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Bioethics Matters

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Moira McQueen, *Bioethics Matters: A Guide for Concerned Catholics* (Burns & Oates, 2009, 107 pages).

The field of bioethics opens us to the deepest question of what it means to be human. Discussions on the morality of contraception, assisted reproductive technologies, embryonic stem cell research, and euthanasia lead us to reflect upon questions such as: What is man? What is our responsibility to each other? Who counts as a person? Catholic moral theology suggests these answers are discovered through the inextricable link between man as *imago Dei* and the two great commandments to love God and love our neighbor.

McQueen touches briefly upon both of these themes in *Bioethics Matters: A Guide for Concerned Catholics*, where she offers a quick overview of bioethics from a Catholic perspective for the lay person. Beginning with an outline of various ethical approaches, she explains the importance of revelation and natural law for Catholics. She addresses issues such as conscience, conversion, and personhood before moving onto practical applications of in vitro fertilization (IVF), stem cell research, and euthanasia.

McQueen's arguments against IVF are among her strongest. She affirms the teachings of *Donum Vitae* that underscore the importance of both unitive and procreative dimensions of the marital act, the rights of the child to be conceived within marriage, and the dignity of the child who is to be treated as a gift and not property to be manipulated, frozen, or discarded. She highlights the confusion surrounding the division of parenthood into biological, surrogate, and social spheres, along with the resulting impact upon the child. Emphasizing how a child conceived through the loving intimate act between spouses "is what best fits our human dignity," McQueen suggests a profound lack of respect for that dignity when a child is conceived either through rape or in a petri dish (p. 51). In both cases, the child is a gift worthy of love and respect, yet there remains a violation of human dignity in the manner of the child's conception.

Although McQueen affirms the roles of natural law and revelation in evaluating moral decisions, maintaining "that the human person participates in the divine law through his or her being" (p. 21), at times she seems to promote a somewhat antagonistic relationship between freedom and law. In her example of a deontological approach to ethics, she refers to a priest advising a couple of the Church's prohibition of contraception "without considering either the individual's circumstances or capacity to fulfill the law" (p. 13). She argues that this approach to ethics is problematic because it looks only to an external law for guidance "no matter what the consequences for the individual may be" (p. 13). In offering this example, it seems that she has in mind situations when a priest could advise a couple to use contraception. Rather than affirming the Church's teaching of the beauty and gift of sexuality, the prohibition of contraception is regarded as an imposition that restricts a person's freedom.

In her section on conscience, McQueen seems to again imply an opposition between freedom and law, arguing, "As thinking people we know we are not sheep, slavishly following the rules of others. We have the responsibility to think things through for ourselves and to reflect on church teachings" (p. 41). Although Catholic tradition places great import on the value of conscience, this conscience must be properly formed since it is always ordered to the truth. Since God's law is based in truth, there should be no conflict between conscience and the moral law. "Human freedom and God's law are not in opposition; on the contrary, they appeal one to the other. The follower of Christ knows that his vocation is to freedom" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 17).

What seems to be missing in McQueen's account is an ecclesial dimension of conscience. While she suggests the need to be informed of the Church's teachings on moral issues, she argues that "what it means to be a Christian" is to be "a disciple not of the Church and its moral theology, but of Jesus Christ" (p. 27). This seems to imply that the Church is separate from Christ and that its moral theology is a human product. Pope John Paul II highlights the nature of the Magisterium, the Church's teaching authority, in aiding each person's conscience towards "freedom 'in' the truth" as opposed to "freedom 'from' the truth." He disparages the tendency of some to set the Magisterium at odds with conscience since its goal is to help Christians to "attain the truth with certainty and to abide in it" (VS, 64). Nowhere does McQueen specifically mention the authority of the Magisterium to interpret scripture or provide moral guidance.

Towards the end of her book, McQueen affirms the "inherent dignity" of all humans and the "inviolability of every life," condemning euthanasia. She quotes *Evangelium Vitae* to the effect that euthanasia is "an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering" (p. 90). However, when she addresses Pope John Paul II's statement on artificial nutrition and hydration that argues for the continued nourishment of PVS patients, she seems to question why these patients should be given food and water when they have "no capacity whatsoever for self-awareness or for interaction with others" (p. 83). Although she allows that the Pope's statement "seems to settle a long-disputed matter" (p. 83), she does not provide any arguments in support of his conclusion. It seems that even if the PVS patient is still considered a person (which she grants), McQueen finds it odd to provide them with "artificial nutrition and hydration" since "the patient does not experience anything" (p. 83).

A stronger ontological concept of personhood might help McQueen with this difficulty. Ratzinger, Norris Clarke, and David Schindler have all written on the importance of relationality in our understanding of the person. Personhood is not simply based on rationality, but on being *in relation with God and others*. Human life has value based on its being created in the image of God and not on the basis of how much a person is able to experience. The patient in a "vegetative" state is still in relationship, even if he may not be conscious of it. He is still part of a family and community, and as one of the most vulnerable among us, he is a gift to those surrounding him, giving them the opportunity to learn what selfless love truly is.

At the end of the book, McQueen beautifully remarks on the Christian understanding of death as not "an end in itself" but rather "a transition to fullness of life in God through the power of Christ's resurrection" (p. 97). In her discussion of suffering, however, she only addresses the ethical responsibility to reduce it, rather than mentioning its salvific power. Since this is a guide specifically for "concerned Catholics," it seems important to bring up the deeper meaning of human suffering in light of Christ's salvific suffering on the Cross. John Paul II's *Salvifici Doloris* is a rich resource that can help bring hope and strength to the inevitable suffering that each of us must face. It seems a real oversight to disregard this deeply held belief in the Church.

Biotechnological developments are challenging our notions of the world and ourselves. At the intersection of technology and human life, the boundaries are becoming blurred. There is a great need for clear teaching on bioethical issues that are transforming our understanding of what it means to be human. While McQueen offers some good insights on human dignity and the problems with artificial reproductive technologies, she fails to provide both a proper ontological account of the human person and the intrinsic connection between law, freedom, and conscience necessary to evaluate current and future biotechnologies from a Catholic perspective. As a bioethical guide for Catholics, this book falls short.

