

# BREAKING BONDS AT WHAT EXPENSE?

**H**ow ought we to respond to the wrongdoing that we encounter on an almost daily basis? More precisely, to what extent can we associate ourselves with someone else's wrongdoing without ourselves becoming morally tainted?



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For several centuries, the Catholic moral tradition has dealt with this issue by employing the principle of "cooperation with evil," a tool for assessing what types of relationships with wrongdoing are morally permissible. Of late, however, in at least some instances, this longstanding moral tradition seems not to be the operative principle. It appears to have been replaced by a different approach.

Several examples illustrate the shift. Recently, a Catholic social services organization was informed by church authorities that it needed to withdraw from United Way because United Way gives money to Planned Parenthood. When asked about the directive, a spokesperson for church authorities said the Catholic social service agency could be seen as raising money for Planned Parenthood by their efforts to raise money for United Way. He also indicated that other Catholic organizations in the area would also be expected to sever ties with United Way. According to the spokesperson, organizations must "operate in a manner consistent with Catholic social and moral teachings" in order to call themselves 'Catholic.'<sup>1</sup>

In another instance, in a different part of the country, Catholics were recently instructed by church authorities "to be prudent and just in making their charitable decisions, particularly on issues related to human life and marriage."<sup>2</sup> They went on to explain that "all human life is sacred and must be protected. This is why we should not support or endorse individuals and organizations that provide, promote or advocate for abortion, contraception, reproductive rights/family planning, or embryonic

stem cell research."<sup>3</sup> In light of these convictions, individual Catholics and Catholic institutions were instructed not to support organizations whose missions were deemed to be morally objectionable, in particular, Amnesty International, the March of Dimes, Susan G. Komen for the Cure, UNICEF, CROP Hunger Walk and the American Association of University Women.

Another example involves United Way's "Dial 2-1-1" program that provides information via telephone and the Internet about critical health and human services available to needy individuals within their community. Some groups oppose 2-1-1 because, along with all the other information it makes available, it provides factual information about abortion services. It does not counsel or refer for abortions, but only provides information, together with information about pregnancy support groups, teen pregnancy prevention, family life education, sexual abstinence education programs and the like. Groups opposing 2-1-1 have contacted Catholic health care providers and others asking them to sever their relationship with United Way.

Finally, members of a pro-life organization have contacted some Catholic health care sys-

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tems to request they sever their contracts with Stericycle, a waste disposal company. They claim Stericycle includes abortion providers among its many clients and disposes of aborted fetuses from these providers and other clients.<sup>4</sup>

So what are we to make of these developments? Several observations:

First, if one were to employ the principle of cooperation with evil in each of these instances, one would likely conclude that the cooperation on the part of a Catholic entity with these organizations is, at most, remote material cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Such cooperation can be justified for a proportionate reason.

Is there such a reason? These organizations do enormous good for poor, vulnerable, ill individuals. Their core missions resonate with our own and are much broader than any activity deemed morally problematic. What might be problematic is a very small part of what they do, and it cannot be said to define completely who they are. Furthermore, with perhaps one exception, these organizations are themselves not directly involved in the wrongdoing (in performing prohibited activities or procedures or in providing something essential to performing them).

Second, it is highly unlikely that Catholic individuals' or organizations' involvement with these organizations does or will create scandal, i.e., lead others to engage in wrongdoing. Will the vast majority of people honestly think that a Catholic's or a Catholic organization's support of Susan G. Komen for the Cure, or the March of Dimes or Amnesty International is really support for abortion, or that these individuals or entities take abortion lightly? In addition, it is important to realize that scandal can work both ways. Not supporting the good causes of these organizations could lead some to indifference toward the tortured, the hungry, the prevention of cancer and serious disabilities. For others, it could lead to a weakening of their faith or disenchantment with the church.

Third, to my knowledge, no theological or ethical arguments have been offered to support the conclusion that Catholics and Catholic organizations should have no involvement with the organizations noted above. I have seen neither an application of the principle of cooperation, nor an explanation of why the principle does not apply, nor a theological or ethical rationale for what seems to be an alternative approach. The only rationale proffered is that these organization or programs have some involvement with actions that

are deemed immoral by the church. But this is not the Catholic tradition. The Catholic tradition is far more nuanced as reflected in the principle of cooperation and the teaching on scandal.

Fourth, if the approach illustrated in these examples becomes the norm for the way that Catholics and Catholic institutions deal with wrongdoing deemed contrary to church teaching, where are the limits, if any? If Catholics and Catholic organizations must eschew any association with wrongdoers and with those who have associations with wrongdoers, there seem to be no limits.

Should I no longer shop at my local Walgreen's or food market because their pharmacies sell con-

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doms, and birth control pills and, possibly, RU-486? Should I not associate with my next-door neighbors who are a lesbian couple or my neighbors across the street who are living together but unmarried? Should I no longer associate and worship with some fellow parishioners whom I know practice birth control, and with others whom I know support gay marriage? Should Catholic institutions forgo the use of commercial insurers because they offer policies that cover birth control, sterilization procedures and even abortion, and their premiums ultimately go to pay for such? And on and on.

If disassociation from wrongdoing and wrongdoers is the *modus operandi*, and wrongdoers and wrongdoing are all around us, then it seems that the approach being espoused leads to a withdrawal from the world. In addition, it seems to place Catholics and Catholic institutions over and against others in a position of moral superiority. But aren't we all sinners? Aren't we all "mixed bags"—mixtures of good and evil?

Finally, there is a much broader theological issue here that needs to be dealt with — the relationship of the church to the modern world. Neither the Gospel, nor the Catholic tradition, nor the church's self-understanding calls for a

retreat from the world or a total disassociation from wrongdoing. Jesus did not isolate himself or walk away from wrongdoers. His mission was precisely to wrongdoers (all of us, in various ways and to various degrees) as is so well exemplified in the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7). Jesus was known to eat with tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:10-11; Mark 2:15-16; Luke 5:30; 7:34). He engaged with the adulterous Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-29). The instances of Jesus associating with wrongdoers are numerous. This is what Jesus was about. It was core to his mission and is core to the mission of his followers.

The Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* underscores this mission. In the words of the Council: "[T]he Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ Himself. And Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served" (No. 3). Elsewhere in the same document it says, "The Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass" (No. 45) and "through her individual members and her whole community, the Church believes she can contribute greatly toward making the family of [human persons] and its history more human" (No. 40).

Contributing to the humanization of all people and helping to bring about the kingdom of God cannot occur by retreating from the world or from those involved in or somehow associated with wrongdoing. Christians must be in the world if they are to have any hope of helping to transform the world; indeed they have a special responsibility to do so. A posture of retreat, or isolation, or "keeping our hands clean," or "being morally pure" not only leads us astray from our true mission as Christians but smacks of arrogance. It fails to recognize that all of us human persons and all of our institutions are at once graced but always in need of transformation and redemption.

As a ministry of the church called to witness to Christ in all things, Catholic health care and the various organizations that make it up must engage the world, not close themselves off from it, and collaborate with others in hopes of transforming the world. This means Catholics and Catholic organizations will have to rub elbows with those

who may not espouse all of the church's beliefs or may not live up to all of its values.

Without question, Catholics and Catholic organizations must avoid unacceptable forms of cooperation and be vigilant about the possibility of scandal. They must also be careful not to become comfortable with wrongdoing and ought to oppose what is truly evil. However, adopting an excessively rigid stance and foreclosing on others because they may be involved in some wrongdoing on some level, seems to undermine what the Gospel and the church are about — advancing the Kingdom.

The increasing number of instances of this approach to organizations that in some way are associated with wrongdoing (but are also involved in doing much good) is a cause of considerable concern and confusion. At minimum, there is a need for a conversation within the church about how to proceed, a conversation informed by the Gospel, the church's self-understanding over the centuries and our longstanding moral tradition.

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#### NOTES

1. Diane Dietz, "Abortion issue splits charities," *The Register-Guard*, December 28, 2010, available at: <http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/news/cityregion/25708807-41/united-services-catholic-community-parenthood.csp>.
2. "N. Dakota bishops: Catholics should not donate to 'objectionable' groups," March 11, 2011, available at: [www.catholicnewsagency.com](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com).
3. "N. Dakota bishops."
4. It seems, however, that all medical waste disposal companies are required by license under federal regulation to dispose of human tissue from aborted fetuses and that Stericycle has drawn the line where it can and prohibits its clients from disposing of intact aborted fetuses.
5. Each of these organizations deserves a separate moral analysis, but that is not possible in a column such as this. For a tool to assist in doing this, see Ron Hamel and Michael Panicola, "Cooperating with Philanthropic Organizations: How to Assess the Moral Permissibility of a Catholic Health Care Organization's Involvement," *Health Progress* 89 (March-April 2008): 49-55.

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