

When Did the Catholic Bishops Stop Believing in the Human Soul?

When I was a child it was drummed into me that nothing was more important than my immortal soul. That drum beat continued until my thirties in the 1960s. The idea of a soul never generated much enthusiasm in me. The belief that my soul would survive my body at death and continue on without a body did not seem an attractive proposition. Thomas Aquinas had to admit that a soul without a body is not a person. There was the consoling fact that the soul would re-unite with a body at the general resurrection but there did not seem to be much emphasis on this belief.

The concept of a soul was one of many imports from Greek philosophy by early Christianity. Because the Bible was short on philosophical concepts, Christianity was bound to assimilate some philosophical ideas from Aristotelian, Platonic, Neo-platonic, Stoic, and other philosophies. Great thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas showed the potential of philosophical ideas for the spread of the Christian movement beyond its place and its time of origin.

The Bible knew nothing of an Aristotelian soul but the idea did seem to support the belief that there is more to a human being than what can be seen and touched. In a beautiful biblical image God was said to breathe spirit into each human form. There is something spiritual and sacred in each individual human, and the concept of a soul was a way to capture that dimension.

The belief that every individual is composed of body and soul was always in danger of leading to a dualistic philosophy in which the soul was important and the body was at best an amiable companion and at worst a constant source of sin. Body and soul had to be integrated as dimensions of something greater. Here is where Christianity created a philosophical concept unknown to the Greeks. The concept of person was a brilliant invention that stemmed from the Christological controversies. Person became central in the Christian attempt to speak of the divine and to speak of Jesus of Nazareth as fully human and more than human. Most philosophers want no part of the Blessed Trinity or the Incarnation but the idea of a person has proved invaluable. While human nature is the answer to what I am, person is the answer to who I am.

Thomas Aquinas' philosophy showed the importance of person not only for theological expositions but for metaphysics and morality. Thomas' writing on morality is often said to be based on natural law, an idea that Christianity imported from Cicero and the Stoics. While Thomas does have his own version of a natural law his moral thinking is centered on the person, the responsible agent. Body and soul remain as dimensions of the personal but the emphasis is their union rather than their conflict. According to Thomas, "Person signifies what is noblest in the whole of nature."

Thomas' person-centered morality is not what dominated Catholic moral thinking after the Council of Trent. Instead, natural law was the framework of moral teaching. Confessors were trained with manuals that catalogued sins and the seriousness of each

sin. Catholics were urged to lead a virtuous life but what was the basis of virtue? While, moral thinking was governed by the idea of obeying nature, it was not clear that the issue was “human nature,” a reality mainly knowable from experience and testimony. The term unnatural was wielded as a judgment on human actions, especially in the sexual area where there was no lightness of matter and there were multitudes of occasions of sin. Homosexuality and masturbation (both terms were coined in the 19th century) were particularly said to be sins against nature.

Through the work of some great scholars in the 1940s and 1950s, emphasis began shifting to a more positive approach to moral thinking. One of the important contributions to this change was Bernard Häring’s three volume work, *The Law of Christ*, which turned moral theology upside down. The law of Christ that Häring refers to is the commandment to love God and to love one’s neighbor. Häring and other theologians made use of the work of New Testament exegetes who provided an abundance of new material on the moral implications of Jesus’ teaching.

New Testament scholarship also redirected attention to the resurrection as central to the life of Jesus and the lives of his followers. Works such as that of F.X. Durwell’s *Resurrection*, led to awareness that an immortal soul was not a biblical idea. Instead, the “resurrection of the body” was the belief in the New Testament and an article of belief in the creed. The translation of the biblical doctrine as resurrection of the *body* could be misunderstood as referring to body as opposed to soul. In the biblical framework of language, the belief might be better translated as resurrection of the person, the whole bodily self. The Catholic Church was reluctant to give up traditional belief in an immortal soul and it tried to hold on to both frameworks. Some scholars, such as Oscar Cullman in *Immortality or Resurrection*, insisted that the two ideas were not compatible and the resurrection of the body was the genuine Christian belief.

The result of historical, biblical, and philosophical studies was a healthy emphasis on the person as the moral agent who is called to a life of justice and love and eventually resurrection. Sin is a failure to live up to that calling but sin is overcome not with a scalpel but by going beyond sin to a healthy unity of the whole person. Rules, or more precisely principles, still exist but there is need for an enlightened conscience and an understanding of the total situation of any moral activity for application of those principles.

Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* tried to emphasize the centrality of the person in the moral life. However, in the fateful paragraph that reaffirmed the official proscription of “artificial contraception,” he reverted to an understanding of sexuality as less than human. In nonhuman animals, sex is for reproduction; but humans quickly discover other uses and purposes of their sexual power. Human sexuality takes its meaning and moral valence from the context in which it is exercised. Sexual activity can hurt another person or become an obsession for an individual. Society needs to provide education in the uses of human sexuality and cultural supports for healthy sexual expressions.

There was an immediate and loud protest against *Humanae Vitae*, led in the United States by Charles Curran. The encyclical created a split in the Roman Catholic Church that has never been healed. Untold numbers of Catholics left the church; others decided to remain in the church while following their consciences on sexual matters. They were not what was called “cafeteria Catholics” who supposedly picked and chose what the beliefs that they liked. Instead, millions of Catholics who had become aware of the emphasis on the person chose to dismiss or to oppose Pope Paul VI’s encyclical precisely because it clashed with the best of moral thinking and their knowledge of the situations in which they lived.

Official church teaching in the 1960s regularly linked contraception and abortion. The strategy was to support the teaching on contraceptives. It was often said by theologians and church officials that if contraception became accepted then abortion would be next. The connection was not a wise one. The grounds for opposing contraception and abortion were different.

When the official teaching on contraception was widely rejected by the church’s members, the bishops saw a threat to official teaching on abortion. The bishops decided to make an absolute stand on abortion, especially after the 1971 Supreme Court decision making abortion legal in the United States. In a strange coalition that has continued to the present, Evangelicals joined with the Roman Catholic Church in making abortion the top moral concern.

The traditional teaching of the Catholic Church was that abortion is homicide after “ensoulment” takes place, that is, when there is a soul present. According to theologians and popes throughout the centuries, God could not create a soul until a body had been prepared for it. There was no agreement on when ensoulment takes place. The number of days before the soul “animated” the body was guessed at or was based on a symbolic number such as forty. One thing everyone could agree upon was that God could not create a new human being at the very beginning of pregnancy. It is true that early abortions were considered a serious sin, but so were masturbation, contraception and intercourse outside marriage.

The bishops seemed reluctant to talk about the soul. That reluctance could have been a positive step by bringing in the scriptural and moral theology of the 1960s with its emphasis on the wholeness of the person. Unfortunately, when the bishops gave up on soul talk they switched to talking about “life.” The key question of when a new person comes into existence was left aside. The only question entertained was when does life begin.

The concept of life taken alone is one of those philosophical abstractions that the ancient Greeks were good at. Life doesn’t exist though what we call living beings exist. The living being that eventuates from human pregnancy is the person. Today’s technology provides many helpful signs of when there is a person but there is no agreed upon list of characteristics. One thing that seems certain is that a speck of matter is not a baby. The

DNA for a baby is said to be present from the time of fertilization but a blueprint for a building is not a building.

After the bishops had decided on the strategy of condemning all abortion, there was nothing more to say. No negotiations on public policy were possible. Abortion is an unspeakable evil and anyone who participates in it is a murderer. The only question for a Catholic was “are you pro-life?” Catholic politicians who faced complex questions of public policy were ordered to have no strategy other than to be against abortion and to oppose any legislation that tries to work out helpful compromises on abortion.

The people who support the legality of abortion often have an absolutist language too. A common phrase in public discussions is “abortion rights” that makes no sense and is inflammatory. Abortion is not a good that people have a right to. A phrase that is used interchangeably with “abortion rights” but has a different meaning is “reproductive rights.”

Women have a right to decide about what happens to their body but the phrase “pro-choice” is no more helpful than “pro-life.” The whole issue cannot be reduced to choice and rights. It is a social issue involving the government, the medical profession, and the ways by which women and men regulate birth.

There is no possibility of a genuine conversation between people who talk about abortion rights and people who accuse their opponents of murder. There might be widespread agreement that reducing the number of abortions would be a good thing. At present there is such great suspicion on both sides of the public rift that something desirable to most of the population cannot be discussed. The Catholic bishops have had a self-defeating strategy in refusing to discuss how abortion policy might be improved. The one proven way to reduce the number of abortions is a wide accessibility to contraceptives.

The official church teaching still is that the use of artificial contraceptives is wrong even though the teaching has been almost universally rejected in advanced countries and contraceptives are desperately needed in much of the world. Pope Francis said that contraceptives might be used during the Zika epidemic because contraceptives are not “absolutely evil.” That is a first tiny step toward acknowledging that the church’s official position is indefensible. The use of contraceptives makes sense in a personal morality that includes responsible family planning.

When did the bishops stop believing in the human soul? The answer seems to be the 1970s. The soul was never an article of faith although it seemed to underlie much of the moral teaching of the church. Considered in isolation, soul suggested an unreality about many of the church’s moral concerns. The teaching was that sex is decidedly of the body but it left a stain on the soul. The abandonment of the soul for something experiential and more integral to the person could be an advance in the understanding of the human being and human activity. An emphasis on the person instead of the soul is more in line with the teaching of Jesus as well as contemporary psychology and related studies.

In the Catholic Church's concern to oppose abortion the soul was replaced with life. A concern with all life forms is admirable; the defense of human lives should be at the center of moral teaching. For example, Pope Francis has tried to get rid of the scandal of official teaching that still sanctions the state execution of prisoners. The church has lagged behind much of the secular world's opposition to state executions as it did in the secular world's abolition of human slavery.

Opponents of all abortions often claim that condemnation of abortion will be seen in the future as an extension of the condemnation of slavery but that is not likely to happen. Slavery was always an attack on a fellow human being; slaveholders had to concoct implausible theories about the slave's lack of humanity. Opponents of late abortion have a good case in maintaining that a human baby is present in late pregnancy. But it will always be counter-intuitive that a fertilized egg or an embryo is a human being. The cells are human and they are living but that does not constitute a person. When the line is crossed to personhood – when “ensoulment” occurs – is not known now nor will it ever be. The question is metaphysical not biological or medical.

The Catholic bishops have radically broken with their long tradition of acknowledging a major difference between early abortions before a new person exists and later abortions. Even if the bishops continue to teach that all abortions are wrong it still make sense for them and for Catholic politicians to discuss improving public policy on matters of abortion.