

# THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO MORAL ISSUES

*The Church is the guardian and authentic interpreter of the Faith and of a natural morality which is based upon a full understanding of the human person and finds its confirmation in Holy Scripture. Vatican II reiterates the Church's responsibility in the following terms: 'It is Her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the Truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by Her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself.'*

## INTRODUCTION

Comment on public concern over the degeneration of social behaviour in Britain and other Western countries occupies many column inches in our newspapers and magazines. Discussions and interviews abound on television and radio. Recently a bishop remarked that the absence of moral standards today is not so much due to ignorance of what is right or what is wrong but rather to an attitude of *what does it matter anyway?* On the other side of the Atlantic an American priest writing about what he calls post-modern Catholicism, reflects on the 'freedoms' which have undermined decent behaviour in modern society. Twentieth-century man has rejected the moral imperatives *without which the essential human condition contradicts itself*. However, among politicians, educators, doctors, psychologists, reformers and others the debate rages on - while the situation worsens. Sensational news-stories beget more sensational news-stories which seek to penetrate the already satiated minds of bewildered readers and listeners - be they angry or apathetic.

Now, into this cauldron of confusion, comes a voice of sanity in the form of a book about Catholic moral teaching on family and medical ethics. The book is called *The Moral Dignity of Man*. The author is Fr. Peter Bristow who has carried out extensive pastoral work (especially among students) and who was for ten years chaplain to the Southwark (London) branch of the Guild of Catholic Doctors. Rarely could the publication of a book have been better timed. If *moral*, in relation to behaviour, is defined as *virtuous conduct* and if *dignity* is defined as *true worth or excellence* then it could be said that man's true worth (or excellence) finds its expression in virtuous conduct. Conduct, that is, which is consistent with God's natural law. *The Moral Dignity of Man* should be required reading for the aforementioned politicians, educators, and reformers because herein is the essence, not so much of the problem (which is debated *ad nauseam*) but of the solution (which has been studiously ignored). Any Catholic who buys the book should, after reading it, consider donating it to his or her Member of Parliament. Meanwhile, circulation of this synopsis will at least serve to bring the book's contents to the attention of many disillusioned and confused Catholics who need clear statements of truth to combat the daily plethora of deception and distortion to which they are subjected.

In the following paragraphs we summarise, and give extracts from, the contents of Fr. Bristow's informative book. (Note: all direct quotations are in italics, followed by the relevant page number).

## PRECEPTS - OR PERMISSIVENESS?

Many of today's moral conflicts concerning family values and medical ethics have their basis in different conceptions of man and the nature and purpose of human life. Fr. Bristow argues that contemporary utilitarianism and the various forms of permissive morality are insufficient for dealing with these matters and that only a natural law morality is adequate to the needs and dignity of the human person.

*The Moral Dignity of Man* is in four parts. The first part examines the background to the present situation and gives the general principles of Catholic morality; the second part deals with various aspects of family morality; the third part with medical ethics and the short fourth part deals with ecology. The opening chapter of Part One focuses on secular morality and the quality-of-life mentality. Indeed, in his Introduction, the author refers to the foundations of moral theology and ethics being *at the eye of the contemporary storm* (p.7). Furthermore: *morals are .... about personal responsibility and accountability for actions .... and the consequences they bring with them* (p.7). This is a responsibility, states Fr. Bristow, which *cannot be properly discharged without adequate and constant formation in which the role of the Church is paramount*, (p.7) In this context he quotes Vatican II's reiteration of the Church's task in these words: *It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is in Christ and . . . to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself*, (p.7)

Continuing to set the scene Fr.Bristow describes morality as *the norms and values governing the behaviour of man in his present state, striving to be what he ought to become, according to his true end in God.* And so it is *intimately tied up with a proper understanding of the human person and his unique dignity,* (p.9) This, we might say, is the heart of the matter.

## **DIGNITY AND PURPOSE**

Part One continues with an examination of the dignity and purpose of the human person. *Those who say that man's dominant characteristic is freedom and that it is up to him to choose his end and make of himself what he will overlook the fact that man's ultimate end is given to him, not selected by him . . . and his freedom is limited to accepting it or rejecting it.* (p.21) In a reference to original sin Fr.Bristow points out that *morals is about man, not simply as he is now but as he ought to be according to his end and purpose. This can be glimpsed . . . by reason alone but it can only be fully and certainly known by Christian Revelation,* (p.22)

This section is followed by chapters on Natural Law and Human Rights; The Light and Truth of Conscience (which includes a section devoted to the magisterium and *Humanae Vitae*) and The Roots of Permissiveness. This latter chapter ends with a section headed The Inevitable Conclusion in which the author emphasises the need to base morality on *an adequate understanding of reason or knowledge and the full truth about man . . .* (p.61) The erroneous supposition that good, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder or that assessment of *good and bad* equates to personal approval or disapproval leads to subjective moral judgements which in turn lead to confusing and contradictory conclusions. *With an intellectual background such as this,* writes Fr Bristow, *it is hardly remarkable that secular contemporary morality is unable to establish any absolute moral values or standards . . . and seems to assume that each man is his own moral judge . . .* (p.61)

## **THE DOMESTIC CHURCH**

Part Two of the book focuses on the sacramental nature of marriage and the family's place in, and contribution to, society. It includes considerable reference to *Humanae Vitae*, the contraceptive mentality and the uses, and abuses, of sexuality. The three chapters comprising this part of the book put into clear perspective these key issues which are among the most controversial when it comes to the arena of public debate. It is in these matters perhaps more than any others that the Church's teaching is most misquoted, misunderstood or just blatantly ignored. Fr.Bristow meets the challenge head on. *Today we are . . . told that the traditional . . . family is dying out and cannot . . . be considered the norm for living, because it is being replaced by other life-styles. The Christian response is that marriage is divinely instituted . . . for the benefit of the person and society and its break-up cannot but be detrimental to man. The family unit constitutes the most basic communion of persons from which society itself is made up . . . therefore the state of whole nations and generations depends directly on family life. The joy, fruitfulness and stability of domestic life should be passed on to society as a whole and to future generations through the children,* (p.62) Thus, family life becomes a source of great treasure and value both for society and the Church.

The author goes on to trace clearly the Catholic ethos and the Church's authoritative teaching in his sections on: personal love in marriage; unity, indissolubility and fidelity; procreation and parenthood; and, the family, the Church and society. For example, he quotes *Casti Connubii* when referring to the marriage partnership: *ultimately there must be an authority which is vested in the husband as the head, while the wife is the heart of the family, so that as the first holds the primacy of authority so the second can and ought to claim the primacy of love.* (p.67)

## **RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTHOOD**

A little later in his book Fr.Bristow touches on the responsibility of parenthood and poses the searching question: *How is it responsible to have a large family?* The answer is provided in these words. . . *the value of the bigger family is understated in our time. In general, children in a large family will more easily learn generosity and fraternity, sociability and service towards others. Consequently it is a greater gift to give children more brothers and sisters than to give them extra material benefits beyond that which is necessary,* (p.69)

We are reminded that in *Familiaris Consortio* St Thomas's words are quoted in reference to the sacrament of marriage: *Some only propagate and guard spiritual life with a spiritual ministry: this is the role of the sacrament of Orders: others do this for both corporal and spiritual life, and this is brought about by the sacrament of marriage, by which a man and a woman join in order to beget offspring and bring them up to worship God.* (p.73) A mutual self-giving and commitment follows. This has a wider effect than just the *ecclesia domestica* for, as Fr.Bristow indicates, *society needs the family and the family needs society.* Each has a responsibility to the other. *The family's task is to contribute to the building of a stable, healthy and neighbourly society through the harmony and self-giving of its members and the balanced education of the children . . . If society needs healthy families then the family needs the support of society and the State. It is in the long-term interest of the latter to foster the traditional family unit by such things as child and even housewife benefits, family housing and ensuring that tax and mortgage allowances favour married people and not those who are co-habiting; by the abolition of free contraceptive advice and suchlike permissive legislation and the portrayal of stable family life in the mass media and especially on television,* (pp.73,74) Part of the responsibility of parenthood is to defend family values. *Were they not to take an active stance in fulfilling this role families would be the first victims of the evils that they have no more than noted with indifference,* (p.74)

### THE CONTRACEPTIVE MENTALITY

In the next chapter Fr.Bristow draws attention to the fact that the contraceptive mentality can be traced back to the Roman Empire. However, it was during the twentieth century that it became organized and widespread. One of the results of this development has been the opposition to, and misunderstanding of, the Church's teaching contained in *Hu.rn.anae Vitae*. In a section headed Corollaries and Consequences Fr.Bristow reminds the reader that *contraception intrinsically contradicts the moral order* and that it is no surprise that: *The years that have gone by since Paul VI's condemnation of contraception . . . have confirmed the Church's judgement in many ways.* (p.83) This is seen, for example, in the wave of permissive and marital infidelity as well as in the adverse physical and mental side effects of the pill. It follows, therefore, that in his final chapter in Part Two Fr.Bristow should treat of the uses and abuses of human sexuality and marriage. And to put the topic in its correct context he states: *The principles of Catholic sexual morality are drawn from Scripture and the constant teaching of the Magisterium.* (p.86)

In this section the author deals with unnatural acts, impure thoughts, extra-marital sex and co-habiting, divorce and, by contrast, chastity and virginity. In fact, the last paragraph of this part of the book provides something of a light at the end of a very dark tunnel; *Chastity and virginity, of which Christians have always given witness, are a sign to the world of our times. They serve as a signal and indication of the path humanity and the family must re-learn if they are to conquer the problems spoken of in this chapter and if man is to live according to his dignity,* (p.96)

### MEDICAL ETHICS

*Authority over human life belongs in its fullness to God who alone can give it and take it away and in whose likeness it has been made.* With these challenging words Fr. Bristow begins the third part of his book dealing with the aspects of medical ethics which today confront the Church and society. These are the topics - controversial and sensitive - which most quickly arouse emotional and uninformed responses. The author, with great clarity and precision, sets out the moral teaching of the Church . . . Abortion: *From the point of view of dignity and rights . . . the really important moment for Christians is, and always has been, conception rather than birth,* (p.99) Duties to Bodily Life and Genetic Engineering: *It is not so much that we need a new 'theology of technology' to deal with these developments as that we need to apply the existing and unchanging moral principles to mutable medical and biological reality.* (p. 107) Euthanasia, the Treatment of Pain and Drug Abuse: . . . *The Catholic Church holds that no human being is the owner of life, his own or others, but only the steward, and hence euthanasia like suicide is a serious attack on the fundamental right and duty to protect human life and the human person,* (p.116) Human Life and the New Reproductive Technology: *Catholicism teaches that technological progress must above all respect the moral imperatives of human life and dignity . . . Technology must, therefore, serve man and not man technology,* (p. 125) The Drama of Moral Decisions; Co-operation in Evil: *The first principle of the moral law requires us to do good and avoid evil, but in the complex circumstances of today one must be vigilant to avoid co-operating in the evil of others . . . Just as one can be an accomplice in a crime without actually carrying out the action, so one can share in the guilt of another by willing or condoning their evil.* (p. 134)

Within the parameters of this wide-ranging subject matter Fr. Bristow tackles: the humanity of the embryo; the pro-abortion lobby; transplant surgery; sterilization; genetic disorders; care of the dying; in vitro fertilization; experimentation; the marketing of contraceptives; immoral laws and tolerance. And he notes, significantly, . . . *the Church bases her stance on the transcendent value of man over technology, and the transcendence of the moral law over man. Man is not the arbiter, much less the creator of the moral law and he must ever be guided by it if true progress is to be made in the long run. The Church claims to interpret that moral law both for individuals and for States.* (p. 133).

### **ECOLOGY AND MORAL LIFE**

The final part of Fr. Bristow's book is concerned with man and the environment. Before going on to look briefly at *genuine Christian ecology* he quotes our present Holy Father: *The commitment of believers to a healthy environment for everyone stems directly from their belief in God the Creator, from their recognition of the effects of original and personal sin, and from the certainty of having been redeemed by Christ,* (p. 142)

In conclusion, the author draws together the many threads of this important book with these words: *A human life is made up of many mediate and intermediate ends, but there can only be one final end. Man is called to keep this end in view, and conquer the threefold lust so as to enjoy the glorious freedom of the sons of God. Sin and concupiscence will only be finally overcome by the redemption of the body and of the whole material world. The ultimate goal of the Universe will be attained when each person receives their spiritualized body from the one who says, 'Behold I make all things new'.* (cf Apoc.21.5) (p. 147).

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[www.catholicassociates.com](http://www.catholicassociates.com)

e-mail: [mfandra@hotmail.com](mailto:mfandra@hotmail.com)