

the sector speaks

catholic ethics is different

As an ethicist I have over the years read thousands of articles and attended hundreds of meetings in which different people have expressed different views about such matters as sex outside marriage, divorce, abortion, research involving the destruction of embryos, sex selection as part of IVF, and euthanasia.

Reflecting on these many voices over many years has convinced me that our society is involved in an ongoing war about ethics. On one side of this conflict, there are a number of ethical systems which I collectively call Traditional Ethics. Catholic ethics is one of these traditional ethical systems. On the other side of this conflict, there is a number of other ethical systems which I collectively call the New Morality.

In this article, I will explore where these different ethical systems have come from. The central structure of Traditional Ethics is different from that of the New Morality, and I will set out the central ideas which shape these different types of ethics. While recognising some of the limitations of Traditional Ethics, I will next argue that it still possesses a number of significant advantages over the New Morality. Finally, I will note some of the implications from all this for our attitudes and practice within Catholic health and aged care.

... the challenge is to get the balance right ... just as the danger in Traditional Ethics is too much responsibility, the danger in the New Morality is too much autonomy.

Before I do so, let me make one more introductory comment. When people become involved in Catholic health and aged care, they sometimes ask why Catholic services have different ethical standards. This is the answer: While Catholic ethics continues to develop, its basis is in Traditional Ethics. This is simply different from the New Morality which is now mainstream.

origins

Different civilisations around the world are based on slightly different but often very similar forms of Traditional Ethics. Catholic ethics continues to develop the Traditional Ethics which has been at the heart of Western civilisation from the beginning. This Traditional Ethic has two sources. One of these is Greco-Roman philosophy. The other is Judaeo-Christian revelation. We sometimes call these reason and faith – that is, what we can learn through human reason and what we can learn through divine revelation. Bringing these two sources together in a coherent ethical system was one of the great achievements of Western civilisation.

The New Morality is much younger. It can be traced back only to what is called the Enlightenment. This was a project of European intellectuals which began in the late seventeenth century. They believed that for too long the world had been bound by superstition and fear. Casting religion aside, they sought a new basis for ethics in reason alone. Many thoughtful people hold that they did not succeed. In *The Quest for a Moral Compass*¹, for example, philosopher Kenan Malik titled one of his chapters "The death of God, the end of morality".

central ideas

The central structure of Traditional Ethics is captured in the simple phrase "responsibility with exceptions". The purpose of Traditional Ethics is to teach us our responsibilities. These include our responsibilities to one another, to ourselves, to society and the common good, and to the environment. However, Traditional Ethics is also realistic in that it identifies some limits and exceptions to our responsibilities. While we are called to be generous in our service of others, for example, Traditional Ethics recognises that we cannot be all things to all people.

One challenge of course is to get the balance right – to be clear about responsibilities, but also to recognise the limits of responsibility. A common failing in Traditional Ethics is to call us to be too responsible – to set out too many responsibilities, and not to recognise sufficiently the limits of these.

By contrast, the central structure of the New Morality is captured in the phrase "autonomy with exceptions". While Traditional Ethics is primarily about what we should do, the New Morality is primarily about our autonomy and what we would like to do. Of course the New Morality also recognises some limits and exceptions to our autonomy. For example, we cannot do what we want if doing so would hurt other people or harm society or damage the environment.

Once again, the challenge is to get the balance right. And just as the danger in Traditional Ethics is too much responsibility, the danger in the New Morality is too much autonomy. Even legitimate and very reasonable exceptions are sometimes forgotten as questionable arguments are developed to justify our doing whatever we want to do. Autonomy almost without limits is a real danger in the New Morality.

strengths and limitations

Neither Traditional Ethics in general nor Catholic ethics in particular is perfect. Even so, Catholic ethics has a number of significant advantages over the new Morality.



fr kevin mcgovern - director of the caroline chisholm centre for health ethics

Firstly, Catholic ethics has a basis for human dignity which is both profound and inclusive. We hold that each and every human being must be treated with great respect because each and every human

being is created in the *imago Dei*, the image and likeness of God [Genesis 1:27]. This vision also challenges us to reflect so that we come to see how the divine image is found in an unborn baby who has been diagnosed before birth with a life-limiting condition, in an adult with intellectual disabilities, in an older person who now has dementia – or even in some of our colleagues and family members who can be difficult at times.

do but also on who we should be. It asks us to consider not only our actions but also our being. It asks us not only to do the right thing, but also to develop good character. To help us in this quest, it has detailed accounts of the various virtues. We are invited to be prudent and just, brave and temperate, and to grow in faith, hope and love.

By contrast, the New Morality generally has very little to say about the ethics of being or the virtues. There are some shining exceptions, but in general the New Morality focuses only on what we should do.

A fourth advantage of Catholic ethics is that it is not simply individualistic. It has a profound sense that we are always social beings who live in community within society. Catholic ethics has a developed understanding of the common good, and it consistently reminds us of our responsibility

“... one of the most powerful signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church is the capacity of our ethics to change ...”

The New Morality usually bases human dignity on the actual capacity to reason. In other words, it says that we matter ethically only if we are currently able to reason. This of course puts at risk many vulnerable people, particularly those at the beginning and end of life. Based on this logic, for example, two secular ethicists named Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva argued in 2012 that newborns cannot be considered persons in the morally relevant sense, and therefore that it is acceptable to terminate them not only before birth but also after birth.² They prefer to call this after-birth abortion rather than infanticide or murder.

A second advantage of Catholic ethics is that it is a teleological system. Catholic ethics recognises who we are; gives an account of who we should be; and then sets out steps which allow us to move from who we are to who we should be. This is the Young Christian Workers' method of See, Judge and Act. It challenges us to become more than we are. It is at once a great strength of Catholic ethics – and a great challenge.

The New Morality is not teleological. Alasdair MacIntyre noted this in *After Virtue* which was one of the great ethics books of the twentieth century. MacIntyre recognised that the Enlightenment project which gave rise to the New Morality did not have any vision of the human *telos* or who we should strive to become. This, he said, is “why their project of finding a basis for morality had to fail.”³

Thirdly, Catholic ethics focuses not only on what we should

to contribute to the common good. By contrast, the New Morality tends to be a highly individualistic ethic, with very little sense of the common good.

Catholic ethics also reminds us of the role of government in securing the common good. It conceives of an activist government which is active above all in seeking the common good. The New Morality can be associated with different visions of the role of government. However, it mostly puts forward a vision of limited government. An individualistic ethic with a limited sense of the common good, it resonates with the aphorism that “the government which governs best, governs least”. Catholic ethics of course protests that this vision of limited government mostly disadvantages the most vulnerable members of society.

Both Catholic ethics and the New Morality offer an applied ethics in such important areas as social ethics, bioethics, sex and sexuality, marriage and family, business ethics, and environmental ethics. In my opinion, however, in many of these areas Catholic ethics offers a more profound vision based on a deeper understanding of the nature of reality.

Of course Catholic ethics has its limitations. Here are three:

Firstly, Catholic ethics can be very authoritarian. Its methodology can be too top-down, while paying insufficient attention to what is coming from the bottom-up. At least sometimes, it can be too ready to speak, and not ready enough to listen. At least sometimes, it can simply tell

catholic ethics is different cont.

people what to do, without offering sufficient explanation and without trying to persuade and motivate.

A second problem is that it has been slow to change, even when change was needed. For me, one of the most powerful signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church is the capacity of our ethics to change, even if this change is sometimes very slow.

Finally, it may be that there needs to be some reappraisal of church practices related to sex and sexuality, marriage and family. Pope Francis has called Synods in 2014 and 2015 to allow the Church to reflect on this. While the Church is unlikely to change its values or its principles, it may develop new language to communicate its message or new guidelines for the pastoral care of people who are gay or lesbian, or divorced Catholics who have remarried outside the Church.

implications

What does all this mean in practice? Let me draw six implications.

Firstly, we should be proud of our Catholic ethics. The Catholic Church is often criticised nowadays, particularly because of our failures related to the sexual abuse of children. While humbly admitting these failures, we should also recognise that Catholic ethics is one of the many good things within the Catholic Church. And when there are public debates about ethical matters, we should be ready to offer a Catholic perspective as a worthwhile contribution to community discernment.

Secondly, we should work for appropriate reappraisal within our ethics. If there are some areas where we are missing the mark, let us recognise this, and let us work for appropriate change. For if our ethics misses the mark in any area, that makes it harder for people to see its many strengths in many other areas. We show our love for Catholic ethics by working for its reform where this is appropriate.

Thirdly, let us value multiculturalism. The great Australian vision of multiculturalism holds that this land is not threatened but rather enriched by the diverse cultures that

exist here. Multiculturalism also provides space for our Catholic institutions to be different. It allows us to make our distinctively Catholic contribution to the Australian common good.

Fourthly, we must uphold conscientious objection. Conscientious objection is the ethical consequence of multiculturalism. In a multicultural society, there will be some ethically contentious matters which might be acceptable to many people but are still unacceptable to some people. Conscientious objection ensures that those with an ethical concern are not forced to do something which is against their conscience. *The Code of Ethical Standards for Catholic Health and Aged Care Services in Australia* affirms conscientious objection.⁴ We show respect for our staff by advising them that we will never require them to participate in anything which they consider to be wrong.

Fifthly, let us continue to promote the common good. Our vision of the common good is one of the great strengths of Catholic ethics. Let us play to this strength by continuing to educate people about the concept of the common good, and by continuing to challenge ourselves and all people to commit ourselves to contributing in real ways to the common good.

Finally, let us play to another of our strengths by continuing to promote the virtues.

In Catholic health and aged care, we often speak about virtues in the values of our organisations, as we call people to compassion and hospitality, to respect and justice, to stewardship and integrity. People find these values and virtues attractive, inspiring and challenging. And these values and virtues contribute significantly to the Catholic identity and the Catholic mission of our organisations. Catholic ethics is different.

Vive la différence!

This is an edited version of a presentation given by Fr Kevin McGovern at the 2014 Catholic Health Australia conference.

-
- 1 Kenan Malik, *The Quest for a Moral Compass: A Global History of Ethics* (London: Atlantic Books, 2014), 239-253.
 - 2 Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva, "After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?" *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39, no. 5 (May 2013): 261-263; online at <http://jme.bmj.com/content/early/2012/03/01/medethics-2011-100411.full.pdf+html>
 - 3 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 54.
 - 4 Catholic Health Australia, *Code of Ethical Standards for Catholic Health and Aged Care Services in Australia* (Red Hill, ACT: Catholic Health Australia, 2001), Part II, 7.19, p. 59; online at <http://www.cha.org.au/images/resources/Code%20of%20ethics-full%20copy.pdf>