

## Life Issues in a Pluralistic Culture

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; nor woman neither . . .

### Hamlet, II, ii, 310-319

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The modern age shares too little Hamlet's admiration for man and too much his disdain for man. We, like Hamlet, seem depressed and lost and unable to delight in the wonders of this world, perhaps because we, too, fail to embrace our duties and to act as we ought. Whatever the reason, the modern age seems not to experience awe at the thought of human powers and human nature. We take some pride in man's technological advances but these hardly balance our experience of and fear of man's inhumanity to man. Our century in particular has given us reason to think that man is "the paragon of animals" only insofar as he surpasses all other animals in his cruelty and bloodthirstiness. The millions dead because of holocausts, wars, and of famines that could be averted have brought us to have a dismal evaluation of human nature, an assessment confirmed by daily reportings of individuals who randomly commit horrific brutalities.

The rot in the state of Denmark, rather than serving to galvanize Hamlet into action, cast him into a state of doubt and depression. Our age exhibits the same signs; the offenses against life in this century have not served to increase our respect for life or our zeal to protect life. Rather, we have sunk into a state of lethargy and indifference, and as in the state of Denmark, the pile of corpses only gets higher. Indeed, abortion and euthanasia provide the quintessential evidence that we have lost our reverence for life. Some ethicists -- highly respected and published by the most prestigious presses -- now argue that some forms of animal life have greater value than the lives of some humans suffering various debilitating conditions. In the name of respecting life, researchers and physicians

seem to be salivating over the prospect of using fetal tissue to treat a variety of diseases.

There is a paradox or contradiction at the very heart of our approach to human life. We go to great lengths to preserve human life and to diminish human suffering, yet at the same time we increasingly treat human life in such a cavalier and utilitarian fashion that one wonders why we continue to make herculean efforts to improve the human lot. One suspects that it is more a desire to advance and test our technological prowess or just mere sentiment that leads us to dig small children out of wells and to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep tiny neonates alive. A residue of the grand and noble vision of man that informed Hamlet's musings lingers but it is rapidly disappearing.

In respect to the "life issues" the pluralism of our culture, is not a benign multiculturalism; it is not just a matter of "my people" wearing its national costumes and doing its national dances or a question of whose heroes we are going to celebrate, whose novels and histories we are going to read. It is not a matter of protecting such fundamental rights as the free practice of religion, nor a matter of fundamental fairness such as public funding for private schools.

Pluralism in this case goes to the very heart of existence; it strikes at the most fundamental of all rights, the right to life. Pluralism in the life issues means that some people approve of the taking of innocent human life, some people do not; some approve of the making of babies in laboratories and others do not; some people approve of the killing of the dying and infirm and others do not. These values are not just pluralistic but contradictory. This is not a tolerable pluralism. We no longer share a common vision of man and of life from which we can then construct a social system protecting man's fundamental rights. Having lost the vision of man that Hamlet articulates, we have also lost the values derived from this vision.

There many reasons, often interrelated, why we in the modern world succumb to the temptation to destroy human life, especially the unborn, weak and dying. Here, hoping to be as comprehensive as possible, but knowing that some reasons likely have been missed, I shall list some fifteen of these reasons that our society is losing the will to do what it ought in protecting human life.

First, the secular world has completely lost any sense that there is a life beyond this one. Many Christians, too, have an extremely diminished -- if any -- sense of our ordination to another life. This leads to distortions that cause us to devalue life. For instance, we come to think that what happiness we shall ever experience, we must experience in this life. Confusing happiness with pleasure, we have lost sight of an understanding of happiness that links it with the virtuous life, with the pursuit of what is good and noble. Few believe that they will be rewarded in the next life for the good that they have done in this. Thus, we labor to ensure that our lives are filled with pleasure and we seek to avoid all pain. We largely live in accord with a utilitarian ethic that leads us to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, even at the expense of the lives of others. Thus, women and men not prepared to shoulder the responsibilities of parenthood because these impinge upon the goals they have for their own lives, feel justified in taking the lives of the unborn. Those who are dying see no reason to endure the pain and suffering of their condition.

Second, we have lost the understanding that self-sacrifice has a value and that it can be ennobling. Being so concerned to ensure our own happiness, we have lost the sense of the noble gesture through which we make some great sacrifice for something of great importance and worth. It used to be thought that women would lay down their lives for their children (may Gianna Beretta Molla's cause prevail!), but now women routinely kill the children within their wombs. They are thought to be stupid to think of making a sacrifice for another; they are thought to be enlightened and responsible when they have an abortion so that they might not inconvenience themselves. We think it unreasonable to ask children to make

sacrifices for their dying parents and do not object when they hasten them towards euthanasia. The neglect of many in the Church to preach the heroic lives of the saints has left the young without the exemplars they need.

Thirdly, the secular world certainly has no appreciation for suffering, but Christians, as well, have lost the love of the cross. Again, if we had a sense of the reality of the afterlife, we might better be able to embrace our crosses. Christianity has become a religion that in practice often seeks to eliminate all pain rather than to teach us how to live with and embrace pain and sometimes even to seek the pain that is an inevitable part of a life well-lived. One of the primary (though not only) reasons for the appeal of euthanasia is that no one likes to suffer and few know how to offer their sufferings up and to unite them with those of Christ. The failure to preach penance and fasting may contribute to this phenomenon; we have not learned to endure hardship.

Fourth, the sense of sin has nearly disappeared. The modern age has a "victim" mentality; we feel that we have suffered or been discriminated against and thus should be excused for whatever wrong we might do. We have no sense that we are ultimately accountable for our actions, no fear of impending punishment. Guilt and fear are unacceptable motivating factors in the modern age and most of those who represent the Church have abandoned mention of judgment day. They think mention of sin is to "lay a guilt trip" on others and prefer to motivate by love rather than by fear, a laudable goal in many ways but not one without its dangers. A gospel of repentance and redemption is rarely preached, for, if we are not sinners, we do not need to be saved. As victims, what we need is consolation and assistance.

Fifth, there is widespread belief that there are no objective truths, that there are no moral absolutes binding on all. We believe one opinion is as good as another, one value as good as another. All morality, all law, is the imposition of someone's morality on someone else. As Clarence Thomas' hearings manifested, we have

lost entirely an understanding of and appreciation for the concept of natural law. We think all law is man-made and arbitrary. Indeed, in defense of abortion, one feminist said that she refused to be subject to "anachronistic laws of nature."

This refusal to recognize the demands of objective reality dovetails with our fifth point. We think that any constraint, even the constraint of objective reality, is an infringement upon our freedom. As recent encyclicals repeatedly note, our age has a corrupt sense of freedom. The freedom to choose seems to be valued above all other goods. We have no sense of the need for freedom from sin or that freedom brings with it immense responsibility. We make some reluctant concessions for the sake of the public peace but basically we want to do what we want, when we want, and even think the state exists in large part to ensure us the possibility of fulfilling all our wants. It is almost a Nietzschean view of man that dominates, a view that we are answerable only to our own passions and that reason should be employed to help satisfy the passions rather than to control and guide the passions.

Women want to be free to choose and value that freedom over the objective fact that what they are choosing is to kill their babies. Those who would practice euthanasia justify it by claiming that the patient would not choose to continue life in certain circumstances. The morality of the act of euthanasia seems to many to rest simply in the question: "What does the patient wish?", not in the question: "What is the moral action here?" Euthanasia, assisted suicide and suicide are, thus, rapidly gaining strength as legitimate choices.

This mistaken view of freedom has also crippled our ability to outlaw such practices as pornography and to put limits on obscenity in the media and the entertainment world. Obscenity simply serves further to diminish our sense of the value of human life -- we peddle pictures showing human beings in postures and acts that we find offensive for animals.

Seventh, there is great confusion about the meaning and purpose of sexuality and what constitutes responsible sexuality. Sexual intercourse is no longer understood to have a telos, end, or purpose. To speak of the "purpose" of sexual intercourse and to suggest that we are obliged to live in accord with that purpose is language that is virtually incomprehensible in this age. The nearly universal use of contraception has almost completely obliterated the notion that sexual intercourse has a procreative purpose. Sex is considered to be wholly a pleasure-giving activity with no deeper meaning. Since couples think sex is simply to be used for pleasure (not the same as union), they feel perfectly comfortable about having sexual intercourse when they are completely unprepared to have babies. Pregnancy is then perceived as an accident for which they are not accountable.

Indeed, the loss of a teleological view of nature has tremendously undermined all of sexual ethics. Many kinds of deviant sexual activity are considered acceptable since they are various forms of seeking pleasure. Again, contraception is clearly a major contributing factor to this mentality, since it robs sexual intercourse of its procreative meaning. The true seamless garment is one that connects contraception, abortion, adultery, homosexuality, divorce, sexual abuse and as related evils, alcoholism, drug abuse, homelessness and the like. These are often the consequences of deviant sexual practices and dysfunctional families. Few have been taught that contraception is a great evil; fewer have been taught why it is. Indeed, it is ironic that most Catholics know that the Church teaches that contraception is immoral not from anything they have heard at Church but from the reportings by a hostile media of the speeches of Pope John Paul II and of the reactions of dissenting theologians.

Eighth, there is great confusion about sexual identity. Feminism rejects motherhood as a worthy role for women; feminists see motherhood as an invention of an androcentric patriarchy designed to keep women in submission. Pregnancy and babies are seen as obstacles to women's self-fulfillment rather

than as means for self-fulfillment. Feminists no longer value the innate feminine abilities for nurturing and self-sacrifice. Men, too, are mocked and considered condescending if they seek to act upon their protective instincts. Fatherhood is no longer seen as a lofty calling for men, but a kind of subservience to a conventional lifestyle. The value of the father as an authority has disappeared; it is assumed that he could only exercise this role in a domineering and selfish way. Clearly, a culture with such views of motherhood and fatherhood is predictably very comfortable with abortion; women are not expected to nurture, men are not expected to protect.

Ninth, the breakdown in family life contributes greatly to the anti-life mentality. Families are the school of love and those who are not schooled to love in the family have a difficult time expressing and experiencing love. It is easy to mistake sexual attraction for love. Many unwanted pregnancies that end in abortion are the result of unloved young women seeking love. Much of the clamor for euthanasia is a result of a lack of love for the sick and elderly. They feel like they are burdens that cannot be endured; they feel they put too many demands on their loved ones (if they have them) -- or on the hospital staff -- emotionally, physically, financially. They feel they are doing others a service and maintaining their own dignity if they seek an early demise.

Tenth, the breakdown in the family and certain liberal philosophies have led to an excessive individualism. We no longer feel we are defined as members of a human community, such as the family or state, which we must serve and to which subordinate our own wishes. Rather, we strive to actualize our selves with little cognizance of how our actions impact upon others. If unborn babies or the dying get in the way of our actualizing our selves, we find them altogether dispensable.

Eleventh, there is little sense that God is the Lord of Life or that Man is made in the image and likeness of God. We do not view life as a gift to be returned in

some way, but as a happenstance that we can use at our own discretion. If life becomes burdensome, we believe we have the right to kill or to die to avoid burdens. Human life seems little more than animal life; when animals are inconvenient to us, we eliminate them. We have little ability to reason why we should not treat humans in the same way. Again, some philosophers are eloquent in their defense of animal rights and think that some animal life is more worthy of protection than some human life since animals at some stages of their existence have greater powers than human fetuses.

Twelfth, there is an often justifiable distrust of the medical profession and a sense that doctors are too enamored of technology. We suspect that they will put people on machines needlessly and then will not be able to discern when it would be moral to remove them. Technological prowess makes doctors inclined to seek to prolong life at all costs. Our society is so torn between wanting to hasten the demise of the dying and wanting to pursue procedures that unnecessarily prolong the dying process, that few, not even the leaders of the Church, know how to make the proper distinctions between what is ordinary and necessary care and what is extraordinary and unnecessary.

Thirteenth, moderns believe, it seems erroneously, that the earth is overpopulated and that anything that reduces the number of humans on the face of the earth is good; thus there need not be resistance to abortion and euthanasia. Few seem to draw the proper conclusions from the fact that the most places on the earth that are the most burdensome on the world's resources are relatively sparsely populated; generally their rate of reproduction is not even at replacement level. These countries are highly industrialized, materialistic and wasteful in the extreme. The disparity between what it takes to support a small middle class family in the developed world and what it takes to support large families in third world countries almost defies belief. Why do we not then conclude that it is materialism, greed, and wastefulness that are the problem, not the number of people?

Fourteenth, we have lost an appreciation of the power of grace. We feel we cannot face our own difficulties nor expect others to face theirs. We do not think that people can change their ways; thus abortion becomes an answer to unwanted pregnancy -- we have little hope that a woman with an unwanted pregnancy can face her troubles and overcome them. We have little sense that the suffering that accompanies the process of dying can be a grace insofar as it leads us to reconcile ourselves with each other and with God.

Fifteenth, and finally, inertia is not on the side of life; we have become accustomed to abortion and the practice of euthanasia seems inevitable. The status quo is now with those who find life cheap and who fight any restriction on choice. The current generation are "survivors" of abortion. But as with Hamlet, this fact tends not to energize the younger generation to defend life but to render them depressed and confused. Anecdotal evidence reports that they hold even their own lives to be of little value. When asked if they think their mother should have aborted them if her pregnancy had posed a significant burden, young people generally answer in the affirmative. Apparently, their mother's willingness to bear them does not obscure the fact that they were all potential members of the class of the unwanted.

Despite the heroism and effectiveness of most of the pro-life movement, I believe it is not facing imminent success, not because of any weakness in effort on its part but because of the nature of the task that faces it. The task before us is enormous. Those who have access to the young in particular need to work strenuously to combat the attitudes I have detailed above, for until we share Hamlet's wonder at "what a piece of work is a man," the pile of corpses just grows and grows.