

*Twenty Questions on Contemporary & Traditional Official Catholic Moral Teaching
With Answers Supplied by Rev. James T. Bretzke, S.J., S.T.D.*

- 1) The Catholic Church teaches that any medical procedure that results in the foreseen termination of fetal life is intrinsically evil and never permitted under any circumstances. *True* or *FALSE*

Here is a classic example of the principle of the double effect (e.g., to deal with an ectopic pregnancy) which is found throughout the moral tradition and can also be found in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Responsum* to the question regarding uterine isolation.

- 2) The Catholic Church teaches that private property is not an absolute moral right to the owner(s), but only a relative right which the owner must relinquish at times in light of other overriding needs of others. *TRUE* or *False*

This has been the teaching since Thomas Aquinas, and is repeated in some form in virtually every social encyclical of the popes since Leo XIII's 1891 *Rerum novarum*.

- 3) The Catholic Church teaches that a Catholic politician could never in good conscience vote for any law that contains provisions that would allow for the legality of abortions. *True* or *FALSE*

"...when it is not possible to overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law, an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at *limiting the harm* done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality. This does not in fact represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law, but rather a legitimate and proper attempt to limit its evil aspects." Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, #73

- 4) The Catholic Church has always taught that a key hallmark of its social teaching is that concrete practices such as torture of prisoners and slavery are always morally wrong. *True* or *FALSE*

Regrettably, the Church has not *always* taught what it now teaches in this area. In fact, from the time of the Middle Ages onwards Christian rulers were taught that it was their duty to exterminate religious heresy by whatever means necessary (e.g., burning heretics at the stake), and Fr. Marcelino Zalba, S.J. was still teaching at the Pontifical Gregorian University into the 1960's that torture was allowable under certain circumstances.

- 5) The Catholic Church teaches that no one under any circumstances may ever do anything, either by direct action (commission) or by failure to act (omission) that

would aid or cooperate in the commission of a moral evil by a third party. *True or FALSE*

Again, the long-standing moral tradition of the Church allows for licit cooperation in evil in some cases (such as that discussed by Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium vitae* #73 quoted in the answer to Question #3.

- 6) The Catholic Church teaches that when there is a conflict between a person's individual conscience and official magisterial teaching on a certain issue a faithful Catholic has no choice but to follow the Church's magisterial teaching in this matter. *True or FALSE*

From the time of Thomas Aquinas the Church has taught that one must follow one's conscience. This is repeated in Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) in #16, and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 1790: "A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed."

- 7) The Catholic Church teaches that care for the poor and disadvantaged of society should carry greater weight, rather than equal distribution in the allocation of public resources as well as the use of private property. *TRUE or False*

While this has been the implicit social teaching of the Church since Thomas Aquinas, it is given particular prominence in the social encyclicals of Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) and Pope John Paul II (1978--2005).

- 8) The Catholic Church teaches that murder can never be morally justified, even if it could be argued that the murder of a given individual would end some grave evil or bring about some considerable good. *TRUE or False*

Murder is defined as the unjustified taking of innocent life, and is listed as an "intrinsic evil," thus, it can never be justified for any reason. However, it is crucial to remember that what differentiates "murder" from other instances of homicide (such as accident, self-defense, war, etc.) are the particular circumstances and intention behind the act.

- 9) The Catholic Church teaches that no married woman of child-bearing age could ever use a drug for any reason if was foreseen beforehand that such drug (such as the progesterone pill) would have a contraceptive effect (i.e., prevent conception of a child). *True or FALSE*

See Pope Paul VI's 1968 Encyclical *Humanae vitae* #15 which states that medicines designed to treat other diseases of the organism (such as regulation of the menstrual cycle, or acne) are explicitly permitted.

- 10) The Catholic Church teaches that one can tolerate a moral evil in one's life in order to avoid a greater moral evil. *TRUE* or *False*

This has been a long-standing tradition behind the moral principles of compromise and toleration of evil, and is implicit in Thomas Aquinas' first principle of the natural law (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, question 94), which states that evil is to be avoided as far as possible, but Thomas does NOT say that evil may never be done.

- 11) The Catholic Church teaches that one may never use or permit any evil means or effect so that a good end or effect would come about as a result of that evil means. *True* or *FALSE*

Again, this is another aspect of the principle of the double effect, and also in the legitimate use of force in self-defense, which is found in Thomas Aquinas, as well as the whole just war tradition.

- 12) The Catholic Church teaches that there would be no moral objection as such to members of the same sex living together, just as long as they did not engage in homogenital sexual acts. *TRUE* or *False*

If this were not true, then the whole tradition of same-sex religious communities would be considered immoral. More to the point, though, is the distinction made between a same-sex orientation (which is considered "constitutional" and NOT the result of personal choice and/or sinful activity) and particular homogenital acts. On this point see the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1976 Declaration on Certain Questions of Sexual Ethics (*Persona humana*) #8.

- 13) The Catholic Church teaches that the Pope and the College of Bishops enjoy a special gift of the Holy Spirit to teach in moral matters by virtue of their magisterial office which is not given to others, even if these others have studied these same moral matters. *TRUE* or *False*

This is a long-standing assertion of the "charism" of office in which the Magisterium, by virtue of its office (and NOT due to its intellectual study or accomplishment) is said to enjoy the "special assistance" of the Holy Spirit. It is somewhat analogous to the special assistance of the Holy Spirit given to married couples to live out their sacramental union. Just as this special assistance in marriage doesn't prevent divorce, in the same way the special assistance to the Magisterium doesn't necessarily prevent mistakes on its part. See Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen gentium* #25.

- 14) The Catholic Church teaches that all moral norms which are grounded in the natural law are absolute and unchangeable and thus they ought to bind in the same way in all times, in all places, and in all circumstances. *True* or *FALSE*

See Thomas Aquinas' treatment of the level of moral norms in his treatise on the natural law found in his *Summa Theologiae* I-II, question 94, article 4.

- 15) The Catholic Church has consistently taught in its social teaching that every act which is immoral also ought to be rendered illegal in the civil arena. *True* or *FALSE*

This is a long-standing tradition in Catholic moral thought, and is found in St. Thomas Aquinas' writings on law, as well as in the general principles of compromise and tolerance. See, for example, Pope John Paul II's example of abortion legislation expressed in *Evangelium vitae* #73, quoted in reference to question #3 above.

- 16) The Catholic Church teaches that in end-of-life cases the use of pain medication such as morphine can be used to treat pain even if it is foreseen that such medication will hasten the patient's death or shorten the patient's life. *TRUE* or *False*

This is a long-standing principle in bioethics and is explicitly reaffirmed in Pope John Paul II's *Evangelium vitae* #65: "Pius XII affirmed that it is licit to relieve pain by narcotics, even when the result is decreased consciousness and a shortening of life, 'if no other means exist, and if, in the given circumstances, this does not prevent the carrying out of other religious and moral duties'. In such a case, death is not willed or sought, even though for reasonable motives one runs the risk of it: there is simply a desire to ease pain effectively by using the analgesics which medicine provides."

- 17) The Catholic Church at Vatican II (1962-1965) reversed its centuries' old teaching that procreation was the highest primary end of marriage, and now accepts the love dimension of marriage as being a primary end of equal importance. *TRUE* or *False*

See Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes* #49-51.

- 18) The Catholic Church teaches that the condition of homosexual orientation is not a result of personal choice or bad moral living of vice and that homosexuals should not be considered as sinning by having a same-sex orientation. *TRUE* or *False*

See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1976 Declaration on Certain Questions of Sexual Ethics (*Persona humana*) #8, as well as the fuller answer given in question #12 above.

- 19) The Catholic Church teaches that not each and every papal teaching enjoys the same level of authority, and that to gauge the proper authority of a papal teaching one has to look at what is being taught, as well as the way in which it is being taught, and the frequency with which it is being taught. **TRUE** or *False*

See Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen gentium* #25 which states that one should attend to the 1) character, 2) the manner (e.g., what "sort" of means the teaching is promulgated), and 3) the frequency with which a doctrine is taught. The Holy See publishes annually in its semi-official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* a particular listing of the relative weight of magisterial documents (which is summarized in Fr. Bretzke's handout on "Guidelines for Magisterial Exegesis").

- 20) The Catholic Church teaches explicitly that one should take into account in moral evaluation not only the action itself but the intention of the agent and circumstances of the action in determining its moral rightness or wrongness. **TRUE** or *False*

This is the long-standing moral tradition, explicitly contained in the teaching of Thomas Aquinas (cf. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Question 18 [On Human Acts]) and reiterated more recently in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 1755: "A morally good act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together. An evil end corrupts the action, even if the object is good in itself (such as praying and fasting 'in order to be seen by men')."