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Moral Theology at the Service of People

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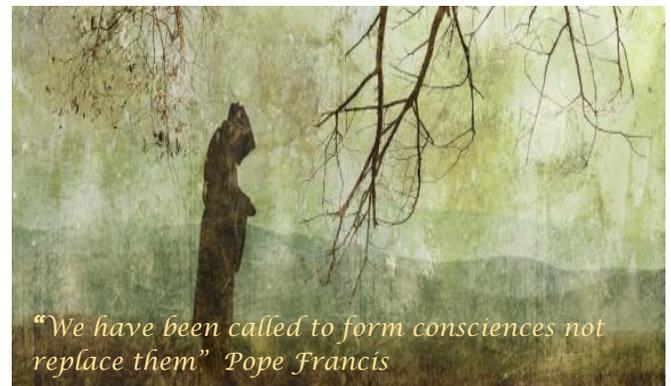
What follows has the nature of an Op-Ed. The official teacher of theology in the Diocese is the Bishop.

The other day, I heard a popular speaker, in answer to a question/statement, downplay theology in a joke, appealing to his enthralled audience. It was a successful ploy, with those present laughing in appreciation. Of course, there is bad theology which should be abandoned ('how many angels can balance on the point of a needle' theology), and there is theology which masqueraded as good, but was and is a barrier to good pastoral practice, being too abstract or demanding of perfection here and now. It is impossible, though, to speak about God and his dealings with us without being theological. This theology should be rigorous as it seeks the glory of God and the good of people.

A popular phrase of quite recent date is "operative theology" which tried to get to the theology behind some way of acting, especially with respect to pastoral practice. That is a legitimate endeavor in face of modern moral dilemmas.

Take the question of divorce, remarriage, and the reception of Holy Communion.

Some bishops and theologians try to give guidelines for pastoral practice without an in-depth consideration of conscience and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and of Pope Francis ("Church called to inform conscience not replace them"). Despite nice words (and we moderns are specialist



"We have been called to form consciences not replace them" Pope Francis

wordsmiths) the theology of conscience here is still, "Do what I tell you."

We should of course have at the same time an understanding of guidelines, which are quite different from decrees from on high.

To continue with our example of divorce, remarriage, and Holy Communion, there is often no consideration given to a theological step beyond Proportionalism.

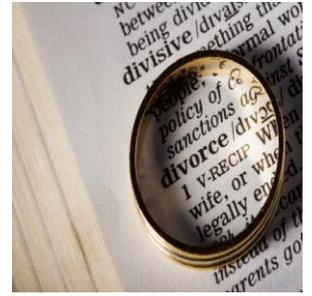
Proportionalism was misunderstood and condemned by many including the late St. John Paul II. Both sides in the dispute, though, seemed to agree that what was at stake was a univocal disvalue. Is this disvalue intrinsically evil or justifiable on occasion? But surely, we must recognize that simply because we have a word, we cannot use it like an umbrella term, putting everything underneath it, as do both adherents to the intrinsically evil side and the Proportionalist side.

Take for example male masturbation. We consider a young teenager who is obviously not sexually mature, a male given to pornography and self-pleasure, and older lonely male and a man giving sperm for fertility testing. Surely these examples are not the same reality, sometimes more or less blameworthy - the same objective immoral act with perhaps different subjective blame or even being totally excused.

The same is true for the term 'adultery'. There is one side which again puts everything under an umbrella term. They can then point to the woman 'taken into adultery' and apply the term to any act of sex outside of marriage when at least one of the agents is married to someone else. This side can also claim to be following the teaching of Jesus about divorce and his use of the term "adultery".

Look, though, at different examples. There is the business man definitively cheating on his faithful wife by having sex with his young secretary. There is the sexual addict who has sex with any willing female, married or not. There is the woman with two small children deserted by her husband

and divorced to allow him to marry a younger woman. Later, this woman finds a strong, gentle man who loves her and her children. Together they now have two of their own children. They make love with each other. Are all these cases solvable because we have a term to apply to each?



In this last example, we are not considering the beginning of the relationship. We are looking at their lives here and now. It is convenient to have an umbrella term and to have therefore a clear solution to any problem. It is convenient if it were a matter of playing a board game, but we are not. We are dealing with unique, individual persons and their relationships with God, each other, and their children. It is not a question of mercy. It is a question of taking seriously the reality of the situation in which people are immersed.

In conclusion, if marriage as covenant is properly understood, there cannot be a second marriage while the previous valid and sacramental marriage remains. But there can be, as in the case presented above, a salvific union, one filled with grace for the good of the family.

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Catholic Healthcare: A Call to Embody the Compassion of Jesus

Maria Giannotti MA, MS Bioethics

Compassionate love is the core of our healing ministry. Those who followed Jesus did so because of the compelling power of his presence among them. Before he departed he commissioned his disciples, and the community he founded, to continue his work. After his death and resurrection, their belief that Jesus was the Christ gave them a new identity. When they were sent forth into the world to do as Jesus had done, they went to work on behalf of God's reign. Ministry, then, is a necessary response of the community of faith to the transforming presence of God in its midst. That presence moves the members to go out and bring healing and reconciliation to all creation.

Our call to follow in the healing ministry of Jesus is highlighted in this touching story: A statue of Jesus, wrecked by shelling during the war, stood in a village just outside Normandy. The villagers gathered around the statue to decide its fate. After much arguing and debate someone came up with a proposal that satisfied all. The statue was cleaned up, but remained handless and a



plaque was placed at its base with the inscription "I have no hands but yours." This story illustrates how ministry calls us to stand in place of Jesus for those who need us, to be the

presence of God in the world. Whatever forms our lives take, we are called as Christians to give flesh and blood reality to



the ongoing compassion of God. Today, God depends on us to be the hands and hearts of loving compassion just as Jesus was. We have hands to touch and hold, eyes to absorb distress and convey concern. We have a voice to acknowledge fear and sorrow. We have hearts to provide an environment that is safe and secure. We have silence to convey respect and awe for the predicament faced by our patients and families.

Regardless of our walk in life, we are conduits of God's love. Healthcare providers have a unique opportunity to reveal the compassion of God in the events of our daily lives. "Each time a healthcare worker acts with compassion and dares to enter into another's pain, God's pathos is again present in the world." Bishop Michael Putney reflecting on the ethos of Catholic healthcare facility writes:

"I would hope that you could find a way of doing your work that somehow conveys to all who enter your facilities God's concern for them. God's attitude toward them; so, they will leave not only physically better off but also more deeply aware of how precious they are personally and, at the same time, how they belong to a human family which is in solidarity with them, especially if they are poor or marginalized".

Three simple values form the essence of our healing ministry, quality relationships, caring and compassion. These values provide us with a deep sense of meaning

and purpose. Compassion and caring motivate us to see and act beyond the limits of what is possible. A relationship grounded in trust and empathy allows us to be truly present to those we journey alongside. When we address those for whom we care in a compassionate way, we are continuing Jesus' healing ministry.

The following experience illustrates the power of attentive listening and urge to act out of a compassionate heart. In my first months as Director of Spiritual Care in a Catholic hospital, I was privileged to be a part of something extraordinary. One of our patients was engaged to be married later in the year. The reality, however, was that she was only days away from death. She confided in the Chaplain that what she longed for most was to be married to the man she loved. In hearing her words the Chaplain was moved to tears. She called and asked if I thought we could pull a wedding off in the next few hours. Through the providence of God and some creative networking we had a wedding underway in a matter of hours. We found her a wedding dress, did her hair and makeup, had a beautiful bouquet made up at the local florist, the bakery down the street made us a wedding cake and all was set. Our priest performed the ceremony and the chaplain took photographs. All staff from the unit participated in the wedding. It was one of the most moving ceremonies I have ever witnessed. The Chaplain was truly present to this young woman in her journey. The values of caring and compassion moved us to see and act beyond what seemed impossible. With an attentive heart and a creative response, we brought



hope to what appeared to be a hopeless situation.

Our attentiveness and response to her longing, not only made life better for our patient and her family, it also made life more meaningful for us. That young woman touched us in a way that changed us. On that day, we stood a little taller, we walked a little softer and we radiated love with a lot more compassion. On that day, we were transformed. The amazing thing about compassion is that when one acts compassionately, peace comes to both, the giver and the one who receives.

Compassion humanizes our tasks and makes us true disciples of Christ. We are at our best when we listen carefully and respond with compassion and attentiveness. One of my mentors taught me that caring is a two-way street; you cannot touch the soul of another without your soul being touched as well. If we are committed to continuing Christ's healing ministry and living our mission, we open ourselves to being changed by our patient-caregiver relationships. *Maria Giannotti B.Ed, MA, MS Bioethics - is consultant with CCBI-A and a sessional lecturer for the Faculty of Nursing University of Windsor.*

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