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Teaching Morality in Contemporary Ireland

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I begin this article with a confession. On May 26 of last year, the day the results of the referendum on abortion were released, I despaired. I call this a confession, not because I was devastated by what I felt to be a great mistake by the Irish Public – I suspect hundreds of thousands of people felt as I did – but because I really despaired; I lost hope. My faith in God remained, but my faith in people had taken a serious blow. What's more, I lost faith in theology. I came to Maynooth in 2002 to study theology because I wanted to make a positive contribution to society. From that time until last year, I remained naïve enough to believe I could do so, but the events of last year have forced me to grow up a little. I still believe I can make a difference, but my expectations of the world and myself have changed. In this article, I reflect on what the Irish moralist can reasonably expect to achieve, and offer some suggestions on how best to achieve it.

SECTION I: THE RECEPTION OF MORAL TEACHING IN IRELAND

It is important that as Irish moralists we realise that most people do not care what we have to say. Two thirds of the people of Ireland voted for a woman's right to choose abortion. I do not claim to know the reasoning of each of these people, but I suspect that a big part of it was a considerable anger toward the Church. Many of the people who voted Yes might have reasoned something like this: 'Who do these men think they are, telling us what to do? They have no connection with the real world, living, as they do, in their ivory towers. It's my body and it's my choice.' My purpose here is not to parody anybody's way of thinking, but to point out to the moralist that this is the attitude of a very large portion of your audience. Now you might disagree, arguing that your audience is your congregation or your classroom. There are two problems with this approach. Firstly, it is not enough to teach morality to your congregation or students alone; we must try to influence society as

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a whole. The majority of people in Ireland today are not practicing or even nominal Catholics, and this majority is changing society: consensus, not reason, dictates policy. Secondly, you should not assume that your congregation or students agree with what you are teaching. Many of those who sit before you at Mass, for example, while regular Churchgoers, have their own ideas about morality, to the extent that if you are not careful about what you say, some of your parishioners are likely to take offence and walk out of the Church. Similarly, in the classroom or lecture hall, the moral teacher may expect a mixed response to his or her teaching.

Furthermore, moral arguments, no matter how well developed and articulated, are likely to be largely ineffective in today's society. There are a number of reasons for this. *Firstly*, as I have already indicated, society is mostly uninterested in what the Church has to say. This is partly due to the controversies around clerical sexual abuse plaguing the contemporary Church. Because of the actions of a number of men, the Church has lost a huge amount of credibility. For this reason, today's Catholic moralist faces an enormous task: to try to convince people of the immorality of certain actions, while representing a Church that has covered up the most heinous of crimes, child sexual abuse. For many people, this is simply unacceptable hypocrisy.

Secondly, a clever slogan is likely to be more effective than a good argument in steering public opinion. In the referendum on abortion, rhetoric on a woman's right to choose was powerful, as it tapped into the anger and resentment of a portion of the population that have, and are being, mistreated by a society that includes the Church. The gender pay gap and the refusal of the Church to allow women to become priests are just two of the inequalities that women face in today's Ireland. Therefore, the slogan 'a woman's right to choose' has potency, as it speaks to a woman's quite understandable resentment at two very patriarchal sections of society, business and the Church. Many people, therefore, regard pro-life arguments as arguments *against* a woman's right to choose.¹ Such arguments, no matter how reasonable, are therefore more likely to stir up resentment than to convince anybody of the immorality of abortion.

SECTION II: HOW TO MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION

I have painted rather a bleak picture here. If you were not to read further, I could leave you with the impression of hopelessness. If

1 The traditional labels for those on either side of this debate are pro-choice and pro-life. Recently, however, certain members of the pro-choice lobby have taken to calling pro-life people 'anti-choice.'

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the majority has such power, and the majority is not interested in what the Church has to say, of what use is the Catholic moralist? I struggled for a long time with this question after last year's referendum. What I offer here are the fruits of this struggle, in the belief that I am not the only one who has asked (and asks) such questions. I will first make some brief observations on ways I consider unwise to try to change things, before offering some positive suggestions.

HOW *NOT* TO MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION

As teachers of morality, it is imperative, regardless of how convinced we are of the correctness of our beliefs, that we do not condemn those who believe differently. Any suggestion that anyone who has an abortion or anyone who supported abortion by voting Yes has committed a mortal sin, is not only theologically unsound,² but also extremely unhelpful. Certain members of the Church are masters at alienating people, and this kind of talk is one example of such alienation. Even if you do not mention Hell, even the least theologically educated Irish person knows the implication of mortal sin. People, quite rightly, do not want to be told, directly or indirectly, that they are going to Hell. Not only will this kind of talk further alienate those who have already rejected the Church, it is also likely to alienate the few members that remain.

While I am not personally guilty of this kind of talk, I understand the frustration behind it. For those of us that know that abortion is wrong, this knowledge, and our inability to make people understand, is extremely frustrating. We do not just believe that abortion is wrong, but that it is horrendous. I know that this is very strong language, but we are dealing with strong feelings and how best to deal with them. This is somewhat ironic: people do things that we know to be seriously wrong, and we have to deal with *our* feelings, perhaps with *our* sin. I have no doubt that abortion is wrong, but so is rage, hostility, and resentment. I am guilty of these sins, and I do not suppose that I am alone in this. Those of us in a position to influence others cannot afford to harbour these feelings. They are bad for us and for our relations with others, and they leave us powerless to effect positive change in the world.

2 It is well known that the concept of mortal sin in Catholic theology requires three criteria: grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent, all three of which are required if a sin is to be deemed mortal. In my view, it would be extremely difficult to argue that anyone who voted for repeal had full knowledge of the wrongness of this action. People voted Yes because they believed that it was the right thing to do. We may rightly talk about culpable ignorance, but we cannot equate ignorance, even if culpable, with knowledge, as the two concepts are, by definition, diametrically opposed.

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POSITIVE SUGGESTIONS

Given the situation mentioned above, that most Irish people are not interested in what we have to say, how do we approach trying to change hearts and minds in this society? These are some suggestions.

Have realistic expectations. We lost the referendum, and if there had been another year for the Irish people to decide on this issue, and in this year the greatest Catholic moralists all got together to come up with the best possible arguments against abortion, and these arguments were widely distributed among the general public, we would probably still have lost. We must continue to seek to change the world, but we must also be patient. Change is not going to happen overnight, and things may get worse before they get better. In the meantime, we must keep the truth alive. As long as some of us know the truth, there is hope, and we must remember that three quarters of a million people in this country voted No. This was not enough to stop the repeal of the eighth amendment, but it is more than sufficient to stop the truth for being completely lost. It is our duty as Christians to hope and to work for change. However, we must be content for the moment that all we can do is to try to stem the tide of decline, and know that while our voice is the voice of a minority, the good will have the final say; that Christ's sacrifice will have, indeed, the final word.

The above paragraph is about our attitude and our expectations, but what about the practicalities of teaching morality? I have suggested that arguments are largely ineffective, so where does this leave us? I suggest that we continue to challenge people by *asking the right questions*, and helping people to find the answers themselves. We, of course, know the conclusions that we want people to reach, but they must reach these conclusions themselves. People are proud, and do not like to be told, especially in matters of morality, and especially by anyone representing the Church. So we must encourage, nurture, cultivate the truth, not force it upon people. We do this by asking the right questions.

Our questions must *challenge false assumptions*. They must help people to discover for themselves the errors in their presuppositions. For example, with regard to morality in general, there is the flawed notion, which many in this society hold, that morality is purely subjective, that there is no truth in matters of morality, only opinion. It is very important to combat this mentality, as it closes a person off to the possibility that what you are saying could be anything more than your own personal opinion, or the opinion of the Church. There are two ways that we can approach this attitude. The *first* is simply to deny that this is the case, to say

that there *is* a truth to morality, and to proceed to tell people exactly what the truth is in specific moral matters. This approach will only alienate people further.

The *second* approach I have found very useful. In my teaching, whenever I encounter this view (and there are always a few that hold it), I ask them to think of a moral issue on which they have an opinion. They do not have to share their view, or even the issue on which they are reflecting. I then ask them: Is this view the truth, or is it just your opinion? Now if they say it is the truth, I gently and respectfully point out that they have contradicted themselves, as they had previously claimed that there is no truth. If they say it is just their opinion, I suggest to them, again respectfully, that they do not really believe this; that to have an opinion is to believe that what you think is true. I leave them to think about this and I move on. I believe this method to be an effective antidote to moral scepticism. Part of its effectiveness lies in the fact that the student comes to the truth himself. The insight comes as he answers the question: Is your view true or just opinion? The teacher aids the student in realising the inconsistencies in his view about morality.

While this is a vital first step to teaching morality, we must follow it by moral teaching on specific issues such as abortion. How, then, do we convey the truth of the Church's teaching on this contentious issue, in such a way that we do not alienate people? Before I make some positive suggestions, I must regress a bit to point out some negative ways to teach on this issue. First, we must not make it all about God. People generally associate disagreement with abortion with Catholicism. If we wish to convince people of the immorality of abortion, we must take a natural law approach. We must convince people that it is evident to reason that abortion is wrong, and that this view does not depend on whether one is Catholic, or of any other faith. Teaching, therefore, about life being a gift from God and the embryo possessing a soul from the moment of its conception, will have no effect on a person who believes in neither God nor the soul.

How exactly, then, should we approach teaching this issue? Again, by asking the right questions. What is the moral status of the embryo? This is probably the most important question with regard to the issue of abortion. Another way of asking this is, is the embryo a person, and therefore due the full ethical consideration that goes along with being a person? While this is a vital question to ask, it is a hugely problematic one to answer. From a faith perspective, there is no difficulty: the embryo is a person from the moment of its conception. However, this answer will not satisfy one who has little or no faith. Is there another way to answer this question? I believe not. Firstly, there is the problem of defining,

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non-theologically, what precisely a person is. Secondly, you would have to demonstrate that the embryo from the moment of its conception possesses these characteristics. For these reasons, it seems to me unrealistic to expect to be able to answer this question.

While this would seem not to bode well for the Catholic moralist, we may ask another question. Is the embryo, as is often suggested, merely a 'cluster of cells'? Now we cannot offer an affirmative answer to this question any more than we could with our previous question. You can certainly demonstrate that the embryo is a cluster of cells, but you could, of course demonstrate that *I* am a cluster of cells. However, you cannot demonstrate, any more than you can demonstrate the personhood of the embryo, that the embryo is *merely* a cluster of cells; that it is not something more than this.

It seems that apart from faith, the discussion on the moral status of the embryo, if both sides are honest, must end in a stalemate. I must admit that apart from my faith I cannot say whether an embryo is a person or not. Similarly, the pro-choice person, if he or she has any humility whatsoever, must be able to admit that he/she cannot say for sure that the embryo is not a person.

This brings us to what I believe to be another very important question with regard to abortion. If we cannot say for sure whether the embryo is or is not a person, where does this uncertainty leave us? What is our moral obligation to the embryo in light of our inability to answer the question of personhood? I would suggest that we might put this question to a group of people in a discussion on this issue, and that we do not rush in with an answer. Let the group work it out for themselves. It might make them think differently about things, or they may challenge us with further questions, questions, for example, about our responsibility to the pregnant woman. So we question, and we try to answer questions. We have a conversation, and we try to keep the conversation alive by not drawing a hard line. We listen respectfully and we do not try to 'win' the argument. This, I believe, is the best way to positively influence people.

Earlier, I suggested that slogans are more effective than good arguments in steering public opinion. In our discussion on abortion, we may question the slogan 'a woman's body, a woman's choice.' Does this make sense? Is a woman's body her own? Perhaps. It again depends on whether or not you look at the question from a faith perspective. However, even if we say that a woman's body is her own, does this mean that she can do with it whatever she wishes? In the case of abortion, is the woman merely doing something (or allowing something to be done) to her own body, or is she doing something to someone else's body also? This body may be only beginning to form. However, if you agree that the embryo might be

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a person, is it not reasonable to think of this ‘cluster of cells’ as its body? With these questions, we challenge the slogan, ‘a woman’s body, a woman’s choice.’ We help people to look at it critically, instead of blindly accepting it. Not that people will easily accept our questions; we may prepare ourselves for a fight. However, we must fight gently, with compassion, respect, and patience, even, perhaps especially, when our opponent is unable to do so.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I believe this approach will be effective in slowly and gradually changing hearts and minds in contemporary Ireland. Not all of our students or parishioners will answer the questions the way we want them to, but at least there will be a conversation. This conversation will continue as long as we do not end it by alienating people. If we are gentle and compassionate, even if people do not see the truth right away, perhaps we will leave them with an openness to the truth. If we are careful, we may just plant a seed that will flower in its own time.

People build walls to protect them from threat or perceived threat. Many have built a wall around their hearts to protect them from a Church that they regard as their enemy. The reasons for this are myriad and complex, and I am not qualified to discuss them. I can only offer this final suggestion: When you teach, ask yourself this: Am I going to be an instrument of positive but gradual change in this world, or am I going to be, in the words of Roger Waters, ‘another brick in the wall’?³

3 Pink Floyd, *The Wall*, Harvest SHDW411, 2 x Vinyl, LP, Album, Gatefold, 1979.