

An Interview with Fr. Vincent Leclercq, A.A., M.D.*
(This interview first appeared in the online newsletter www.aisnenouvelle.fr)

Doctor, Assumptionist priest, professor at the Institut catholique of Paris, Fr. Vincent Leclercq wears many hats. But there is no contradiction among them, he insists. Versed in ethical and bioethical questions, he is preparing a book at this time, to appear on April 12, entitle *Fin de vie (End of Life)*
(1). He was recently invited by an organization called Traversée (2) to give a presentation and engage in a Q/A session on the theme, "Medically assisted and ethical reproduction."

- You are both a doctor and an Assumptionist priest… How did that come about?
- Being a doctor, that's who I am by training, my profession. Assumptionist, that's my vocation. In fact, the Assumptionists asked me to teach moral theology. I have specialized mostly in bioethics.

- In a few words, could you tell us who the Assumptionists are?
- The Assumptionists are a congregation founded in the 19th century, well-known in France because they oversee Bayard Press. We are a congregation particularly concerned about issues of Church and society.

- Your presentation Thursday is on medically assisted reproduction (MAP). What experience do you have in this area?
- As a medical doctor, I wrote a paper on how French laws have changed the way they look at human embryos since 1994. As a priest, I am approached by many couples who ask our advice

on making a decision regarding MAP. They know a little about the Church's reservations, but they wish, above all, to enlighten their consciences before setting out on a very trying medical course. They're also looking for someone to be with them along the way.

- Isn't there precisely a contradiction between the Church's position and the very fact of someone accompanying certain couples who are entertaining the use of MAP?
- I think that the positions of the Church are above all an invitation to reflect and discuss, knowing that the final decision falls to couples themselves.

- What are the main points of your presentation?
- With regard to the debate over MAP, I am going to try to establish some ethical guidelines. It's really a question of just how far one goes in the "medicalization" of birth. The ethical question is: is this contributing to greater joy in our societies? The idea of the presentation is, with regard to these questions, that we speak of a certain number of practices that already paint a certain picture, give a certain vision, of Man in society. For example, should MAP be opened to homosexuals couples? I think that the law, sociology, practice give a certain number of guidelines. My approach is to take off from what is admitted by all just because it is already possible or because it is already done so that one can take the necessary step back to ask good questions. For what is possible scientifically soon becomes what is accepted ethically.

- Are you saying that there is a tendency to confuse what is scientifically possible and what is ethically acceptable?
- Yes, there is a tendency to jump immediately from what can be done to what the norm should be. Science can easily determine what becomes normative. I think that ethics bring a little more complexity to the changes science creates.

- You yourself must have a position on MAP. How do you detach yourself from it?
- In my presentation I try to provide tools. Obviously I have a position on the subject. But I want to show that Christians and non-Christians, by the way in which they consider relationships, from the point of the law or from practice show that MAP are not a question of the private domain. There is also a societal implication. For Christians, of course MAP touches on the question of birth, but on the origins of life as well. To believe that life comes from God gives great legitimacy to existence today. It is an invitation for everyone to think about the responsibility of becoming a parent and also to take care of the relationships that cause a child to live, grow, and develop. Whether one is a Christian or not, the stakes are the same. And this may also contribute to society's reflection on this matter, that is to say, what regards the interest of the child before a desire to have a child. The fact of being a Christian does not give one the right to dictate, but the obligation to reflect on what consequences decisions have.

- You yourself have cited the case of homosexuals. Don't you fear that the debate regarding MAP will turn exclusively around this subject, when, in fact, it is much broader?

- I'm not sure. We'll have to see. I think that with general guidelines one is led to take a step back with regard to this question, in order to make one's own judgment.

- Would you like to initiate a dialogue on this subject?

- As for the Catholic Church, here in France in 2009, the bishops published a book, *Bioéthique, propos pour un dialogue*
(
Bioethics, a Matter of Dialogue
). It is really dialogue that is given the preference. It's not meant in any way to put an end to the discussion.

(1) Fin de vie, collection « Pourquoi les chrétiens ne peuvent pas se taire, » Editions de l'Atelier, in bookstores April 12.

(2) Traversée describes itself as an organization that welcomes anyone who is confronted by suffering caused by loneliness, isolation, breakups, or social exclusion. It sponsors lectures, provides outreach, and offers a hotline service (http://www.la-traversee.org).

* Fr. Vincent obtained his Ph.D. in Theology at Boston College and spent several years living at the Assumptionist Center in Brighton, MA.