

EDITORIAL

IS THERE A CASE FOR DIRECT ABORTION?

*" Any direct attempt on innocent life as a means to an end - even to the saving of another life - is unlawful....Never and in no case has the Church taught that the life of the child must be preferred to that of the mother. It is erroneous to put the question with this alternative: either the life of the child or that of the mother...there can be but one obligation: to make every effort to save the lives of both."*



POPE PIUS XII, ALLOCUTION TO LARGE FAMILIES, NOV 26, 1951

*" I declare that direct abortion, that is abortion intended as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being."*

POPE JOHN PAUL II, EVANGELIUM VITAE

In late 2009 in Phoenix, Arizona, a mother who was deemed unable to continue with her eleven week pregnancy because of pulmonary hypertension, a condition that limits the ability of the heart and lungs to function normally, had an abortion in a Catholic hospital. The decision was made following a meeting of the hospital Ethics Board and a Catholic nun who sat on the Board was told by her bishop that she had excommunicated herself.

In an authentic Catholic hospital, a physician would have had an obligation to tell the pregnant woman of the risks of continuing with the pregnancy. She would have further been told that everything possible would be done to save both lives but a direct abortion would not be offered in a Catholic hospital. The bishop of the diocese, Thomas Olmstead, stated: " I am gravely concerned by the fact that an abortion was performed in a Catholic hospital. I am further concerned by the hospital's statement that the termination was necessary to treat the mother's underlying condition. An unborn child is not a disease. While medical professionals should certainly try to save a pregnant mother's life, by which means they do it can never be by directly killing her unborn child."

Various attempts have been made to justify direct abortion in this case and, given the circumstances, such attempts appear quite reasonable at first glance .I will examine two such attempts by well known Catholics and my criticism of their views is by no means intended as a personal attack. Dr Tina Beattie, director of a research centre for Catholic studies, writes: "the intention in this case was not to kill the child but to save the mother."

It would appear that Dr Beattie is here confusing the motive of a moral act with the intention of the moral act. There are certain moral acts, including the intentional killing of an unborn child, that are intrinsically evil acts by their very nature and not because of their motive or outcome. Certainly, the physicians were motivated by the good desire to save the life of the mother just as a man who kills his elderly father out of compassion might be motivated by the good desire to end human suffering. However, the intention in both cases remains the same: the direct killing of an innocent human being. This always constitutes a grave moral disorder.



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The motive or desire may psychologically move us to do the sorts of moral acts we choose to do. Nevertheless, it is the intention that defines the act, that gives it its moral character. John Finnis has written that "Intention is not a matter of desire, rather it is a matter of choosing ends and means, often against the tug of contrary desires." An intended evil act can never become good

because of a good motive. Intention is discussed in greater detail by Dr Joseph Shaw in this issue.

A further argument put forward by Dr Beattie is that a newly conceived human being is not yet a person. Dr Beattie appears to reject the science of Genetics in favour of the flawed Aristotelian theory of delayed animation when she writes: " The idea of ensoulment serves as a reminder that the coming into being of a human person is not an instantaneous event but a gradual process, not only in terms of the biological process of fertilisation, implantation and cellular division but also in terms of the developing consciousness of the mother and her relationship to the child."

Presumably, according to this view, if the mother is not conscious of a developing relationship with the child, this would then justify abortion at any time during pregnancy. One written response to her article is worth quoting: "Modern embryology has found that even at the two cell stage the evidence points to one cell having the potential for producing the placenta, amniotic fluid and the umbilical cord, the other cell will become the embryo and foetus. There is a closed differentiating system right from the start - a continuum between conception and the baby."

Dr Beattie uses the difficult, exceptional and ultimately tragic Arizona case to apparently justify liberal abortion laws when she writes that: " Statistics show that when women have ready access to contraception and abortion laws are liberal, abortion rates are lower than in the largely Catholic countries of Central and South America, despite the fact that abortion in such countries is often illegal and poses a significant risk to a woman's life." She does not provide evidence for her considerable claims. Has she made a study of the relevant statistics in Nicaragua where the abortion law has been tightened without significant increase in maternal mortality? Is she aware that maternal mortality rates in Chile, where abortion is illegal, are among the lowest in that region? Dr Elard Koch, an epidemiologist at the University of Chile, has written that abortion in that country was legal between 1931 and 1988 and was then outlawed. Maternal mortality peaked in 1961 and has been in decline since. The outlawing of abortion did not interrupt this decline. Furthermore, is Dr Beattie satisfied with the "liberal" abortion law in Britain that has led to over seven million abortions even though there is ready access here to contraception?

Father Charles Curran also believes that the intentional killing of innocent human life may be justified if there is a proportionate reason: "Saving the life of the mother is a proportionate reason justifying abortion."

Although Fr Curran's article is entitled "Catholics are not utilitarians," the ethics of proportionate good is indeed a type of consequentialism. The primary focus is on the consequences rather than on the intended act. According to this theory, we may intend evil for the sake of attaining a proportionate end. We may, for example, torture or murder an entirely innocent man if this leads to the release of a number of hostages. Fr Curran appears unable to accept that moral acts may be described as good and evil in and of themselves.

Curran ends his article: "It is clear that many theologians and some bishops have come to the conclusion that an abortion to save the life of the mother is a morally good act."

Dr Beattie has used the Arizona case to argue in favour of liberal abortion laws and Fr Curran argues that direct abortion may be morally good. Such statements provide good reasons to answer the question "Is there a case for direct abortion?" with a resounding "No."

Sadly, we know of women with medically challenging pregnancies who have been steered towards abortion by some health professionals. These women have a right, if they so wish, to be referred to those who are willing to support them through to birth. Very occasionally, a pregnant woman may be confronted by challenging medical circumstances but this is now exceptional, thanks to progress in medicine. This particular aspect is discussed further in this issue by Dr Dermot Kearney.

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## REFERENCES

Beattie,T "In the balance," The Tablet, 5 June 2010, pg 6-7

Curran,C "Catholics are not utilitarians," The Tablet, 5 June 2010, pg4-5

