

How to deal with moral dilemmas? By Fr Gerry Hughes, SJ, held at St Josephs' Community Centre on 29th January 2012

A personal impression of the event

Following Fr Hughes's very successful talk in June last year on "What is all about"? I was really looking forward to this presentation.

To my great pleasure and surprise approximately 50 people turned up, almost filling the Community Centre to its maximum capacity.

Fr Hughes started by asking questions to the audience how we would address three hypothetical dilemmas:

1. In the film Sophie's choice where Sophie was asked by the concentration camp guard to choose which of her two children should be killed; if she did not make a choice, the guard would kill the three of them: which child would you choose?
2. In a refugee camp in Somalia where there was only food for five days, but too many people to feed: who should be fed?
3. In the plane crash over the Andes of the Uruguayan rugby team, they had to eat the bodies of the others who had died in order to survive: what would have done?

We all found these dilemmas very difficult to answer, as it was a question of making the less bad decision. The message so far in the talk was clear: there was not always just one obviously right or wrong answer, but a spectrum of them. What under normal circumstances would be considered wrong may not be wrong in certain extreme circumstances. Very genuine moral values may conflict in a particular case: again, the terms we use in speaking about ethics – terms such as 'abandon', 'fair and unfair procedures', 'lie', and even 'kill' 'dead, or 'human being' need to be interpreted if they are to be correctly applied in particular cases. These general points got us exactly where he wanted us to be: in the right frame of mind to continue with more challenging issues in our own lives.

There are many day-to-day situations with dilemmas that we may have to address sooner or later. Fr Hughes invited us to contribute dilemmas we had to face in our own lives, such as whether to switch a life support machine off when the person has been in that state of unconsciousness for many years, or for example when a man leaves a woman without any children, then many years later she marries again and has children is there any good reason why she should not receive communion? Would it be right to break up the second family? This dilemma remind me of a relative of mine in America who, having re-married and with four children brought up in the Catholic faith, could not receive communion for over 17 years until both her marriage and her husband's were annulled very recently (one of the cases even had to go to the Vatican!). It was clear from the talk that there are many "loaded" words such as 'kill', 'euthanasia', 'abortion' and 'adultery' that make the choice of a correct moral decision more difficult. Am I doing any of these things if I decided this, that or the other?

The "debate" went up a nudge when someone asked about homosexuality. This was discussed at length, and there was a wide diversity of opinions.

After all these dilemmas, good old Aristotle came to help solving moral dilemmas. He (Aristotle) suggests that to make a good decision, a person must:

1. Be honest to yourself (and God);
2. Be emotionally balanced: and if not, find someone else to give advice;
3. Have sufficient experience of life to see the implications of what one is doing.

Fr Hughes's final advice on how to deal with moral decisions was, having examined all the facts, to make the best judgement possible under the circumstances,

The event was a well attended success and most people would like him back again for another challenging event.