

EDITORIAL

THE CORROSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS THROUGH MISUSE



Human rights are central to Catholic ethical reflection. The word "right" refers to what is owed to a person and when each person receives what is his or her due, there is justice. According to Thomas Aquinas, what is due to another may be due either by its very nature - that is, a natural right - or by human law, that is, a positive right. He goes on to say that the human will can, by common agreement, make a thing to be just provided it be not, of itself, contrary to natural justice, and it is in such matters that positive right has its place. If, however, a thing is, of itself, contrary to

natural right, the human will cannot make it just, for instance, by decreeing that it is lawful to steal or commit adultery. Hence it is written (Isa 10:1): "Woe to them that make wicked laws."

Similarly, Pope Benedict has said that the "Defence of man's universal right and the absolute value of the person postulates a foundation. Is not the natural law precisely this foundation?" In a major address to the German parliament, he said that "the conviction that there is a creator God is what gave rise to the idea of human rights, the idea of the equality of all people before the law, the recognition of the inviolability of human dignity in every single person and the awareness of people's responsibility for their actions."

John Finnis has written that the "maintenance of human rights is a fundamental component of the common good." So it follows that natural law and natural right may be regarded as two sides of a coin. A person has a right to life precisely because of his or her absolute value. To quote Pope Benedict, "Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will...his will is rights ordained if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is."

However, a false understanding of human rights is having a corrosive impact on the way we live now. For example, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Health, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Secretary General have all wrongly claimed a right to abortion in international law. 93 countries have been directed to change their laws and introduce abortion. Currently the laws of over two thirds of all UN member-states recognize that unborn children deserve protection. Yet pro-abortion nations use Aid and Development money to try to force through their liberal agenda. Sweden, for example, withheld all financial assistance to Nicaragua because its National Assembly failed to pass a liberal abortion law. It is surely undemocratic and unjust to subvert the will of national parliaments and courts in this way, as Lord Nicholas Windsor has rightly said.

In fact there is no right to abortion in international law but there is a right to life as set out in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Lord Windsor, Lord Alton and others are to be commended for having introduced an international initiative known as the San Jose articles to counter the false notion that there is a universal right to abortion. "Human Rights" organizations



including Amnesty International are promoting abortion especially in poorer countries and it is with sadness that we find ourselves unable to support them.

In January 2011 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that there is a "human right" to suicide but the state has no obligation to provide people with the means to commit suicide. The complainant in this case was suffering not from terminal illness but from psychosis. A false understanding of human rights leads to their erosion.

Recently, the British public has been appalled on hearing that women are having abortions based on the sex of the unborn child. Even greater disapproval was sparked by an article in *The Journal of Medical Ethics* justifying "Post-Birth Abortion." And yet, this is surely what was bound to happen when "rights" become absolute.

To be more precise, it would appear that some people have greater rights than others. Two senior midwives in Glasgow, who have a conscientious objection to abortion, have been told that they have no choice but to take responsibility for overseeing mid-term and late abortions.

What became of their rights?

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