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The Stewardship of Life

Rev. William F. Maestri

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Leonard J. Weber in his very sensitive presentation on the ethical issue of severely handicapped children, *Who Shall Live?*, centers on the value of life.¹ The basic stance that one takes toward human life, and life in general, serves as a first principle for one's value of orientation toward such issues as abortion, euthanasia, human experimentation, and care for severely handicapped children. Weber goes on to present two fundamental modes of valuing life: life as a *possession* and life as a *gift*.² Each of these modes needs to be examined.

Life as Possession

We live in a historical and cultural epoch which has, for the most part, eliminated the transcendental element of life. The sacred or holy has been effectively neutralized by our *faith* in the scientific method for establishing *reality*. In fact, outside the scientific method, there is no reality (one is tempted to say no salvation). The application of this method is most evidenced in our technology. We are awe-struck not by the heavens or by nature (long since demythologized and depeopled of sacred beings), but by our technological advances and wonders.

Along with the method of science and its application to technology, the sacred has been neutralized by the *privatizing* of life in general, and religion in particular. Religion is the "private affair" between me and my God. Worship has been relegated to the 50-minute hour on Sunday (Saturday for the vigil-goers), and in effect divorced from daily life. Space and time become overwhelmingly secularized in meaning and direction. The heavens behold the glory of man's technology through satellites and rockets. Time is of the *chronos* variety. It is linear and mathematical. There is no "breaking point" or exis-

tential significance in such a view. The *karios* time orientation is not much in evidence these days.

The result of our absolutizing of the method of science and its resultant view of reality, along with the privatizing of life and the secularizing of space and time, leaves us living in a one-dimensional world. The cosmos has collapsed on us. We must live on the bread of this world alone. What we *see* is what we get. The question arises: What do we see and get?

Our one-story reality offers us the following: pollution, crime and violence, urban disaster, energy crisis upon crisis, war, and man's general inhumanity to man. Is there any wonder that we have witnessed a general Kierkegaardian inward-turn? We have become self-preoccupied and self-absorbed. We are what Christopher Lasch calls the "narcissist society." Lasch writes:

Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to "relate," overcoming the "fear of pleasure."³

In all of this is the underlying assumption that life in general is out of control. Events happen to us and not by us. We have become generally alienated from our fabricated world. Steven Muller, writing in *Daedalus*, captures this mood. Muller is of the opinion that people, even the educated, are at a loss in the world of machines, a world in which we are entangled. The automobile, calculator, toaster, and television are the mysterious gifts of technology, gifts with which we are not very comfortable. In effect, Muller is saying: "Bygone is the era of the tinkerer."⁴ These gifts we can neither explain nor repair. We simply use them with fear and trembling.

All of the above is brought to bear on our perspective of human life, and life in general. Life does indeed become a *possession*. Even more than this, life becomes an *obsession*. It is *MY* individual, solitary rock of certainty in the midst of uncertainty. My life becomes mine with a vengeance, and is seen as an anchor in a hopeless sea of daily experience. The orientation of life as *possession* and *obsession* becomes grounded in rights and individual demands. In addition, since my life is mine in a radical and absolute way, I become a law unto myself in terms of its *use* and *disposal*.

Such a view of life has significant carry-over into the issues of biomedical ethics and values. If life is my possession in such a private and radical way, euthanasia and experimentation are decided on the basis of what I determine to be sufficient reason. From such a perspective, abortion is a rather easy issue to resolve. It is what I decide to do with my body over which I have absolute control. In effect, we have become a collection of individual moral islands feeling the extension of no obligation beyond our own solipsistic worlds.

At the other end of the spectrum of life is the perspective which views life as a gift. Life is the ultimate gift from a good and gracious God, Who directs all things to a good end. Weber says that from such a viewpoint there are limitations to the use of one's life. To see life as a gift evokes not rights but obligations and duties. Life as a gift calls one to a stance of protection and reverence. Above all, when we recognize life as a gift from God, we are called to a basic posture of gratitude. We see the goodness of life and we respond by singing His praise.⁵

However, a rather strange metamorphosis takes place during such discourses on life as a gift. In the same breath there is an immediate claim for the "right to life." Life, the gift from the God of love, now becomes a right. And to many of the so-called "pro-life" groups it is an absolute right. Life becomes a right which must be fought for with all of one's mind, soul, and strength. Life is the absolute value and the object of our ultimate concern.

I cannot help but become uncomfortable with the language of "the right to life." The result of such a view is medical vitalism and the absolutizing of this earthly and bodily existence. In many ways, "the right to life" can also make life a possession — a possession that does not recognize what Pope Pius XII called a higher and more important good. Although Pius XII left this higher good unnamed, Richard McCormick, S.J., has suggested human relationships and the capacity for giving and receiving love as this higher good.⁶ What, in effect, is happening is that life is becoming the coin of absolute possession and obsession. The medical pessimist who views life as worthwhile only to the degree that it is attractive or free from suffering, and the medical vitalist who knows no limits to the means of preserving bodily life, are just opposite sides of this coin of life. Both make life a possession; to be sure for different motives, but a possession and absolute right nonetheless. To one group (the pessimist), absolute is my free choice as to when and how life will be disposed of. To the other (the vitalist), bodily life and its preservation are the absolute norms of the moral conscience.

Perhaps we are still at a point when we can listen to a voice from the past with much to say about such issues. That voice is of Rudolf Bultmann who, in his famous essay "New Testament and Mythology," writes:

For self-assertion deludes man into thinking that his existence is a prize within his own grasp. How blind man is to his plight is illustrated by that pessimism which regards life as a burden thrust on man against his will, or by the way men talk about the "right to live" or by the way they expect their fair share of good fortune. Man's radical self-assertion then blinds him to the fact of sin, and this is the clearest proof that he is a fallen being.⁷

The words of Bultmann call us to demythologize our belief in the false gods of absolute freedom and bodily-earthly existence. We need to be reminded of the temporality of this world and our personal earthly existence. It is with such a view that we will now consider life from the perspective of stewardship.

Life as Stewardship

To be a steward is to be recognized as one who is fundamentally trustworthy and valuable. To be a steward is to be entrusted with something or a state of affairs that is significant. Man stands before God and his fellows in this stance of creaturely stewardship. Man is entrusted with his personal life for the purpose of giving praise to God, the ground of all being and becoming.

This stewardship of personal life involves man with his fellows and the totality of all that is. Man is an interpersonal being who realizes his potential in community and in historical time. If man is to grow into the *likeness* of God and complete the *imago Dei*, he must stand in creaturely openness to the Creator God. Man cannot turn his back on God or his fellows and claim to be authentic.

This stance of basic openness to the "God Who Is" confronts man with the feeling of awe and the graciousness of existence. Man realizes that he need not be, and yet he is. Man is not here at his own will or design. But man, each new individual, comes into the world through the will of the God of Love. Each new being is the re-entry of the good and gracious God in the ongoing process of God's self-communication to the world. In each new life God rededicates Himself to our world and its glory. Each new life is God's yes to His good creation placed in the stewardship of man's care.

From such a perspective, life at its boundaries, the alpha and omega, takes on a new depth. The good and wise steward realizes that his existence, and that of his fellows, is not a possession to be grasped. Life is not my individual possession to do with as I will. Neither is life the absolute good which must be preserved at all costs. The good steward sees his earthly existence and all creation as provisional and on the way. The good steward is neither a vitalist nor a pessimist, but is a person of hope.

Hope is our faith that lights the future and helps us to persevere in the present. Life at its boundaries, from conception to death, is a sacred stewardship of trust and care. Life is to be revered as holy because the source of all life is the ground of holiness. So we are called to recognize St. Paul's words to the Romans to the effect that in life and death we are the Lord's. This earthly existence is not the final chapter, but the necessary introduction to the mystery of God. We

hope for that day when we will see Him as He is and be welcomed into His kingdom.

In our earthly existence we are stewards entrusted with life and creation. We will give an account of our stewardship one day. All life is under our care, but especially the living who are weak and defenseless. They are the voices that cry out as "holy ground" for our reverence and agape. In our society, the fetus and handicapped children have become the least of our brethren, which means they have also become the hidden presence of Christ. They are not tissues, or fleshy potentials, but our brothers and sisters called to God's kingdom.

Finally, at the omega boundary of existence, care and reverence are required of the good steward. There is no life that is insignificant or outside our care. There is no obsolete human being to whom we do not owe what Paul Ramsey calls "canons of loyalty."⁸ But we need to remember the wisdom of Scripture: there is a time to be born and a time to die. In the process of living there is the process of dying and letting go. No matter how painful the separation, how advanced the technology, let go we must. For as pilgrims we are on a journey to the good God Who first called us forth and now calls us home. Our hope is not for this life only. Were it so, we would be the most to be pitied.

This "letting go" is not an act of despair, or not caring, or a pronouncement on the quality of life. This "letting go" is the total act of faith, hope, love, and care. It is our total handing back to God what He has first entrusted to us. As good stewards, we realize the provisionality of life, and the need to surrender and be enfolded in God's unbounding love. This is not death with dignity; for there is no such thing. Death is most undignified. This "letting go" is our imitation of Christ and the surrendering of our spirit, confident that through this death we have passed to eternal life.

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