

How to do Ethics.

Keynote Address presented at the 10th EPCRA conference in Leuven , Belgium,
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Twenty years ago, a small number of enthusiastic and committed Pentecostal Christians who were studying at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven had become convinced of the merit of doing organized research in the area of theology and religious studies. To many of their fellow Pentecostals, this probably seemed like a strange idea. For the very essence of a faith guided directly by the Spirit appears to be inimical to humanly disciplined research. Parallel to this, it must have seemed even more strange that Pentecostal and Charismatic leaders were engaged in theological research in a Roman Catholic institution. For our own part, I must also observe that many of my own colleagues were somewhat puzzled about Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians doing theological research at all. Nonetheless, we are proud to count a number of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians among our graduates, some of whom were founders of the European Pentecostal and Charismatic Research Association (EPCRA).

Twenty years ago, ecumenical research at the Faculty of Theology was still at an early stage of development. In the fifteen years after the Second Vatican Council, we had only just begun to understand the implications of ecumenical dialogue. Few steps had been taken to provide a firm academic base for research in ecumenical issues and for cultivating ecumenical dialogue in a constructive manner. Today, however, having recognized the importance of this endeavor, the Faculty of Theology supports the Center for Ecumenical Research which is delighted to co-sponsor this conference on the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the EPCRA. We sincerely hope that this conference will symbolize a lasting relationship between the EPCRA and the K.U.Leuven and a mutual commitment to continued theological research across ecumenical boundaries.

The theme of this conference is "The Growing Importance of Ethics in Pentecostalism." It seems to me, and I am sure it would immediately occur to anyone who heard about this theme, that the principal concern of the conference would be a survey of when, where and how ethical issues are becoming more and more the concern of Pentecostal and Charismatic pastors and theologians. One might even think that the "keynote speech" for this conference would attempt to explore precisely that ground. Another moment's thought, however, would reveal that such a survey encompasses far too broad an area to be contained in a single speech.

In fact, the growing importance of ethics is the dominant theme that one will find in the papers that are being given at this conference, and, most important of all, the discussions that are taking place between all the participants here in Leuven.

This is really a much more fitting manner for gathering information about the multifaceted aspects of ethical issues and concerns among any body of the faithful. For if we wish to construct a picture of what is happening on so many fronts, in so many ways and for so many people, the primary mode of communication that we will need to exercise is not "talking" about this or that issue, but rather "listening" to the voices and the experiences of our fellow Christians, in order to understand what their particular issues are and how they are going about dealing with them.

It is this observation that I hope will lead me directly to the main point of my talk - namely that ethics in general is, or at least I firmly believe that it should be, primarily not about talking about and pronouncing judgements upon this or that question. Ethics is primarily about listening. It is about exercising a willingness to open ourselves to, and to attempt to comprehend, the dynamics of what ethical experience itself is all about.

Now, at first sight, this may appear simple: in order to "do" ethics, one must first have some idea about how to go about this enterprise. What we first need to do is to learn how to "think ethically". This, however, is not what I am suggesting. For, anyone who turns their attention to trying to elaborate what it means to "think ethically" runs the risk of blinding themselves to the fact that they are attempting to achieve something that they already know how to do. And this constitutes the first premise of what I wish to present to you this evening - namely that each and every single, adult, minimally integrated person is an ethicist. If we are fundamentally healthy, adult persons, we are ethical persons - not in the sense of invariably living out the highest ethical standards, but more realistically in the sense that each and every one of us makes ethical decisions all the time - from the time we get up in the morning until the time we go to sleep at night. We may not make these ethical judgments and decisions very well, but we do make them. If this were not the case, human life - even the life of the believing community as we know it - would be impossible.

Every person is an ethicist - including ourselves. Whether we are aware of it or not, every one of us has learned how to assess the situations in which we find ourselves, how to sort out what we consider to be good in those situations and what not, how to make decisions about priorities among these goods and how to act upon the decisions that we make. To repeat myself, I am not suggesting that we all do this very well; I am simply drawing our attention to the fact

that we all **do** it and that we all do it **continuously**. The fact is that the vast majority of our ethical decision-making goes unnoticed. When the decisions we make and the behavior that we perform closely resemble what we have always done, what we have been taught to do and what conforms to the dominant expectations around us, we can talk of "spontaneous ethical decision-making". It may go by so quickly and effortlessly that it is hardly noticed at all. The fact is that we take for granted the vast majority of ethical decision-making simply because it occurs so easily.

Every once in a while, however, our ethical assessments, prioritizing or decision-making do not come spontaneously. We hesitate in our normal manner of going about things because we may not be sure about one or another aspect of what is happening. Perhaps we cannot assess what is going on because we do not have sufficient information. This frequently happens when we encounter new situations that we have not seen before. New techniques and new technologies are a common cause of this hesitation. What, in fact, should we do in light of the possibility of altering human genetic information or even human cloning? We simply do not have any experience with this sort of issue and so we find ourselves wondering even what it is that we need to assess;

Another example of hesitation arises when we find it difficult to prioritize what we consider to be the goods present in a situation that we may deem worthy to be protected or promoted - or the evils to be avoided. Perhaps we are confronted with multiple goods, each of which clamors for our attention and even realization. One thinks, for instance, not only of new medical techniques for dealing with human illness and suffering but also of new monetary structures such as the IMF and a single European currency. One thinks of political structures such as the United Nations or the European Union (at least in the minds or dreams of some). All of these things may be implemented to effect what we can even agree upon as being worthy of the name 'good'. But are there not simultaneously other goods that compete either with these structures or with the goods they effect? One thinks of the autonomy of peoples, cultures and nations, the need to encourage diversified initiatives and the importance variations in cultural patrimony. Certainly, the contemporary outcry against this thing called "globalization" is a sign that there are other considerations to be made besides playing with the potential homogenization of the human community. How does one structure their priorities, being pulled, as it were, in different directions? On the one hand, the only way it seems possible to deal with global problems is to work toward some form of common approach, while on the other hand, the very movement to homogenization itself is threatening.

Finally, there is the dimension of ethical decision-making itself. Whereas for the vast majority of the time we make our ethical decisions spontaneously and seemingly effortlessly, sometimes we find ourselves stymied, perplexed or even paralyzed. Typical of this situation is a plethora of options, many of which appear to be no better or no worse than all the others. The more options we have, the more difficult it is to make a decision. In the world in which we live, with its ever advancing scope of technological possibility, increasing literacy and education of the general population, and the generally practical accessibility of information, our behavioral options are inevitably bound to increase. How can or should we be making moral decisions that embody the best options for any given situation?

One possible response to these kinds of questions is that we should pray about them and allow God to intervene to show us the way. But without denying the importance, perhaps even the centrality, of this attitude, one can validly ask how it is we might recognize when God is responding to our prayers. I think of a little story here, and pardon me if you have already heard it, of the man who lives in a low-lying area that is being threatened with a flood. Having been upright and faithful his whole life, he firmly believes that God has granted him the privilege to build his house in this valley and to live here. And so he prays that God will look after him. ? As the flood becomes more threatening, a bus filled with his neighbors comes by and all his friends ask him to board the bus and to leave the threatened valley before the flood comes. But he refuses the ride on the bus and confidently declares that he is praying to God who, he is sure, will take care of him. ? the boat ? the helicopter? Finally, the flood comes and he dies. When he reaches heaven and encounters God, he asks God why he did not act to save him from the flood that eventually lead to his death. And God replies, what do you mean I did not act? I sent you a bus, I sent you a boat, I even sent you a helicopter ? but you paid no attention to any of it.

How do we know when and how God is responding to our prayers? How do we discern when options are being presented to us? I suggest that one of the ways we can do this is, to borrow the words of the American Jesuit philosopher and theologian, Bernard Lonergan, " to be attentive". We need to pause, to look around, and to ask ourselves, "what is going on here ? what is happening ? what is God presenting to us?" At the same time, however, we need to ask "where are we going ? what kind of persons and community are we being called to become ? how is the spirit transforming us into citizens of the Kingdom of God?"

What I would suggest is that when we start asking these kinds of questions, what we are doing is **ethics**. In my estimation and understanding, ethics is the discipline that attempts to discern, to clarify and to articulate insights to these two kinds of questions. As a discipline, ethics attempts to introduce some order, some structure into these discussions - for example, by attempting to set out a consistent terminology to facilitate the ethical discussion itself. And yet even here we encounter one of the major problems facing the discipline of ethics. **Because** everyone is a practical ethicist, **because** in order to engage in ethical discernment and decision making we need to talk about ethical issues with our fellow ethicist-human persons, and **because** the languages (English, French, German,

Chinese, even Latin) that we use for these discussions are constantly changing, we have the problem of defining terms that everyone will be able to recognize and agree upon.

I can illustrate this with the problem of trying to define the word "good" - probably the most basic and most widely used ethical term that ethics uses (or its equivalent in any language). What does "good" mean? For, beyond ethics, the word good has a huge number of meanings, ranging from likeable or attractive to efficient or appropriate. Within ethical discourse, the word "good" begs for clarification: good in relation to what ? good in what sense? Further, in ethical discourse the word good goes beyond its adjectival function and functions as a substantive. We speak of "the good" or "goods" - or to use its one of its contemporary substitutes, "values".

(Parenthetically I must remark that I do not agree with the synonymous use of the words "good" and "value". Nor do I even believe in the validity of speaking of value or values in a substantive manner. There are no such things as values, even though most of us use this term to designate the conclusion of a process of valuing. However, here we encounter yet another one of the necessary terminological clarifications that need to be done as a precursor to ethical discourse. I simply draw attention to it here and terminate the parenthesis.)

The second part of the address by Prof. J. Selling was a presentation without the use of a manuscript presenting processes and dynamics involved in doing ethics.