The Honest Conscience

Rev. James O'Reilly, Ph. D.

Some will argue that as long as a person thinks that what he does is right he should go ahead and do it. A person must act according to his conscience. This statement is a dangerous half-truth. In an excessive anxiety to protect the claims of the individual conscience, the claims of the human community and the claims of the objective order of the universe are undermined. This cannot be done without betraying the honesty of the very conscience which we wish to protect. In the first place, it is together, in community, that we acquire knowledge at all. One cannot think in complete independence from a tradition of wisdom. We must think for ourselves but not by ourselves. In the second place, the honesty of one's conscience is not the only consideration that is of importance. Correctness of a matter matters. There is more to morality than subjective goodness. In addition to goodness or badness of my performance of the action, there is the question of the goodness or badness of the act itself. If the act is objectively not good but evil may flow from it to myself and others, regardless of how it is thinking it to be right. It is simply not true to say that objective goodness or badness is of little account before God, that subjective disposition is the 'whole thing.' True, it is the latter that makes or unmakes the doer before God, but it is the former that does or undoes mankind and his world.

The person who faces a moral decision must therefore pause before two considerations—that of the moral tradition in which he was raised, and that of the objective order. By so doing he acts more fully in accord with his humanness, which is to say, more honestly. For humanness is not confined to being an individual person. Humanness includes a 'being with others' and 'being in a world of cause and effect.' But since moral wisdom, even when well transmitted by the community, does not become clear to everyone equally and at the same time, and since the claims of the objective order become more inscrutable with increasing complexity of life, we must all exist in greater or lesser tension between individual conscience and community tradition, between subjective goodness and objective correctness, between conscience and law, between seeing with our own eyes and seeing through the eyes of others. It is in the face of this tension of the moral life that every man at some time in his struggle to be true to his humanness is led to suspect that more is needed than that we be 'together' and 'in a world.' We must also be 'under God.' We cannot contain our wisdom long, unless Wisdom contains us. This is the point at which honesty of individual conscience becomes inseparable from the desire, however incoherent, to become a part of a People of God.

Letters . . .

Dear Dr. Egan:

I have a suggestion to make: would it be possible in one issue, or several, to publish in the Linacre what the Popes had to say specifically in regard to medical and ethical problems related to medicine?

Sincerely yours,

J.A. Fabro, M.D.

Torrington, Conn.

Editor's Note:

The suggestion is commendable but Linacre would be duplicating. Dr. Fabro suggests has already been done by the Daughters of St. Paul in two editions:

1. Matrimony—from Benedict XIV to John XXIII.
2. The Human Body—Leo XIII, Pius XI, Pius XII.

These books may be procured from—

The Daughters of St. Paul
50 St. Paul Ave.
Boston, Mass. 02130

Dear Sir:

My letter is prompted by two excellent articles which appear in the August 12th issue of the J.A.M.A. The two articles I refer to are "Ethical and Legal Questions Posed by Recent Advances in Medicine" by James V. Appel, M.D., and "Medical Ethics and Morals in a New Age" by Paul S. Rhoads, M.D. I would suggest that anyone in medicine should read these articles for they are very relevant to many problems in today's medical practice.

In the article by Dr. Appel, he makes a fine suggestion in regard to transplants. In it he states he believes there should be two teams of physicians involved, one for the donor, one for the recipient. In this way the decisions are spread and probably a more just decision can be made. This is in particular reference as to when the donor has actually died.

We have a somewhat analogous situation in cases of so-called therapeutic abortion when one team will decide for both mother and infant. I would suggest it would be far better and in keeping with Dr. Appel's suggestion that in all such cases there be two teams involved, one to speak for the mother, one for the infant.

If such is not done we are in reality establishing a double standard of morality. Any nation or society which establishes a double standard of morality will collapse in ignominious ruin.

Sincerely yours,

John M. Malone, M.D.

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