Life, Death, *and* Catholic Medical Choices

50 Questions *From the* Pews

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Liguori
Liguori, Missouri

Imprimi Potest: Harry Grile, CSsR
Provincial, Denver Province, The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri 63057
To order, call 800-325-9521, or visit liguori.org.

Imprimatur: "In accordance with c. 827, permission to publish has been granted on March 1, 2011, by the Most Reverend Robert J. Hermann, Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus of St. Louis, Archdiocese of St. Louis. Permission to publish is an indication that nothing contrary to Church teaching is contained in this work. It does not imply any endorsement of the opinions expressed in the publication; nor is any liability assumed by this permission."

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

O'Neil, Kevin, 1955-
Life, death, and Catholic medical choices : 50 questions from the pews / by Kevin O'Neil and Peter Black.—1st ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-7648-1953-7 (alk. paper)
1. Medicine—Religious aspects—Catholic Church. 2. Medical ethics—Religious aspects—Catholic Church. 3. Catholic Church—Doctrines. I. Black, Peter, 1954- II. Title.
R725.56.B563 2011
174.2—dc22

2011001461

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com.

Printed in the United States of America
15 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

CONTENTS

We dedicate this book to two extraordinarily faith-filled women whom we remember with gratitude and love: Sister Joan Flynn, RSM (1923-2010), aunt of Peter Black, and Margaret A. O'Neil (1921-2010), mother of Kevin O'Neil. May they rest in peace.

INTRODUCTION

Questions raised in this book touch on some of the most profound moments of joy, fear, anger, and sorrow in our lives. Joy at the news of a long-awaited pregnancy, at an optimistic prognosis for an illness, at the news that an organ donor has been found, and even bittersweet joy as a loved one accepts her approaching death with courage and peace. Fear may accompany the diagnosis of an illness, the report that a treatment is not working, or at the news that death is near. Sadness arises at our own or a loved one's suffering, at the news of infertility, at death. Anger may surface in all these instances of fear and suffering, and even in our relationship with God.

Responses to these questions will never address adequately all the thoughts, emotions, and feelings that accompany important decisions that we make. They attempt, however, to offer information, principles, and the reasoning that is at work in Catholic Church teaching in response to many questions that surface at the beginning of life, in moments of life "in between," and at the end of life.

Browsing through these responses, readers will note time and again that emphasis is placed on certain fundamental

concepts that form the core of the Catholic Church's teaching and promote our embracing responsibly our own lives and those of our brothers and sisters. Attuning our minds to these issues will help us to respond even to questions not asked or answered here.

Before addressing these important concepts, we must say a word about the most basic criterion in Catholic teaching for judging right and wrong action: authentic human good. Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote: "Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are *in conformity with man's true good* and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person toward his ultimate end: God himself, the supreme good in whom man finds his full and perfect happiness" (*The Splendor of Truth*, #72). Notice that it is when human beings are prized that one stands right before God. The fundamental concepts that we briefly review here concern precisely "man's true good" or authentic human good.

First is the dignity of the person as one made in the image and likeness of God. We possess dignity simply because we are, not because of our intelligence, our independence, our health, our contribution to society, our faith, or any other reason other than that we exist. The Church's teaching that human life is to be respected from conception to natural death is grounded in this profound respect for each human life as an image and likeness of God, whether that life be the tiniest embryo, a homeless person needing medical care, a person in a persistent vegetative state, or a frail elderly person awaiting death. All are equal in dignity. To live and to die with dignity is to live and to die as one made in the image and likeness of God.

A second point is respect due to human life itself. Our

tradition recognizes human life as a fundamental gift from God, without which no other gifts may be enjoyed. Unless we are alive we cannot experience the joy of friendship, family, music, sports, or any other thing that makes life enjoyable. The primary gift that comes with life, however, is the possibility of a relationship with the same God who offers us life. A recurring theme in Catholic teaching is that we ought to always respect our physical lives and those of others, but not as ends in themselves. We are destined for eternal life with God. This spiritual end of our lives is primary and holds a place of utmost importance with regard to all judgments that we make throughout our lives. We ought neither cling to our physical lives as if they are all we have nor should we disrespect our own or another's life and hasten its diminishment.

The gift of life comes to us in a particular body, our body. This is a third point to keep in mind. The Catholic tradition holds great respect for the body, linked to our belief in the goodness of all creation but also to Jesus' Incarnation, his taking on our human flesh and nature. For this reason, the Church teaches that we are really a union of body and soul. It would be even better to speak of an ensouled body or an embodied soul since there is no division between the two. Frequently what affects the body touches the soul and vice versa. Our experience confirms this point. Physical sickness affects our spirit; sometimes our spirits are so low that we feel aches and pains in our bodies. People don't say, "My liver has cancer," but "I have cancer." We are a union of body and soul.

A fourth point touches on the human person as relational. Right from conception we are in relationship with others. Many of the questions in this book arise from the bonds of relation-

ship: Who makes decisions for a loved one? May I donate my body to science? Can I force someone I love to seek medical treatment? We live as social beings, and the judgments that we make affect not just us but those around us. Good moral decisions are never made in isolation from or without concern for others.

A fifth point to consider in the Christian tradition is its particular perspective on human suffering. We should be clear that suffering is not good in itself, and we have a long tradition of trying to ease suffering and to walk with people as they experience it. Suffering is not something that can be cured or taken away (like physical pain); it attacks the human spirit and sometimes requires a human journey to work our way through it. While the Church encourages us to overcome suffering, it also recognizes that suffering can have a positive value in our lives. A common experience of those who suffer is a feeling of isolation, of being disconnected from themselves and others. Faced with suffering, the greatest temptation is to close in upon oneself and to stop loving others. In this case, suffering destroys us as images of God because it gets in the way of our loving others. On the other hand, when suffering is endured with courage, is made bearable with the support and expertise of others, and does not block our love, it can take on a new meaning in the light of the sufferings of Christ, who himself did not stop loving in his suffering. Christians should be in solidarity with those who suffer, especially the sick and the dying, for suffering can deepen the faith and love of us all. "This mysterious vocation of yours to suffering is a vocation to love for God the Father of Mercy, and for other brothers and sisters. Only Christ's cross can illuminate our weak intel-

ligence and give it a glimpse of the deep meaning of the human and Christian fruitfulness of suffering" (Pope John Paul II, December 20, 1981).

A final introductory point concerns our understanding of health itself. A Vatican document titled the *Charter for Health Care Workers* states: "The term and concept of health embraces all that pertains to prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation for greater equilibrium and the physical, psychic and spiritual well-being of the person" (*Charter for Health Care Workers*, §9). Although we frequently associate health with the body, this broader understanding of health is very important and helps put some of the responses in perspective.

As we have already stated, one's spiritual well-being is primary. One should not be surprised, then, that one's relationship with God might play an important role in making decisions about life. Someone might make medical choices based on psychological well-being, concerned about responsibilities to loved ones and being reconciled with others. This broader definition of health underscores the personal and unique context in which judgments about life are made. Although Church teaching offers both general and particular guidance on many issues, final judgments ought to be made always by individuals with a well-formed conscience, in light of the particular circumstances of their lives.

Chapter 1

Introduction to Questions About the Beginning of Life

Jesus once compared the kingdom of God to a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds. Yet it grows to become a bush large enough for the birds of the air to come to nest in it (Matthew 13:31–32; Luke 13:18–19). Perhaps most of us have never seen a mustard seed but are familiar with acorns. Standing before a fully grown oak tree, we may find it difficult to believe that it began as something as small as an acorn, which we can hold easily in the palm of our hand. Human beings, too, come from the tiniest material, an egg and sperm. Once they are joined in conception, however, the journey of growth begins. Standing before a fully grown human being, or even holding a newborn baby, we may find it difficult to believe that this human life came from a single cell that could hardly be seen in the palm of our hand, yet it is true. Provided with the proper environment and care, the tiniest new human being will develop in the womb,

be born, and continue to develop until natural death.

As miraculous as each new human life is, we find ourselves at times in moral dilemmas precisely around issues at the beginning of life. Someone may be heartbroken that she cannot conceive a child while someone else doesn't feel ready to receive a child into the world. News of advances in science that seem to promise "miracles" for people suffering from diseases require the destruction of new human beings for their research and therapy. Couples who experience infertility discover that some options for having a child present ethical problems themselves.

Frequently in these early life matters, we come back time and again to the unity of body and soul, and the danger that comes when we fail to take this into consideration together. New life, while described by some as "a clump of cells," is a new human being; both the matter, the "body," and the soul are important. The experience of infertility in the body brings sadness in the soul. Certain attempts to resolve fertility issues separate spouses' gifts of their bodies, their whole selves, to one another in efforts to bear a child.

Embracing life and respecting the dignity of all human beings from the very beginning is a consistent teaching of the Catholic community. Its teaching that a new human life begins at conception is based on sound scientific evidence, not on an arbitrary judgment of the magisterium of the Church and theologians. In the face of challenges at the beginning of life, we are reminded constantly of the equal dignity of all human beings and our obligation to respect the dignity of one another.

The questions and responses that follow relate to some instances at the beginning of life. We trust that they will be informative but also encourage us to consider how we might

embrace life at its beginning and to stand with those who are suffering and seeking support in the challenges that they face.

1. When does a living human being or a person begin?

This seemingly simple question is of utmost importance in bioethics and, in the view of some, difficult to answer. There are really three aspects that must be considered in answering this question: scientific, philosophical, and moral. The question concerns when human life begins, when it is deemed a person, and an unspoken question as to when and why we should respect a person.

Regarding the scientific perspective, Church teaching states clearly that a new human being begins living at conception, that is, when a sperm and egg are joined and become a separate unique organism. This new life is distinct from the lives of the parents or the ones who provided the eggs and sperms, in the case of artificial reproductive technologies. The key point is that this new life now possesses its own genetic individuality and, given the proper environment, will continue to grow. Church teaching does not arise from religious conviction but from a philosophical interpretation of scientific information.

From a philosophical perspective, Church teaching holds that a unique individual human being is a person. The technical philosophical definition of a person is an individual substance of a rational nature.

The moral question is why each individual must be respected and protected. It is because of the dignity of each human life. Each new human life passes through several stages of development but, according to Church teaching, these stages do not

constitute different levels of moral status or value. The same kind of respect is due to developing human life from the time of conception through to the end of human life.

This last point about the respect that is due to human life from the beginning is related to the question about when a person begins. In the Catholic moral tradition, persons have moral status and possess rights, the most basic of which is the right to life. In our relationships with persons, we ought to protect them and not endanger their lives, much less deprive them unjustly of life itself. Church teaching states that human life is to be treated "as a person" from the time of conception. As we said, in the Catholic tradition, a person has been defined as an individual, rational creature. One of the difficulties that the Church recognizes in speaking of personhood right from the beginning of human life is that it is possible for embryos to split to become identical twins and also to come together again after splitting. The question is then raised as to whether we had an individual or two individuals. This is a relatively infrequent occurrence, but it poses a question that needs to be answered. Some people object that an embryo is not capable of reasoning at this stage. Yet the embryo is the first stage of ongoing development. Nothing will be added to the developing life to give it the power of reason. It simply needs to develop. The Church's answer about questions of personhood even at this early stage is based on two points: probability and risk.

It is probable that this new being is a person; to directly kill such a being is to risk killing a person. To deliberately take such a risk shows that one is willing to kill a person. The Church affirms then that all human beings are to be treated as persons from conception through natural death.

2. What does the Church teach about abortion?

It is important to describe abortion accurately in order to respond to this question. Pope John Paul II described it in his encyclical letter, The Gospel of Life, in this way: A "procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth" (#58).

Several words are particularly important in this description. He speaks of a "procured" abortion because there are times when tragedy strikes and pregnancies end unexpectedly and painfully because of unfortunate physical circumstances independent of anyone's actions or intentions. Procured abortions ordinarily require the assistance of medical personnel to intentionally end the developing human life.

Secondly, John Paul speaks of abortion as "deliberate and direct killing." So the persons seeking the abortion and those who carry it out fully intend to end the life of the child and choose to do so freely. "Direct" means that the death of the new life is the result of a specific action performed to bring about its destruction. There are times when human life is lost at this stage because of other actions by medical personnel who perform surgical interventions that are aimed at curing a pathology and who do not intend to carry out abortions. For example, a pregnant woman who is diagnosed with cancer of the uterus may undergo surgery to remove the cancerous uterus knowing that doing so will cause the death of the fetus. In these cases the death of the child is neither deliberate nor direct. In fact, if the child were viable and able to live outside the womb, every effort would be made to save its life. The death of the

child in this instance does not meet the description of abortion as deliberate and direct killing.

Returning to the initial statement: Abortion is understood as that which is procured and entails the direct and deliberate killing of a human being. Why is this morally wrong and is never justified? Why is this the case?

The Church holds for the sacredness and inviolability of all life, but particularly innocent human life precisely because of the dignity of each human life created in the image and likeness of God. To deprive a human being of life is to take away the most fundamental human good that we have. Without life we cannot enjoy any other human good, such as relationships with others, the spiritual life, and so forth. Church teaching adds another argument against the taking of innocent human life in an instance such as abortion. That is, God is the author of life; we are stewards of the gift of life. We ought not reject or abuse a gift of God. Even though persons may find themselves in painful and very difficult situations, deliberately and directly taking innocent life is an immoral response. Every effort must be made to assist women with difficult and even unwanted pregnancies to know that they are not alone and will not be left alone in bearing and raising their children.

3. Is abortion ever morally justifiable, for example, in cases of rape, incest, or in order to save the life of the mother? Is the "morning after" pill OK to use after a rape?

Understanding abortion as we have described it earlier, that is, the deliberate and direct taking of innocent human life,

standard Catholic moral theology could not justify abortion in any case, including those listed here.

The desire to end a pregnancy that is the result of an act of violence and power as in rape and incest is understandable. The child of that pregnancy would be a constant reminder to the mother, during pregnancy and during life, of the act of rape or incest that produced the child. However, the child himself or herself is an innocent party in these situations. The Church would suggest offering all means of psychological, spiritual, and material support to enable a woman to deal with trauma and to bear the child and to decide what the best way forward would be in this tragic situation.

A further question is raised regarding the use of what is often called "emergency contraception" in cases of rape. Church teaching is clear that one may never administer medicine to prevent the implantation of a fertilized ovum. In such a case, medicine would really be an abortifacient, effectively preventing new life from implanting in the uterus. The fifth edition (2009) of Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, states: "If, after appropriate testing, there is no evidence that conception has occurred already, [a victim of rape] may be treated with medications that would prevent ovulation, sperm capacitation, or fertilization. It is not permissible, however, to initiate or to recommend treatments that have as their purpose or direct effect the removal, destruction, or interference with the implantation of a fertilized ovum" (Directive #36).

4. Is it acceptable for a Catholic healthcare professional to be employed by a hospital that performs abortions, provided she has nothing to do with these procedures?

The question raises an important issue regarding any intentional involvement in wrongdoing. Application of this material extends beyond this example to many other situations in our lives. The case presented here is fairly straightforward. In fact, a person may work in a hospital that performs abortions, provided that she has nothing to do with the procedures. Because performing abortions is only one part of what the hospital does, a person may work there contributing his or her expertise to other areas of healthcare. If the circumstances were different, and the place of employment was a clinic dedicated to terminating pregnancies through abortion, it would be morally wrong to work there.

The reasoning in this response is guided by the principle of cooperation. It asserts that we may never intentionally cooperate approvingly in the morally wrong action of another person. To consent to help another and to approve of his morally wrong action is termed formal cooperation. Cooperating with another reluctantly, disapproving of what he is doing, is called material cooperation. One may never cooperate formally in another's wrongdoing because, in doing so, one also performs an immoral action, knowingly and willingly. Some material cooperation may be morally justified, but not if a person's cooperation is necessary for an immoral action to occur.

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