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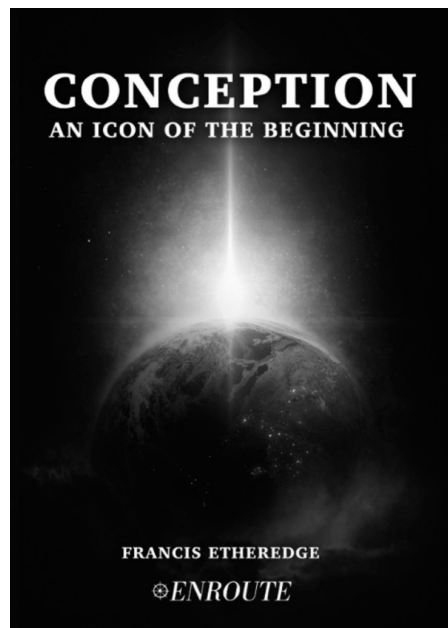
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BOOK REVIEW

CONCEPTION: AN ICON OF THE BEGINNING. BY FRANCIS ETHEREDGE PUBLISHED BY ENROUTE

REVIEWED BY BISHOP JOHN KEENAN OF PAISLEY, SCOTLAND.



This book arose in response to the question: When does the life of a human being begin? It is a question as old as humanity itself, and the paths taken to answer it are now well worn and known.

In that sense it is a rare event indeed to find the questions take us in quite a new direction, one that has its beginning before tried and tested words and concepts, and opens its vista to include the insights of origins, of art and spirit. Where others have seen a crossroads separating the paths of faith and science, Etheredge has noticed a highway of mystery that allows more sense. In this world of his we begin to understand how the dilemmas that have plagued questions around human life and love are not lacking in arguments but have become stuck out of a failure of imagination more than anything.

In bringing the gift of new intuitions into play Francis Etheredge opens the mind to wonder at what creation would have meant to our world before its sights were lowered to mere notions of fabrication and reproduction. Where the world seems blinded by techne and asks only about usefulness, he sees its poesis and is lost in contemplation; where it sees only stuff and obsolescence, he sees eternal significance.

At the moment of conception, Etheredge sees not just fusion but light as, who knows, some radiation of that first Light. The body and soul are not two entities but sacramentally one, as outward and inward expressions of the one reality of the human person, itself an icon embodying the idea of God. In widening the horizon, he invites us to consider human sexuality way beyond pure function and satisfaction, and to imagine it as a harmony

whose tune begins in the breath of divine intercommunion itself.

It makes sense, then, that his work is carried out in the company of poets and artists, philosophers and theologians. Only this method opens the intuitions of creation and revelation, of beginnings and incarnations, of mysteries and their expressions.

All of this is the living environment where the central thesis breathes; that where the body lives, there is the soul, and where there is both there is the human person, created whole as the only way God knows how.

I invite you to accompany Etheredge on the adventure of where the life of a human being begins, not so much as to have some ready-made answer to the controversies of our times, but so that this long contemplative gaze into the eyes of the human person allows you, at the same moment, to see something of the face of God and know, for what it is worth, the vast beginning and end of man.

CONCEPTION: AN ICON OF THE BEGINNING by Francis Etheredge

Editors note: In response to his recent book we asked Frances Etheredge five questions. Here are Francis' answers to the questions that we posed.

Bishop John Keenan's review of his book *Conception: An Icon of the Beginning* is above

Introduction

In writing about myself I hope you will understand that God begins with where we are; and, no matter the hopelessness, human complexity or profound nature of the reality of our lived lives – God exists to help! When, therefore, we discover ourselves in the midst of overwhelming wrongs and our nature rebels, because the gift of our humanity is greater than the tragedies we are living through, I beg you to draw on every piece of good evidence, principle and source, whether contemporary or otherwise, and dialogue with the wealth of Tradition, Scripture and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church (*cf. Dei Verbum, 10*).

Could you tell us something about yourself?

I grew up in a Catholic family and, through the life-experience of being beaten at school for being an academic failure I inwardly collapsed in a kind of rejection of the humiliations of life. As I grew up and questioned the deterioration of my life expressed in friendlessness, undeveloped interests, running away, attempting suicide, going into adult life and passing through innumerable jobs, unfinished courses and relationships – beginning to read fuelled the questioning that, at the same time,

questioned everything and opened upon the indescribably slow dialogue with God which ended and began again with the experience of reading the Catechism of the Catholic Church which said: If God can create everything out of nothing He can make a new beginning for the sinner (*cf. CCC, 298*) - and He did. I am now married with eleven children, three of whom are in heaven. For my part, I am currently writing.

Your book *Conception is your most detailed work to date*. Why did you write it?

This book arose and began, some twenty or thirty years ago, out of the discovery that God acts at the beginning of each one of us (*cf. Humanae Vitae, 13*); but, as reflection and research showed, while there has been immense historical progress with understanding the beginning of each person - there remains an absolutely fascinating question: Does God create the soul at the first instant of fertilization or at some subsequent point? On the one hand this question has an obvious answer: The existence of each one of us is a witness to a beginning. But on the other hand this question draws on what is ancient and new, complex and simple, evidence and Revelation; and, in the course of these years, then, the book has been rewritten at least three times and gone from being a developing dialogue to a book with a more dialogic structure: each contributor multiplying the different aspects of the question without, I hope, losing the focus of the book as a whole. In a word, then, *Conception: An Icon of the Beginning* is written out of the desire to answer the question of when each of us begins, to bring together what dynamically stimulates that investigation and to write about it both simply and, at the same time, in a way that points a way forward through the myriad difficulties to the fact: the fact that each one of us has a beginning!

How do you find the state of bioethics in the secular world?

The secular world, in a sense, is that world which exists through the legitimate and positive development of all that is intrinsically good; however, through the reality of human imperfection, there are many developments which are therefore profoundly questionable. While it is laudable to assist married men and women with the problem of infertility, advancing responses which are not a direct answer to the problem of infertility has neither advanced a greater understanding and treatment of that infertility nor come without immense bioethical problems - many of which derive, precisely, from a kind of philosophical "separatism": that it is possible to investigate all questions as if they are equally isolatable from the whole of human being. Even modern medicine recognizes, increasingly, the interactions between life-style, constitution, diet, drugs (whether medicinal or otherwise), illness, psychological characteristics, family dynamics, social conditions and the roots of nature; however, when it comes to questions of human fertility, the transmission of human life, the nature of human conception, there is a tendency to "isolate" the aspects under investigation to the point that the preoccupation with microscopic parts is almost a form of reality denial.

In other words, in this world of increasing presence to each other in all the particular, personal characteristics of our lives, there needs to be a renewal of the medicine of the whole man and the whole woman, each dynamic members of the whole human race inhabiting planet-home. Part of that renewal is, then, recognizing what is good, true and beautiful, wherever it is to be found and from whom, therefore, it is possible to draw as well as, hopefully, to engage in that dialogue of differences that develops us all.^[2]

How about inside the Catholic Church?

One of the immense gifts of the Catholic Church is that capacity to be "the place of common ground" because, ultimately, truth will not contradict truth but will, rather, elucidate, stimulate, enhance, develop and multiply the possibilities of coming to a comprehensive account of the whole human being. Thus, as St. Paul VI once said, the Church is an expert in humanity; and this expertise, both rooted in nature and Revelation, is at the service of mankind: Is at the salvific service of mankind. This is not to say that there are not lessons to be learnt in whatever field of activity is to be considered - but it is to say that there is an ongoing realism about the human being which needs to be constantly recovered, rediscovered and developed more fully: a realism that by its very nature is inclusive of the whole mystery of human being; and, therefore, where there are particular questions still to be investigated, there is both a development of her account of the dynamic whole of human being and, at the same time, a deeper and more embracing answer to the particular problems that arise. Recognizing, therefore, the ongoing tragedies of abortion, harmful human embryo experimentation and the freezing of human embryos calls out to all of us to rediscover the fundamental social nature of human being and human rights: that we do not exist as discrete entities but that we express a concrete relationship to each other in virtue of the very humanity out of which we spring. On the one hand, understanding the wholeness of human being-in-relationship entails understanding that the first instant of fertilization begins a biologically inscribed psycho-social unfolding development of the person-in-the-family of man. While, on the other one hand, it seems that the unique resources of the Christian Faith are unrelated to the problems of everyday life, it is increasingly clear that the sacramental mysteries, the mysteries of the *Immaculate Conception and the Incarnation of the Son of God are mysteries for the sake of our salvation and need to be drawn upon more and more profoundly for the good of our times*.

Having studied bioethics for many years do you have any advice for Catholics in healthcare?

Develop your understanding and love of the human person: the being-in-relation made in the image and likeness of the Blessed Trinity!^[3] Develop your capacity to recognize common ground in the ethical traditions of the world, wherever it is to be found such that truth builds up truth and explicates the whole of human being.^[4] Develop that cross-cultural and international nature of collaboration which will, ultimately, both witness to the common nature of human beings and express itself, hopefully, in

renewed, embracing and well founded declarations of human rights: rights that are ultimately the rights of relationship: that where the gift of humanity is present there is a relationship of equal rights.^[5]

What possibility is there, in this day and age, in this cultural climate, for Catholic University Teaching Hospitals to take the fullness of human being as the point of departure for a humanitarian rescue of modern medicine? What myriad investigations need to be done to recognize the integrity of human being? What answers are there to suffering which both draw on all that is humane and all that explores the meaning of life-experience?

What helps, then, to draw us into the wealth of the gifts of God, whether in the daily life of the Church or in one of her beautiful charisms, I invite you to seek out what is possible for you in the reality of your life so that you may benefit, as I do, from the words sacramental life, teaching and community of the Church.^[6]

Conclusion

We live, as Pope Francis says in *Humana Communitas*,^[7] in the perspective of the Resurrection: let our lives live out of a resounding appeal to God to heal, to comfort and to bring all to eternal life.

In our next issue we will be publishing a further article by Francis entitled "The Human Person Is a Bioethical Word: the Need to Recover the Humanity of the Human Race"

REFERENCES

1. Although these experiences recur in different ways, in different books, probably those that address them most directly are the following two: *The Prayerful Kiss* and *The Family on Pilgrimage: God Leads Through Dead Ends* (both published by En Route Books and Media).
2. Cf. for example, the trilogy: From Truth to truth: *Volume I: Faithful Reason*; *Volume II: Faith and Reason in Dialogue*; *Volume III: Faith is Married Reason* (all published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing).
3. Cf. also, *Scripture: A Unique Word*, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
4. There is an almost impossible amount of work in every area of life; and, therefore, we need a holy realism about what is for each of us to do.
5. The development of these ideas can be found in *The Human Person: A Bioethical Word* (published by En Route Books and Media).
6. I am a member of the *Neocatechumenal Way*.
7. *Humana Communitas*, 13, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the President of the Pontifical Academy for Life for the 25th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Academy".

BECAUSE I AM. CHRISTIAN ACCOMPANIMENT THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF A PRE-BIRTH DIAGNOSIS OF A POSSIBLE DISABILITY BY CRISTINA GANGEMI

(REDEMPTORIST PUBLICATIONS).

REVIEWED BY DR PRAVIN THEVASATHAN



Because I Am is a "programme of reflection and spiritual accompaniment for parents whose child receives a pre-birth diagnosis of a medical condition or possible experience of disability." As such, it is a vital resource for our age. I have spoken to too many parents who were put under pressure to consider abortion as an alternative to having a disabled child. I have also encountered too many parents whose relationships have broken down due, in part, with having to deal with a disabled child.

There is a great quote at the start from Dr Pia Matthews, whose daughter has Rett Syndrome: people with disabilities are not only those "to whom we give. He or she must also be helped to become one who gives to the best of his or her ability."

The child with a disability should be recognized as an individual person, not as a diagnosis. The author looks at various paths that are open to parents who have been told that the child has a disability. What if they opt for termination? I prefer the term abortion. We are called to accompany the parents in a non-judgmental way. We certainly should not cast judgment on the parents. But the followers of Carl Rogers ask too much of us when they tell us not to judge the moral act. I believe the author is calling us to judge the act but not the person as she writes: Christian teaching can "never advocate termination." In some circles, being judgmental and rigid describes those who simply want to adhere to the natural law.

Accompaniment means being with the parents as they travel through the teachings and insights of their faith traditions and supporting them. Do we tell them to accept their sufferings and unite them to the sufferings of Our Lord? This requires a considerable amount of discernment.