

TALK TO THE ACTS CONFERENCE – “CONSCIENCE”

Introduction

Can contraception ever be lawful?

Should celibacy be withdrawn as a rule of the Church, and priests who want to be allowed to marry?

Should lesbians/homosexuals have the same rights as anyone else?

Should Catholics who are divorced and have remarried be allowed to receive the Eucharist?

Is it morally right or wrong to use condoms to prevent infection with HIV/AIDS?

Just think through those questions, and then buzz and share with each other on three questions: What do you think the official Church teaches on these matters? What is your answer to those questions? Do all Catholics have the same opinion on these questions – and why?

Perhaps here we face the issue: Should all Catholics simply obey without question the teaching of the Church, i.e. official pronouncements from Rome or from the bishops, or is there space for legitimate difference of opinion on certain matters; and if so, on what matters can Catholics hold differing opinions? And if everyone can simply follow their own opinion on any issue where does this leave the unity of the Church as a faith community?

We are primarily concerned here with issues of morality and official Church teaching, not with questions of faith. When we hear that expression “the teaching of the Church” this refers basically to what the Church teaches concerning faith and morals. But there is an important distinction here between the issues of faith which are essential to being a Catholic and then questions of morality and the internal order or way of life of the Church, or its pastoral policies or positions concerning what is good or not for society, and so on. So, there are the central or core teachings of our faith, e.g. that God exists, the divine and human nature of Jesus, that he was both God and human, the Resurrection, the Trinity and so forth. If we do not believe these central core teachings of faith, then basically it means we are opting out of being a Catholic, we no longer belong to this particular faith community.

But the Church also has a huge range of other teachings, policies and statements, e.g. on matters of morality like birth control, sex outside marriage, abortion, euthanasia, etc. The Church also has a magnificent set of values and principles enshrined in what is called Catholic Social Teaching, e.g. the common good, solidarity, the primacy of the poor (option for the poor), the integrity of creation. The Church also has many teachings and has issued many statements on the issue of poverty and the rich-poor divide, capitalism, trade unions, refugees, war, peace, economic justice, and so on. Then there are the internal policies and matters regulating the internal life of the Church, e.g. that only men can be ordained priests, and the recent new translations of the liturgical texts. In addition, there were all sorts of practical rules which were practiced at certain times, and no longer exist, e.g. not eating meat on Fridays, fasting for the whole night before receiving Communion, women needing to wear a hat or a veil when they came into a church, and so on.

Now, must we all follow these teachings in the same way that we follow teachings on core matters of our faith? I am sure you have met or heard of Catholics who would say “yes, whatever Rome or the bishops say, we must obey”! One can understand this to a certain extent. It gives a sense of security to some people when everything is black or white, and there is no grey area where one has to think and reflect carefully and try to make up one’s mind about what is the best or right thing to do. That is the attraction of fundamentalist groupings in both the Christian or any other faith tradition – clearly defined rules about what one must think, about what one must do or not do, with no place for doubt or difference of opinion.

Here we must recognize with gratitude and appreciation that the Church has a long history and has developed over the centuries a rich resource of knowledge and wisdom, spiritual guidance and principles and values which can really help us on our pilgrimage and journey through life. Much of Church teaching can give us inspiration and insights into how to analyse and respond to the crucial issues affecting the world and its people, e.g. the rich resource of Catholic Social Teaching concerning issues of social and environmental justice. The Church has also incorporated the insights and findings of scientific research into its understanding of the world and human and societal behaviour.

But the Church has both a divine and human element in it. The Spirit lives in the Church community, and in us, but we are also subject to our human prejudices, failings, and sinfulness; there will be both the positive and negative in the Church community and all its members. And so the Church and Church leadership are capable of making errors of judgement, even serious mistakes, and the history of the Church is full of these – and we should not be surprised or shocked at all about this. For example, several centuries ago the Church approved of the torture of heretics, something unthinkable today when the Church will fully participate in events surrounding the United Nations Day against torture on 26 June (as I did a few times in Bulawayo Cathedral together with torture victims from Zimbabwe). Perhaps one of the most famous examples of the mistakes of the official Church was the condemnation by the Church of Galileo's discovery in the 17th century that the earth moves round the sun. Much later the Church changed its stance, but it was only in 1993 that the Pope officially recognised Galileo's innocence. So, the Church can develop its knowledge on a whole variety of issues over time, and many times it may have to change its position accordingly. The problem is that the official Church usually takes a long time before it will change its position.

This simply underlines the fact that what is not essential teaching, what is non-basic teaching in the Church is not unchangeable; it is not for ever, and the Church will hopefully continue to learn from its mistakes and maintain a humble, searching attitude in what is becoming an increasingly complex world where issues are very difficult to deal with constructively in order to achieve the best possible result.

But what about morality, issues concerning our moral behaviour, e.g. sexual behaviour? Is Church teaching on issues of morality binding on us, does it call for simple unquestioning obedience? On the one hand we must recognize that just because the Church has made mistakes on certain issues in the past, this does not necessarily mean that we are justified in disagreeing with or dissenting from anything in the present Church teaching on morality. On the other hand, we have to examine whether present Church teaching on different issues is truly unchangeable or absolute, or if it will require our obedience. And it is here that the matter of conscience comes in.

Conscience

The teaching and tradition of the Church concerning conscience is clear; it is the *formation* of one's conscience and *how to act in accordance with one's conscience* that provides the challenge. In recent years, however, there has not been much focus on the issue of conscience in the Church.

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church one reads: "Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions....especially in religious matters..." (paragraph 1782).

Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom was also quite clear in its statement that no person can "be forced to act in a manner contrary to one's conscience. Nor...is one to be restrained from acting in accordance with conscience, especially in matters religious" (#3).

We have a fuller explanation in Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths..... Man's dignity, therefore, requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint." (Gaudium et Spes, #16 and #17).

What is evident here is that our conscience is *autonomous*. But that is not the end of the matter. If we are facing some moral problem, and we simply decide to do what we *feel* inclined to do, that would not be a decision of conscience or a decision we have conscientiously made. Our conscience needs to be informed, we need to reflect and decide on a course of action after we have informed ourselves about the matter and examined carefully the options or alternative responses we have on the basis of the values by which we live, or want to live. We cannot, therefore, just do what we feel like doing and think that we are acting in accordance with our conscience.

Informing Ourselves

To inform ourselves properly about the moral issue we are facing does not mean, of course, that we have to go in search of all the available documents and relevant information or knowledge on the subject. Yes we can read up material and it is good to do so. We can also approach someone in a pastoral context or someone who is knowledgeable, e.g. our chaplain or a priest/religious or lay leader one knows and trusts, a counsellor, an ethics professor, and chat through the issue. The role of the chaplain or confidant is not simply to give you the official line, but to share with you in a reflective way the different aspects of the question, even to challenge your assumptions, helping you to recognise the alternatives and to reflect on the values which you want to express in the decision you will make, or the way you may be ignoring important values which can affect you and others.

We often face many moral dilemmas in our life where we are not sure what is the right or best thing to do in the circumstances we face. For example, our responsibility towards the community in which we live, our personal relationships with others, our ideas about sexuality and sexual relationships, justice issues, honesty in a work situation, and so on. What we will decide to do, or the solution we will seek, should always be based on the objective of what is the good and life-giving thing to do, according to Jesus' fundamental call: "You must love your neighbour as yourself".

Another problem is that morality and moral decisions have often been viewed or limited to single or separate individual acts, e.g. an act of stealing, or a deliberate lie, or a sexual act. Morality also has to do with longer term attitudes and ways of thinking, e.g. an attitude of thinking less of particular groups or individuals; prejudices against them or even contempt for them; our habits; the way we might continually neglect to do the right and good thing in our homes, families or communities; the damage we can cause to the environment by littering, and so forth. Morality, therefore, also has to do with our basic overall approach to people, life, the community, the environment and so on. Is our basic overall approach in life something life-giving for ourselves, for others, for the community, for the environment? That is the question.

What I am suggesting here is that we as people should be thinking – I stress – thinking seriously about our life, thinking seriously about our faith and values and the implications these have for our moral behaviour in all aspects of daily living. We should be people who can really act out of a conscious and free choice "moved and drawn from within", following our formed and informed conscience, and not merely responding, reacting or acting from blind impulse, or because of pressure from others especially our peer group, or just following what everyone seems to be doing.

Part of forming an informed conscience means that we listen to the moral guidance given by the Church as part of the process of making a moral decision. But if we come to a decision which seems to differ from the official guidance on a moral matter, e.g. contraception, does this imply disloyalty to the Church? (Buzz about that for a minute or two).

An Example of a Moral Issue: Sero-Discordant Couples

In 2001, the Bishops of Southern Africa issued a pastoral statement called ‘A Message of Hope’ dealing with HIV/AIDS. Part of this focussed on the situation of a married couple where one partner has become HIV positive, and the statement dealt with this as follows: “There are couples where one of the partners is living with HIV/AIDS. In these cases there is a real danger that the healthy partner may contract this killer disease. The Church accepts that everyone has the right to defend one’s life against mortal danger. This would include using the appropriate means and course of action.

Similarly, where one spouse is infected with HIV/AIDS they must listen to their consciences. They are the only ones who can choose the appropriate means in order to defend themselves against the infection. Decisions of such an intimate nature should be made by both husband and wife as equal and loving partners.” What do you think about this? (Buzz and comments).

The issue, therefore, of discordant couples – or indeed of two people contemplating marriage where one is HIV+ - needs to be examined in the light of a moral and ethical understanding of the issue, and in terms of a theology which is “done” in the current context of HIV. One partner has become HIV+. There are several consequences which must be thought through, e.g. the children and the need for both, or at least one parent, to live and care for the family.

Another consequence is the relationship between the husband and wife and its meaning for the stability of the marriage and promoting an environment conducive to a sound upbringing of the children. Within this reality, the permissibility or advisability of continuing a sexual relationship – and the consequences.

We, therefore, need to adopt a *holistic* approach. Because of the serious consequences due to one partner becoming discordant, what approach, or theological approach, can or should be taken?

Firstly, counselling concerning the provision of accurate information and the awareness of the consequences of a sexual act between discordant couples – and the options they have. If the couple decide that it is very important to have and continue a sexual relationship as part of their ongoing love relationship and as means of sustaining their marriage, can they be counselled about the use of a condom as a means of protection so that they can be enabled to work towards the goals they have discerned – and take the risk that it might not be 100% effective?

The approach, therefore, would seem to indicate encouraging decision-making on the basis of an *informed conscience*, and Church leaders and pastors accompanying couples in this situation have a vital role in providing that caring, respectful atmosphere in which the couple can look at the issue honestly and with trust in each other on the basis of clear and accurate information.

Forming a Good Conscience

Our goal, therefore – to form a good conscience so that we can exercise responsible autonomy in the search for truth. So, in making moral decisions in our life it is important that we don’t just decide and act.

We need to search for the truth in life. In this quest or search there are two texts which can guide us from Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom:

“This Vatican Synod urges....those (who are) educating others....to form persons....who will come to decisions on their own judgement and in the light of truth, govern their activities with a sense of responsibility and strive after what is true and right, willing always to join with others in co-operative effort.....(#8)”

“Truth is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue. In the course of these, people explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered. Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by personal assent that people are to adhere to it.” (#3). So, we need to exercise responsible autonomy in the decisions we make, and not just follow what is told to us, or the opinion of the majority, in slavish obedience.

As those texts from the Vatican Council suggest, it is important that we learn about moral principles which should guide our decision-making, that we make ourselves aware of the Church's stance or position on the more important moral issues of our time, and that we engage in discussion with others so that we can deepen our insights into a given issue. We need to be aware of taking the easy way out, or oversimplifying questions and issues, of the ways our own judgement can be distorted by the way we might feel about certain questions, thus leading to a lack of balance in trying to discern what is the truth.

We need to honestly admit that often we feel uncertain about what is best to do in particular circumstances. As Christians, our guiding principle is that we are called and challenged to think, reflect and use our powers of judgement so that we can direct our lives and honestly evaluate the morality of a particular action which we might be contemplating. And never to judge others. One way we can develop good consciences is through our meetings and workshops where we can pose some moral dilemmas for discussion among ourselves. This will help us to think critically about issues in life, about what is moral or ethical or not; it will help us to analyse the “why's”, the reasons which support a particular moral position, and through listening to different opinions we can evaluate ourselves and our growth towards maturity in moral decision-making.

Wisdom

We need therefore to pray for and seek the wisdom which will assist us in making judgements about the morality of actions, policies and situations in whatever arena of life we might contemplate – personal and family life, society, politics, economics, and so on. To achieve wisdom we need to look at criteria such as fairness and prudence. The American educationist and psychologist, Robert Sternberg, explains the term wisdom in this way...it is “the successful balancing of intra-personal, inter-personal and extra-personal interests by adapting to, shaping and selecting environments, in order to achieve a common good. This common good is in turn determined through the application of values”. In making wise moral judgements we need to balance the interests of self, of others, of the institutions in the communities and society so that the common good of all can be protected and enhanced.

Conclusion

As members of ACTS we, like all Christians, have received a unique and personal call and mission which we are invited to live in real life as it really is. Our call and mission is not only to take on conscientious responsibility for ourselves, but also for all others, to take responsibility for building up and ensuring a

quality of life for all especially the poorest and most vulnerable in our society, and to act in conscience to preserve life itself and the environment for future generations.

I encourage you, therefore, to be people who know how to live faith in real life, and to search for the relevant answers through developing and deepening an informed conscience concerning all the crucial issues we face in life and in the world of today.

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