


Recent Appointments to the Pontifical Academy for Life

OME OF THE recent appointments of people as members of the Pontifical Academy for Life have provoked anxiety and dismay, since apparently they include a person who is a known abortionist, another who is pro-choice and another a lecturer at a Pontifical University who seems to represent the strongly proportionalist school of moral theology.

The following observations seem to me to be in order.

The Pontifical Academy for Life is an academy and is not, as such, part of the Magisterium of the Church, although its reflections and especially its profound studies of scientific, philosophical and theological aspects of questions involving the treatment of human life have informed and guided many Magisterial interventions on those issues. As an Academy, it could be argued that it needs

to attend to new scientific developments, not always limited to Catholic circles; the intervention of renowned scientists, doctors, philosophers and theologians in its study days and at its congresses over the years had been a great strength. Someone without the faith or with other presuppositions than ours might contribute to the understanding of the complexity of questions to be addressed. In my view, someone could be co-opted for a time for such a purpose or even appointed in some way, but on the clear condition that he or she did not deny, attack or undermine key tenets of moral doctrine in bioethics and in related areas.

The Pontifical Academy for Life has contributed enormously to excellent presentations of that teaching, especially in *Evangelium vitae*, *Dignitas personae*, documents on human cloning and on stem cells over many years. Other dicasteries of the Holy See contribute more directly to doctrine, which needs to develop, particularly as new issues and questions arise, but 'development' needs to be properly understood.

For some people, 'development' is not 'change', but we need to make a distinction. The two concepts would be identical where an existing doctrine were applied to a new reality, but in clear harmony with preceding teaching, in the same sense and in the same judgment; there the 'change' would be a 'development', but no more than a development. However, if 'change' means alteration in the sense of denial or rejection of former doctrine, that would not be 'development' at all, but denial, contradiction, perhaps even betrayal.

The Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Pope and the Bishops of the Catholic Church, does not establish truth, does not 'decide' to teach or to deny something which would then be binding upon the consciences of the faithful. The Magisterium is bound by Scripture and by Tradition, including teaching on faith and morals handed down; it cannot 'create' or 'decide' such truth, but can only declare it with the authority of Christ and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Where the moral teaching of the Pope, of the College of Bishops, of the authentic Magisterium

expressly recognises some moral act as involving something of its nature immoral, that is 'intrinsically immoral', that means that it cannot be objectively justified under any circumstances or for any good intention. Expressing the centuries-old doctrine on this point, this affirmation constitutes one of the kernels of Pope St John Paul II's *Veritatis splendor* and *Evangelium vitae*. The intrinsic immorality, not of all killing of human life, but of the deliberate, direct killing of innocent human life, as taught across the centuries, was expressed authoritatively in *Evangelium vitae*,¹ and applied in that same document.² That point of departure and of constant reference seems to be in danger of being undermined by these appointments. As Pope St Paul VI put it in *Humanae vitae*,³ the Church does not establish moral doctrine, but can only declare it and indeed must do so.

1 See Pope St John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 57.

2 See *ibid.*, 62 and 65.

3 See Pope Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 18.

If we were to take a hypothetical case of an act of the Magisterium, which directly and expressly contradicted what had been taught by earlier universal Magisterium either infallibly or at least definitively, there would then be a contradiction between prior and actual Magisterium. However, the obligation to obey and to follow Magisterial teachings is predicated upon the teachings being 'reasonable', and they must be so for the mind to grasp them and for the will to (be obliged to) follow them. Yet, in the given case, there would be a direct contradiction. Some might argue that the more recent teaching should be followed, but they would be wrong; that would only be so where there was a genuine development of doctrine or where there were a merely disciplinary change (the translation of the Lectionary, the insertion of new feasts into the liturgical calendar, and so forth). This could not apply, should the faithful be faced with a direct and explicit denial of moral doctrine, provided it concerned something which was intrinsically good, intrinsically immoral or intrinsically holy; the Magisterium

cannot 'render' something intrinsically morally good or bad, but can only discern what is such and teach accordingly. If a new teaching did not involve the intrinsically immoral, but condemned what was usually immoral, any assertion, in my view, would need to be interpreted as a reinforcement of prior restrictions (it would be binding in conscience, though not absolutely or in all circumstances). By contrast, a real contradiction would undermine both the teaching and the authenticity of its articulation, and it could not be binding in conscience.

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