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## Review of *Medical Ethics: Sources of Catholic Teachings*, 4th Edition

Daniel P. Maher

Assumption College, [dmaher@assumption.edu](mailto:dmaher@assumption.edu)

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***Medical Ethics:  
Sources of Catholic Teachings, 4th edition***

**edited by Kevin D. O’Rourke, OP, and Philip J. Boyle**

Georgetown University Press, 2011, paperback, \$39.95  
352 pages, bibliographic notes and index, ISBN 978-1-58901-742-9

Now in its fourth edition, *Medical Ethics: Sources of Catholic Teachings*, assembles excerpts from ecclesiastical documents that express and often explain Catholic teaching on moral issues in health care. In each of seventy-five chapters, arranged alphabetically with titles such as “Abortion,” “Fertility Assistance,” and “Right to Health Care,” the editors collect appropriate passages from one or more sources. The emphasis falls on clinical ethics, but the institutional and social dimensions of health care also receive considerable attention. Well-known documents—such as *Evangelium vitae*, the fifth edition of the *Ethical and Religious Directives (ERDs)*, *Donum vitae*, and *Dignitas personae*—take center stage, but one also finds selections from papal addresses, documents by individual bishops and state conferences of bishops, statements emanating from the Church’s various administrative bodies in Rome and Washington, DC, and even one text attributed (wrongly) to the bishops of New Zealand. These excerpts, which account for 90 percent of the text, are reproduced in most cases without accompanying footnotes or commentary. The balance of the text consists of three introductory chapters intended by the editors to situate Church teaching “in proper perspective” (xix).

Readers familiar with the third edition of this book will see significant changes. Despite being approximately one hundred pages shorter than the 1999 version, the fourth edition manages to expand the breadth of its content, mostly owing to formatting changes that leave less blank space. Whole chapters have been deleted and new chapters added, not only to

accommodate recent texts (especially *Dignitas personae*, which is cited extensively) but also to focus more properly on health care. Thus, chapters on addiction, homosexuality, and murder have disappeared in favor of new chapters on, for example, prenatal adoption and RU-486.

Many such changes yield clear improvements, while others seem reasonably defensible even if not unquestionable. For example, Pius XII's 1954 allocution on tissue transplantation, now deleted, might have seemed dated, but no comparable expression of the moral concerns attending this issue has replaced it. Also, deleting the chapters "Children and the Family" and "Family and Marriage" (presumably because they were nonmedical) makes it less obvious where to look for the positive teaching on sex and fertility. The focus on specifically medical topics almost necessarily interferes somewhat with another goal: presenting Church teaching as more than a matter of rules or negative precepts.

*Comparison to the Third Edition.* While the previous edition contained the entire text of the *ERDs* in a single chapter, the new edition quotes the document piecemeal, where it is topically relevant, incorporating nearly every part at least once. Additionally, the editors have eliminated individual chapters on the principles of double effect, cooperation in evil, and totality in favor of an introductory chapter intended to provide "a more extensive explanation of these principles" (xx). This chapter also explains other "normative concepts," including informed consent, subsidiarity, scandal, and preferential option for the poor, although chapters are nevertheless dedicated to some of these same topics in the body of the text (for example, "Dignity of Person," "Informed Consent," and "Scandal"). In another innovation, the editors have noted specific lacunae in Church teaching, such as on GIFT and on the use of methotrexate for ectopic pregnancy, and in these cases they have provided references to the works of certain theologians (and even a quotation from one).

*Evaluative Comments.* It is helpful to consider the book's stated purpose, which is "to help health care professionals and the public at large know the teaching of the Church concerning various health care issues by presenting the relevant documents that contain and explain it" (xix). The book is not designed to meet the demands of moral theologians or scholarly experts in medical ethics. Instead, it aims to make Church teaching intelligible to the laity (i.e., non-ethicists) who nevertheless wish, perhaps for professional reasons, to understand Catholic moral standards in health care. The book does not primarily target Catholics (as the third edition did), but the editors do want "to help interested people to comprehend and internalize" this teaching (xix). Readers should not expect to find a complete treasury of documents that are important for a thorough understanding of Church teaching, but rather a representative sampling (especially from more recent texts) of authoritative statements. *Compendium of Catholic Teachings* would be a more accurate subtitle.

One virtue is the book's breadth of sources, and it must be said that this collection does provide a useful orientation to Church teaching on medical ethics. Although the editors deserve neither credit nor blame for the content of the documents, they are responsible for selecting and arranging excerpts for their audience. On that score, three classes of problems arise. First, in some cases, editorial decisions have interfered with a clear presentation of Church teaching. For example, the chapter titles unavoidably introduce some artificiality (we find "Hydration and Nutrition, Assisted" rather than "Nutrition and Hydration" or "Assisted Hydration and Nutrition"), and alphabetization based on those titles often separates related topics (for example, "Assisted Suicide" and "Physician-Assisted Suicide"). Indeed, the decision to replicate excerpts (more or less exactly) in multiple locations—rather than simply referring the reader to a previous quotation—yields redundancy coupled with omissions, some of which are significant. For

example, portions of *Evangelium vitae* n. 65 (on euthanasia) are quoted at least five times (twice with substantial typographical errors), but at no point does the text include the formal condemnation of euthanasia (parallel to the condemnation of abortion, which, incidentally, is also reproduced inaccurately). In a more important case, the excerpt from the *Declaration on Euthanasia* in the chapter “Ordinary and Extraordinary Means to Preserve Life” includes only three of the declaration’s four “clarifications,” which significantly truncates the teaching, as is made clear by the specific appeal to the missing fourth clarification in the chapter “Hydration and Nutrition, Assisted.” Fortunately, the chapter “Withholding and Withdrawing Life Support” excerpts the declaration more completely.

Infrequent cross-references between chapters (and an unreliable index) make it unnecessarily difficult to know when to stop looking for related material. For example, there is no reference from any of the chapters dealing with end-of-life issues to the chapter “Pain Relief,” to its neighbor and near duplicate “Palliative Care,” or to the easily overlooked “Terminal Sedation.” This last chapter *does* direct readers to the chapters “Euthanasia” and “Withholding and Withdrawing Life Support,” but help is more urgently needed in the other direction. Most important, “Terminal Sedation,” which cites nothing except the *ERDs*, inexplicably makes this false claim: “To date, there has been no other authoritative statement” in regard to terminal sedation. In fact, the text quoted from the *ERDs* itself paraphrases teachings made famous by Pius XII, which have been subsequently quoted in part and incorporated into the *Declaration on Euthanasia* and *Evangelium vitae*, as may be seen in the chapters “Pain Relief” and “Palliative Care.”

The glaring mistake just described is not typical, but it does reveal that the editors have not carefully reviewed the manuscript. In fact, the second class of problems with this edition may

be described as errors that no competent Catholic moralist could make. For example, the Holy See's 2004 statement on cloning is attributed to Vatican II. The 1993 document on uterine isolation is attributed to the Doctrinal Congregation on Sterilization. In another place, the table of contents indicates that a United Nations document, "On Implementation of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS," can be found on page 59, but the text quoted on that page is from the "Note on the Banalization of Sexuality regarding Certain Interpretations of 'Light of the World'" by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2010). Elsewhere, in the section on assisted nutrition and hydration, Pope John Paul II is quoted as insisting that we not interrupt "minimal care" to unconscious patients. (The correct word is "minimal.") In "Futile Care," an excerpt from the 2008 board statement by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability is misidentified as a document from the New Zealand bishops providing guidance for voters. When the editors become aware of these flaws, they may react like the man in Matthew (13:28) who discovered weeds among the wheat: "An enemy has done this!"

The third class of problems arises from pervasive carelessness in copy editing: typographical errors by the dozens, promiscuous irregularity in the citation of documents, failure to follow the editors' own stated rule for marking ellipses in quoted texts, and the use of endnotes without clearly distinguishing those that belong to the documents from those written by the editors. In addition, the excerpts haphazardly preserve or omit the headings, section numbers, and structural divisions of the original texts. Some documents that are readily available on the USCCB Web site (with their dates and authorship clearly indicated) are identified instead by their different titles and dates of publication in *Origins*, which is unnecessarily misleading. Of course, one does not envy the editors their task of finding a clear and consistent way of citing ecclesiastical documents, but these defects compound opportunities for confusion.

Accordingly, some simple changes would improve the text. It would help to have a comprehensive list of the sources where the original documents may be found in their entirety, both in Web and print versions. Correlating the Latin and English titles of documents also seems necessary. Perhaps readers can be expected to know that what the text cites sometimes as *Evangelium vitae* and sometimes as “The Gospel of Life” is one source, but they will have a much harder time recognizing references made in the text to some documents by their Latin names (especially *Donum vitae*, *Iura et bona*, and *Humanae vitae*) because the text identifies these documents almost exclusively by their markedly different English titles. Readers would also benefit if the editors clarified the relation between the USCC, the NCCB, and the USCCB and if they gave some explanation of how the several Roman sources of documents (congregations, councils, academies, and so on) are ordered and affiliated within the Vatican.

Furthermore, although nobody buys a book like this for its introductory material, general remarks on the first three chapters seem warranted. First, the new chapter (“Normative Concepts”) does not achieve the difficult combination of clarity and sophistication that characterizes the other two chapters. Moreover, its editorial defects (e.g., attributing a quotation from *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* to *Mater et magistra*) are unfortunately consistent with those documented above. Second, these chapters emphasize the role of Scripture and Tradition in Church teaching on medical ethics to the point that they reverse the priority expressed in the preamble of the *ERDs*: “The moral teachings that we profess here flow principally from the natural law, understood in the light of the revelation Christ has entrusted to his Church.” The editors do not fail to state that “human learning” enters into Church teaching (4), but they underplay the extent to which Catholic moral standards are an expression of natural moral reasoning. Instead, they cast individual conscience as the home of reason and Church

teaching as “faith-related information” founded on Scripture and Tradition (25–27). In this presentation, Church teaching appears as one element in the formation of conscience for Catholics due to their faith, but it has no clear relevance to non-Catholics. To the contrary, we may grant that the deepest and most comprehensive understanding of moral truths comes from theology while still affirming that Catholic *moral* teaching is essentially nonsectarian. This deserves clear emphasis, especially if, as the editors assert, that teaching is pertinent to current debates about health care reform.

*Conclusion.* The problems affecting the main part of the text are numerous and sometimes serious, but they are discrete and remediable. Until a fifth edition corrects them, this text still merits attention for bringing together in a single package a valuable array of official Church teachings on medical issues. In fact, although the editors never mention college students as part of their audience, the text seems more suitable for classroom use than for unmediated consultation by health professionals and interested citizens. In the classroom, a knowledgeable teacher can compensate for some of the editorial flaws and guide students to a fruitful reading of these documents.

Daniel P. Maher

*Daniel P. Maher, PhD, is an associate professor of philosophy at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts.*