

FOOD FOR ETHICAL THOUGHT!



Some of you will know that I have the rather dubious privilege of being a member of an international ethics commission centred in Rome. One of the tasks with which the Commission is currently engaged is to produce a *Code of Ethical Standards for Healthcare Services* that are part of the mission of the Church. Many documents that are produced in Rome intended to support the mission of the Church and provide guidance and direction for our Christian calling, are often written in a language that is highly academic and difficult for most people to practically apply to their lives.

In the light of this particular challenge I am working on a new model of presentation for this *Code of Ethical Standards*, which hopefully will be in a reader-friendly language, interesting, and helpful as an education and training resource. The Code will in particular attempt to address and provide guidance on a number of ethical dilemmas that arise in healthcare ministry. Getting the Commission to accept such a model, which is a significant departure from previous models, will itself be a further challenge! However, it is likely that the model will at least be adopted for English speaking Provinces.

In the light of the current global situation, I have now included a section on the ethics raised by the pandemic, which may be applied to any future global catastrophe that would have significant impact on our healthcare services. I believe the ethical questions it raises are ones which all of us have to bear in mind and live with into the foreseeable future. It is hoped that the questions raised will help us to better understand some of the really difficult challenges that front-line healthcare staff are having to face. If we better understand their position and the decisions and choices they have to make, it will hopefully, help us to be more patient and accepting of a very difficult moral situation. It may help us, as the saying goes 'to be part of the solution rather than the problem.'

ETHICAL CHALLENGES TO A PANDEMIC

Here are some examples of the challenges:

1. A hospital is overwhelmed by a pandemic and the management team realises it cannot treat all equally.

2. **Urgent** medical treatments for non-pandemic related conditions are suspended because Nursing and Medical staff are diverted to dealing with the pandemic.
3. The Government impose restrictions on movement which prevents families from visiting dying relatives.
4. 'Lockdown' measures trigger a rise in mental health conditions and domestic violence.
5. Black and ethnic minority groups are twice as likely to die

Questions I need to ask and *try* to answer:

1. When medical equipment and other resources cannot meet the demand, on what basis should we prioritise treatment?
2. In situations of catastrophic shortages is it possible to balance the rights of the individual and the needs of public health?
3. Is it permissible for the Government to prioritise on the basis of age, social role, presumed value, or a predicted life-span?
4. What is the most important and urgent goal in a pandemic?
5. A recent news item reported that 2 bikers travelled from Rochdale to Whitby for fish and chips. (I don't know whether they got their fish and chips, but they did get a fine!). Was there behaviour morally acceptable in the current climate?
6. Is there *always* a solution to *every* moral dilemma?

Another question you may well be asking is: *Where is God in this pandemic?*

A response to that in a later edition of the Bulletin!

SENT BY Brother Robert.



The short answer to that question is, I believe, God is right here with us, and we have to dispel any idea that this pandemic or any other human catastrophe is the work of God! It may be helpful to take a peep back into early Christian history to observe how the early Christians responded to plagues of the past, and their response clearly follows Jesus' commands:

'Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends';

'Love your neighbour as yourself',

The *Golden Rule*: 'Do to others as you would like them to do to you' and;

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, which teaches us not to pass by anyone in need.

This is the Christian ethic to plagues and their like, when we are faced with a duty, (a call) to put our life at the service of others.

Two of the great plagues of the early Christian era, were the Antonine Plague (AD 165) during the time of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, and about a century later (AD 251) another one which afflicted the Greco-Roman world in which Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria described how the pagans (non-Christians) threw anyone who caught the plague into the street and left them to die, in the hope that they themselves would be spared! Not recommended in the interests of public health!

But, significantly, the response of the Christian was not to abandon the sick but to do as Christ commanded and care for them. It is widely regarded that this action of responding to the Gospel call saved many lives simply by providing victims with the most essential needs of food, drink and care. Historians have claimed that this Christian response did not go unnoticed and contributed to the growing idea that Christians were marked by their mercy and selflessness; a mark that contributed to the growth of the early Church.

So, what's the message for us as we face the challenges of Covid-19? We are duty bound to observe the measures set out by the Government in matters of hygiene, social-distancing and lockdown, since we have a social and moral responsibility to protect the most vulnerable and not to put our own safety at risk unnecessarily. But, if circumstances become so grave, such as the healthcare system being completely overwhelmed, and one

of your neighbours is in need, it would be a duty to at least *consider* going to the aid of your neighbour, simply because you are a Christian.

As perplexing as it may seem, the crisis that we currently live through, is the continuing story of our salvation. It is in these times, as in all times, that we are called to live as Christ did and as he commanded: 'I have given you an example, wash one another's feet.' Today, that call to serve is witnessed in the many acts of courage, self-sacrifice and indeed heroism, of those who place their lives at risk when offering consolation, encouragement and support to those affected directly or indirectly by Covid-19.

As to words of encouragement: The pre-Christian philosopher 'Aristotle' claimed in his arguments that the purpose of our lives is *happiness*; the Penny Catechism made the same claim – God made us to be *happy* with him NOW and forever in heaven; Jesus claimed that he had come that we may have life and have it to the full; and Julian of Norwich wrote, God's purpose is to make us *glad* and *merry* in life.....