

Addendum to the Church Doctrine Commission as reported to the 2010 PNCC General Synod [October 4-10, 2010]

Document 1: "To Live in the Spirit of God"

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As pastors and teachers we proclaim that human life is a precious gift from God. Each person who receives this gift has responsibilities toward God, self, and others. Society, by reason of its laws and social institutions, must protect and nurture human life at every stage of its existence. These beliefs stem from ordinary reason and from our faith's constant witness that life must be protected with the utmost care. This teaching has been a constant part of the Christian message since the time of the apostles.

Our first Prime Bishop, The Most Reverend Francis Hodur, understood this essential belief when he formulated the mission statement of our Polish National Catholic Church.

*"By divine imperative the sacred mission of this Church is to carry the light of Jesus Christ before the people, constantly reminding them that their aim is to **live in the Spirit of God**, in truth, love, and righteousness, seeking the truth by reading the Holy Scriptures with the aid of the accumulated wisdom of the ages." (Preamble of the Constitution of the PNCC)*

To live in the Spirit of God means that we are called as individuals, families, Church, and nation to approach the Christian life with a consistency that links together many different issues in the moral life by focusing attention on the basic value of life. This is at the heart of Jesus' message. Lovingly received by the Church, it is to be preached as 'good news' to the people of every age and culture.

Catholic moral teaching is based on *the natural law* – God's immutable, eternal law written in the heart of every person. St. Paul instructed the Church regarding this when he reminded the Romans that all people are bound by the natural law (Romans 2: 14-16). This natural law opposes theories of moral relativism (an approach to morality that is defied by situation and circumstance) that has become so popular. The natural law is most clearly summarized in The Decalogue (The Ten Commandments – Deuteronomy 5: 6-21).

When we look at whether our actions are moral or not, there are three elements that we need to use in evaluating each act:

- The Object – What you do, the act itself.
- The Intention – Why you do it.
- The Circumstances – Who, When, Where and How.

Some acts are in themselves evil, regardless of the intention or the circumstance. For example: adultery or cheating on an exam. Some acts are good, such as giving to the poor, but can be rendered evil by their intention or circumstances. For example: giving alms to the poor in order to win an election or just for appearance sake. Jesus warned us of this in the Gospel of St. Matthew 6: 1-4 where he warns the disciples about the purity of their actions. A good moral act comes when all three elements are good. If any one element is bad, then an act is morally wrong.

Our moral conscience is the barometer that God gave us that helps us determine if an action is right or wrong. It is the application of the moral law to our particular actions. Conscience is not simply a feeling or a subjective judgment: "I think it's ok." Our conscience works correctly only when it applies the objective moral law – as seen in the commandments and teachings of Jesus – to a concrete act.

In our day a wide spectrum of issues touch on the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity. Where life is involved, the work of love must be profoundly comprehensive and consistent. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, because human life is sacred and inviolate at every stage and in every situation.

Abortion

Abortion necessarily plays a central role among the important issues involving the dignity of human life. Abortion, the direct killing of an innocent human being in its formative stages is always gravely immoral. Its victims are the most defenseless and vulnerable members of the human family.

Many initiatives of help and support for people who are the weakest and the most defenseless in our society have sprung up and continue to emerge in the Christian community and in civil society. There are still many married couples who, in a spirit of generosity and responsibility, are ready to accept children as the supreme gift of marriage. Neither is there a lack of families, over and above their everyday service to life, that are willing to accept in to their care children, children in difficulty, handicapped children, and even elderly men and women who have been left alone.

Human life is sacred because it involves the creative action of God. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah recognized that the life of every individual, from its very beginning, is part of God's plan.

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." Jeremiah 1:5

Throughout the Psalms the expression of awe and wonder occur again and again in the face of God's intervention in the life of the child in its mother's womb.

"You have been my guide since I was first formed, my security at my mother's breast. To You I was committed at birth, from my mother's womb, You are my God. Psalm 22: 10-11

"On You I depend from my birth; from my mother's womb, You are my strength." Psalm 71:6

"Truly, You have formed me in my innermost being; You knit me in my mother's womb. I give thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works. My soul also You knew full well; nor was my frame unknown to You, when I was made in secret; when I was fashioned in the depths of the earth." Psalm 139: 13-14

Euthanasia

At the other end of life's spectrum, men and women find themselves facing the mystery of death. How should a person face the inevitable decline of life as they grow older? How ought one act in the face of death? The believer knows that all life is in the hands of God.

"You, O Lord, hold fast my lot." Psalm 16:5

Man is not the master of life, nor the master of death. In life and in death he has to entrust himself completely to "the good pleasure of the Most High, to His loving plan." (Sirach 41: 3-4)

"None of us lives as his own master and none of us dies as his own master. While we live, we are responsible to the Lord and when we die, we die as His servants. Both in life and in death we are the Lord's. That is why Christ died and rose again, that He might be Lord of both the living and the dead." Romans 14: 7-10

There is in the world a tendency to value life only to the extent that it brings pleasure and well-being. Suffering seems like an unbearable setback, something from which a person must be freed at all costs. In this prevailing view death is considered "senseless" if it suddenly interrupts a life that is still open to a future of new and interesting experiences.

In this context, in misguided attempts to "gently" end one's life or the life of others (i.e., euthanasia), the temptation grows to have recourse to methods that would take control of death and bring it about before its time. In truth, when examined more closely, what might seem logical and humane is found to be senseless and inhumane.

Contemporary society, which is marked by an attitude of excessive preoccupation with efficiency, oftentimes sees the costs of supporting the growing number of elderly and disabled people as too burdensome and, therefore, intolerable. These people are very often isolated by their families and society. Since these frail, disabled individuals are no longer able to actively participate in a society that values efficiency and productivity, they are thought of as having no value. As such, we are faced with one of the more alarming symptoms of what some have labeled as a "culture of death."

It is important in our reflection to distinguish euthanasia from decisions to forgo so-called "aggressive medical treatment." These medical procedures no longer correspond to the real situation of the patient, either because they are now disproportionate to any expected results or because they impose an excessive burden to the patient or their family.

In such circumstances when death is clearly imminent and inevitable, a person or his/her responsible agent(s) can in good conscience refuse forms of treatment that would only result in a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life. However, the normal care to the sick person in such cases must not be interrupted. The decision to refuse extraordinary or disproportionate means of treatment is not the equivalent to suicide or euthanasia. On the contrary, it expresses an acceptance of the human condition in the face of death.

The Relief of Pain

With advancing age comes an increasing need for medications to address pain management. Among the questions that arise is the use of various types of painkillers and sedatives for the relief of the patient's pain when this involves the potential risk of shortening life. If no other means exist and there is no other conflict in the realm of ethics or morality, then relieving pain by medications and medical procedures, even when the result may be a decreasing of consciousness and the shortening of life, is acceptable.

In such cases death is not the primary goal; it is not willed or sought after even though for reasonable motives one runs the risk of it. There is simply a desire to ease pain effectively by using the means which medicine provides.

Physician-assisted Suicide

To agree with the intention of another person to commit suicide and/or to help in carrying it out through so-called "assisted suicide" means to cooperate in and, at times, to be the actual agent of death. This is unacceptable to the person seeking to follow the moral good. St. Augustine writes, "it is never licit to kill another' even if he would wish it, indeed if he requests it, hanging between life and death. Nor is it licit even when a sick person is no longer able to live." (Ep. 204, 5)

Even when not motivated by a selfish refusal to be burdened with the life of someone who is suffering, this type of euthanasia ("mercy-killing") must be called "false mercy" and is a perversion of mercy whose author is God. True and authentic compassion leads to a sharing of another's pain, not killing the person whose suffering we cannot bear.

The pinnacle of this arbitrariness and injustice is reached when certain people, such as physicians or legislators, arrogantly ascribe to themselves the power to decide who ought to live and who ought to die. In such cases the life of the person who is weak is put into the hands of the one who is strong. The sense of justice is lost and mutual trust, the most fundamental element of every authentic interpersonal relationship, is undercut at its very root.

Using the eyes of faith when faced with the temptation to give up in utter desperation, the request, which arises from the human heart in the supreme confrontation with suffering and death, ought to be seen above all as a request for compassion, sympathy, and support in a time of trial.

Stem-Cell Research

Recent scientific research has progressed at an unimaginable pace. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of genetics and other reproductive services. The almost daily development of a steady stream of information presents problems of its own. First of all, the information itself is becoming more and more

complex and, secondly, the application of such emerging technologies frequently raises questions of ethical and moral dimensions.

Most people have had some sort of course in general biology as a part of their education. Fewer of us have had further studies at the college level. A distinct minority have had specific instruction in molecular genetics or bioengineering. Thus, we may have some general idea of the topic but are unable to grasp the core issues involved. As an example, several ethical issues were raised with the completion of the Human Genome Project. This project identifies and maps the structure of human DNA, the building blocks of human life. Issues such as the privacy of personal medical information, the potential disqualification from obtaining health and life insurance, the possibilities of identifying some aspects of future health, to name just a few, carry a moral dimension.

While the technology moves forward at lightening speed, in most instances there is insufficient time provided for understanding the advances, let alone reflect on their ethical and moral implications. Stem-cell research is just such a technology. Essentially, stem-cells are cells that have some potential to be grown into many different kinds of cells. This technology has the potential to be a means by which cells, tissues, and organs of the body can be replenished and even replaced. At face value this would appear to be a genuinely desirable use of medical science, since the goal of the research is to use the stem-cells to develop various tissues that can be used to repair damaged tissue in the human body (e.g., heart tissue to repair a damaged heart, nerve tissue to repair a damaged spinal column or to reverse the effects of Alzheimer's disease).

Upon more careful study there is the need to look at a specific ethical problem that has direct influence on our moral position. Which stem-cells should be used for research, adult or embryonic? Many scientists, religious leaders, commentators, members of the public, and politicians have weighed in on the various sides of the debate.

On one side of the discussion are the proponents for embryonic stem-cell research, citing the difficulty, time, and money necessary to obtain adult cells and coaxing them into developing other tissue. Up until most recently, this was true. The use of embryonic stem-cells, however, requires the destruction of human embryos. This action violates the primary moral imperative to respect human life from its conception.

On the other side of the debate, researchers have demonstrated that adult stem-cells can be successfully isolated and developed. As this research continues to progress, the use of embryonic stem-cells would be unnecessary and eliminate a major moral problem.

While the Catholic community has historically left open the question of when does the person receive a soul (ensoulment), it has in fact insisted that the prudent response would be to recognize that, as a practical matter, ensoulment is coincident with fertilization, the moment of the joining of sperm and egg at conception. This position, combined with the historic and apostolic respect-for-life position of the Church, is what gives support to the opposition to embryonic stem-cell research. The basis for rejecting the use of embryonic stem-cells is the recognition that the human embryo is a full human person from the moment of conception and therefore has an intrinsic dignity and value that cannot be compromised in the name of other values.

To carry our reflection to the next level, a broader ethical question emerges. Should we as a society support public policy that would continue research into high-tech, expensive therapies that might not be available to many individuals because these individuals are uninsured, underinsured, or because their insurance plan might not cover experimental procedures and treatments? The stem-cell debate may be an opportunity for us to ask if we, as a nation and as a society, should begin to focus on prevention rather than cure as our dominant health care strategy.

Conclusion

As we continue in this third millennium of Christianity, world events and Church teaching direct all our attention to the central issue of life itself as the foundation of our concern. A comprehensive, integrated and consistent moral approach to the issues of our time will provide a solid basis and a powerful challenge to love as faithful disciples of the Lord and as involved citizens. It calls to us to question all views that might be contrary to the teachings of Jesus. It challenges us to reject whatever represents the culture of

death. It challenges us to work everyday toward the formation of a culture of life – at home, at work, in our schools and in society.

How might we answer these challenges in a real and practical manner? The way we vote – the language we use – the jokes we tell – the attitudes and values we hand on to our children – the causes we support – the business practices we use – the entertainment we attend – how we are for our sick and the elderly – are only a few of the ways through which we answer these challenges. In these and other ordinary experiences of daily living we express and witness to our respect for all human life. The alternative is to become trapped in contradiction.

This consistency speaks and acts not only about abortion and euthanasia, but also encompasses our attitudes toward welfare, immigration, sexism, racism, cloning, the selling of children and women, genocide, and a host of other issues. Based on the reading and study of the Holy Scripture and with the aid of the accumulated wisdom of the ages, *Living in the Spirit of God* is a consistent ethic of life that provides the framework for confronting the moral problems of this new millennium.

Finally, the mission of our Polish National Catholic Church, articulated by our organizers with the guidance of The Most Reverend Francis Hodur, calls us to be a people of life and a people for life. The mission of our Polish National Catholic Church echoes the words of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

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