

## Civilization and Bioethics

Authentic civilization is rooted in morality and objective values. In fact, the bioethics of societies tells us if they are civilized or not. Scientific knowledge and development can be at the service of humanity or of barbarism, depending on the ethics that guides their application.

The NAZI and Marxist revolutions are so morbidly fascinating because entire technologically advanced countries were enslaved to evil ideologies. They directly manifested what Pope Saint John Paul II called a “culture of death,” which is the opposite of true civilization. One of the first things the Bolsheviks put in place after they seized power in Russia was legal abortion on demand. Even before he established the extermination camps, Hitler advocated for and carried out widespread sterilization and euthanasia of the sick, especially those with genetic conditions.

It is commonplace today for people to shake their heads in disbelief at the horrors of the concentration camps and gulags that were major features of these regimes, but our modern “civilized” societies also engage in terrible cruelty. Several billion preborn babies have been the victims of legal abortion around the world in the last few decades. The late professor, now beatified, Jerome Lejeune referred to the containers used after the artificial conception of children in labs as part of *in vitro* fertilization, where millions of human embryos are kept in frozen storage, as “concentration cans.” There is also a clear trend towards acceptance of euthanasia or assisted suicide in country after country.

I read Tolkien at night with my daughter during this past Lent. As we moved through *The Lord of the Rings*, it struck me as never before that the essence of the quest to destroy the One Ring was an ethical insight. The forces on the good side are weaker and tempted at times to wield the Ring of Power to destroy Sauron and his evil creatures, but they realize doing so would only lead to their own corruption and transformation into evil tyrants. It is a profound wisdom to realize that the end does *not* justify the means, that it is not ethical to use evil means even to achieve a good result. The Church warns of the appallingly slippery slope once one has agreed to do an evil, even with the best of intentions.

A false understanding of compassion seems to be one of the doorways to the abandonment of sound bioethics and true civilization. Too often emotional responses to objectively terrible suffering lead to committing injustices and ethical violations. By condoning euthanasia or assisted suicide, we do not truly help sick patients “put an end to their misery.” Direct killing crosses a bright ethical line that goes beyond the justified relief of pain. Once accepted in the more extreme cases, the inner logic of this position transforms healers into executioners.

Suffering is an evil, but it is not the supreme evil that some make it out to be. It is also inevitable that we will face suffering in our lives. The Christian vision of redemptive suffering begins with the willingly accepted passion and death of Jesus Christ on the cross to save us from our sins. He took on pain and suffering to free us from the slavery of sin. [The Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) (# 1505) points to the Catholic belief that “Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion.” Suffering need not be meaningless pain, as many see it. The saints teach us that it can be a strong means of growing in holiness if our hearts and wills respond to suffering with love and true compassion for others.

It is not easy to “take up one’s cross” and follow the Lord, but this has been a key Christian insight for almost two millennia. Jesus loved to shake up our complacent lives and perspectives with paradoxes. The Beatitudes are full of apparently contradictory assertions, such as “blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Mt 5:4). If Christ had not said that joyfully enduring insults and persecution for his sake would lead to great rewards in heaven, we might be more tempted to compromise with (or not be signs of contradiction to) the powerful ideologies of our age.

All this brings us back to civilization and bioethics. To be uncivilized is fundamentally about something much deeper than rudeness or a lack of refinement. A failed civilization does not pass the test of treating the most weak and vulnerable ethically. Justice and objective values are pillars of civilization. Abandon either and one falls into the arbitrariness that is a hallmark of barbarism. There can be a civilization of love but not one of ethical relativism. Technological advancement and biomedical practice must be guided by civilized ethics. A great tragedy of our world is that they are increasingly not. That is why The National

Catholic Bioethics Center exists, to support the Church in pointing towards the ethics that will make a truly civilized world.