

A CONTENTIOUS THING

Abortion

The Church proclaims the existence of God the Creator; our understanding of human life begins with seeing it as a work of God's hand which reaches its meaning only by being consciously lived as such.

Because God is involved in our lives like this, we hold human life to be sacred.

Several areas are put into sharp relief by this belief, and here are a few of them.

Morality: Modern people sometimes derive their moral values from within themselves - making decisions which enhance their own comfort, their own self-respect, their own opinion about the way things ought to be. If they *happen to be* people of taste, discrimination, wide sympathies, etc., they are less likely to make a mess than if they should *happen to be* crude, greedy, deranged or compulsive. The Church thinks, instead, that morality relates to God's intention, expressed in our making, that we should become like him; the Church therefore derives moral truth from God, and sees whatever diverges from what we know of him as sinful and destructive.

Freedom: The Church thinks the concept of a *free human being* must be related to God, and that human freedom cannot be the right to say or do anything whatsoever. Just as it is hard to see how a person desperately seeking servitude can be said to exercise free choice, in the same way, if the fulfilment of human life lies in God, all paths leading away from God must appear as negative paths, and as unfree. The catechism says:

There is no true freedom except in the service of what is true and just. The choice to do evil and to disobey is an abuse of freedom and leads to the "slavery of sin".

It is false to maintain that a free man is fully self-sufficient, and aims only at the satisfaction of his own interest in the enjoyment of earthly goods.

Human Value: the notion that a human life can be judged by the people who relate to it, or even the one who lives it, is also disqualified by the Church's principle. Such a thought leaves out of account the will of God, by whom and for whom our lives are created. *Wilful suicide* in this analysis becomes a disobedience which would radically disconnect us from our meaning. *Euthanasia* similarly appears as a determined refusal of our principal relationship.

Parenthood can be viewed as a human relationship closed off from God the Father. Parents could seek within themselves for the rights and wrongs of their situation, basing them on their own needs and possibilities, and their perception of the good of the family; but the life so lived would be capable of only a limited goodness and fullness; it would always fall short of the full measure of humanity, which is to reflect the glory of God.

Question: Can one life ever be judged to be expendable by another person or persons?

Traditionally, we *have* done this in judicial terms - the death-penalty - and in military circumstances - sacrificing soldiers' or civilians' lives; both of which practices are increasingly seen as abusive, and wrong, by whole societies acting together. In medical fields there is far greater confusion. That a doctor may have to "play God" by deciding whom to treat, whom to leave untreated, is a cause of fear to many; on the other hand, we have become inured to talk of killing the aged and the ill, in the name of "quality of life" or "dignity". It is even common for people to say that it would be "kinder" to kill an unborn child than to bring into the world a child who is disabled. The category of disability is, of course, negotiable. It can mean, at the outset of the development, a child who has no brain, or a child with no limbs, or a child who is likely to inherit incurable and distressing illness.

The concept of death being *preferable* to damaged life is a curious one, and the moral step which exalts the perceptions of the parents and their medical advisors over the life of the unborn child is only dimly palpable. Rapidly the will of the parents becomes more and more influential; quite treatable disorders come to be regarded as disqualifying the unborn from the human family, as the realization of what is undesirable *to the parents* becomes determinative. The wrong sex, in certain parts of the world, is already sufficient reason for aborting a baby; there is no particular reason why the wrong hair-colour should not become so. What is demanded is that the parents, and most particularly the mother, should choose freely to give birth. Should the maternal feeling of a mother for her child fail during pregnancy, the fate of that child is under threat; there is a spectral creature called *the unwanted child* which walks the corridors of this whole discourse.

The Church's stance is to recognize for each child, from the moment of conception, a right to life which nothing can alienate. The attempt to distinguish the value of one life from another is seen by the Church as a grave error:

The human right to life depends neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor does it represent a concession made by society or the state: it belongs to human nature and is inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin. The moment a positive law deprives a category of human beings of the protection which civil legislation ought to afford them, the state denies the equality of all before the law. When the state does not place its power at the service of the rights of each citizen, and in particular of the most vulnerable, the very foundations of a state based on law are undermined. As a consequence of the respect and protection which must be ensured for the unborn child from the moment of conception, the law must provide appropriate penal sanctions for every deliberate violation of the child's rights.

This statement, from the Vatican Congregation for Doctrine, attempts to canonize a principle based on natural law; but it is organically buttressed by reference to Creation. In the eyes of the Church the right to life is part of the human fabric; but the human project is only to be understood in reference to God. The teaching is thus specifically Christian, but makes its appeal in the name of common humanity.

This is not a matter of personal taste. One in five unborn babies is deliberately destroyed in this country by abortion. Five million have been aborted in the last 30 years. These are deaths, and they are deliberately chosen. The most dangerous place for a baby in Britain is in the womb.