

Ethics at a Glance

Catholic Moral Tradition

One of the most sophisticated and well-articulated ethical frameworks, particularly with respect to bioethics, is that of Roman Catholicism. The *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* is a comprehensive statement of ethics pertaining to a variety of ethical issues in health care. This example of an ethical position, well grounded in the framework of a particular faith tradition, has been very influential in the general realm of bioethical thought.

The Catholic moral tradition has rich and varied roots; however, all intellectual viewpoints emphasize an abiding commitment to the promotion and defense of human dignity from conception to death. Each human life is considered sacred and deserving of a right to life. Such a right includes proper origination and development of a life with access to an adequate level of care. Also emphasized are the need to accept social responsibility in caring for the poor and the promotion of the common good. In this perspective, the common good is defined in terms of protecting fundamental rights in order that all individuals are enabled to realize their common purposes and goals (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1995).

One of the founding voices of the Catholic moral tradition is that of Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican saint who lived in the thirteenth century. He is associated with a particular interpretation of **natural law**, a philosophical tradition dating back to early pre-Socratic philosophers. In general, natural law proposes fundamental laws that have been laid down by nature itself and are discoverable through experience, observation, induction and insight into commonly shared aspects of human nature and behavior. Aquinas viewed human beings as intelligent, rational creatures, created in the image of God, whose human reason is answerable to the basic principle of doing good and avoiding evil (Catholic Encyclopedia). Good is simply that which is proper to human nature and consistent with the objective goal of human happiness. Through the application of our human reason, in combination with our natural inclination to recognize and seek the good, we are able to reflect upon and discover laws, in the form of general tendencies, that satisfy basic human needs and fulfill the divinely intended nature of human beings (Meaney, personal communication).

Aquinas proposes four basic goals of human nature: to prolong life, procreate, form community, and seek truth (Ashley & O'Rourke, 1997). For example, our natural inclination to preserve our lives creates obligations to care for ourselves and avoid actions that put us in danger of losing our lives. This respect for our

own dignity and life is rationally extended to the dignity and lives of others. Likewise, the inclination to create and care for offspring generates support for the institution of marriage and prohibits actions that would interfere with the procreative process.

Catholic natural law is, in essence, a teleological theory based on God's plan for man within the universe. However, it is not strictly consequentialist in that consequences are not seen as the sole determinant of a moral act. Instead, a moral act is determined by the act itself, the motive or intentions of the actor, and the circumstances surrounding the act. While rooted in natural law, the Catholic moral tradition has evolved various approaches to the process of moral reasoning.

Proportionalism is an approach that evolved in the 20th century with the intent of formulating a dynamic, evolutionary and more pluralistic worldview in light of the complexity of contemporary society. It relies on intuitive positive values such as love and loyalty that can be weighed through the reasoning process in any particular situation to achieve a proportionately favorable outcome. A primary strength of this approach is its acknowledgement of the very complex issues presented by rapidly evolving technologies and pluralistic social orders. Critics of this approach claim that consequences are weighed too heavily allowing for inherently evil acts to be too easily justified in some situations (Ashley & O'Rourke, 1997).

An alternative approach is that of **prudential personalism**. This ethical framework takes into account the unique manner in which human nature is embodied in each individual, the role of individual intelligence and free will in making life choices, and considerations of individual diversity in relation to our inherently communal nature. This model places friendship with God and other persons as the supreme good to which all other goods are subordinated, and rejects abstract ideals and values as the sole basis for moral reflection. Instead, proponents of prudential personalism contend that a "practical, goal-seeking, situational, contextual" methodology is possible by starting with the ultimate goal of human life and posing the question, "How does this action in its context contribute to the growth of persons in community?" However, outward consequences are assessed secondarily to inward motive and self-realization (Ashley & O'Rourke, 1997).

A strength of the Catholic moral tradition in health care ethics lies in the specific guidance given with respect to medical decision-making on a number of complex issues including abortion, assisted reproduction, end-of-life care, euthanasia and emerging genetic technologies. The primary weakness lies in its applicability as an ethical justification for people who do not share the assumptions of natural law in general or specific theological assumptions embedded within Catholic theology.

For more on the Catholic moral tradition see:

The Catholic Encyclopedia. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/>

The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Services.
<http://www.usccb.org/bishops/directives.shtml>

Philosophy Pages. Thomas Aquinas.
<http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/aqui.htm>

The Provincial Health Ethics Network.
<http://www.phen.ab.ca/materials/intouch/vol3/intouch3-08.html>