", is mentioned:

Autopsies can be morally permitted for legal inquests or scientific research. The free gift of organs after death is legitimate and can be meritorious. (#2301)

Such statements may promote readers to give serious attention to making provisions for giving the "gift of life."

*You shall not commit adultery*  
*The fecundity of marriage*

Under the Sixth Commandment, section III, "The Love of Husband and Wife" we find the section on "the fecundity of marriage". Principal passages from *Humanae Vitae* are explained, including the "inseparable connection . . . between the unitive and the procreative significance" in marital intimacy, and the spacing of births. An important quotation from the Pastoral Constitution is invoked for the principal regarding objective criteria, which are to be drawn from the nature of the human person and human acts, (a statement which has been understood with great variations among moral theologians). Various methods of contraception, other than periodic continence, are said to be "intrinsically evil", (a somewhat stronger expression than Pope Paul's statement: "*intrinsece inhonestum*", in *Humanae Vitae*, #14).

With ample quotations again from *Donum Vitae* the Catechism addresses the various techniques of reducing human sterility. As with the earlier document, the "simple case" of homologous *in vitro fertilization* is not acceptable. Encouragement for childless couples to consider adoption or community service is reiterated.



## Part IV Prayer

Finally, and briefly, we should note that in the moving Part IV on Prayer, we find the exhortation to address our prayer for healing to Jesus, who:

always responds to a prayer offered in faith: "Your faith has made you well; go in peace."  
(#2616)

### Personal Comments

Since this text is written in the distinctive catechetical *genre*, i.e., a brief but comprehensive treatment of the salient contents of our Faith, we will have to continue to look to other types of officially authorized documents, written collaboratively, for example, by health care practitioners and ethicists, to flesh out the brief statements incorporated here.

This document, as an institutional formulation, certainly is not to be located on the "cutting edge" of theological speculation. It makes no effort to reflect the continuing controversial nature of certain issues —perhaps because the writers adjudged these to be of little interest to initial inquirers, or a source of confusion to many others, or such controversies are seen as an embarrassment or even a testimony to the disobedience of certain provocators.

By intent it constitutes a pastoral, conservative, and often traditional statement. Moreover, I find it sometimes heavy and uneven in depth and richness, but for the most part, very readable. The Catechism has already proved to be genuinely informative and helpful in giving ready access to specific teachings, and in providing a solidly Roman Catholic context within which to consider particular concerns.

I join my voice to many others in expressing disappointment with the decision to incorporate non-inclusive expressions, but at this point it is the one translation which we have in hand. The language constitutes an unneeded deterrent for some who could genuinely profit from the breadth of material, the wealth of references and the uplifting creativity evidenced in the treatment of many subjects.

### Conclusion

The concluding section of the Prologue draws upon the older *Roman Catechism*. It provides a most helpful overall consideration:

The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends . . . the love of our Lord. (#25)

We could interpret that love as both the Lord's initiative, his love for us made manifest in the proclamation of the good news, in his presence among us as healing physician and savior, and our love in return, lived out in a life of faithful service to the same Lord whom we encounter in our sick, suffering and dying sisters and brothers.

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