

On the Morality of Tattoos

I was asked some time ago to give some guidance on tattoo's, and though it took far too long to get to this, here is my advice on the subject.

In the Old Testament we read the following: "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh, for the dead: neither shall you make in yourselves any figures or marks. I am the Lord." (Lev. 19.28)

With that being said, we Catholics are not fundamentalists (may it please God) and it would be wrong to condemn everyone everywhere who has a tattoo, or even many tattoos. It so happens that in some cultures, marks on the flesh are quite acceptable. Ethiopian Christians tattoo the cross on their foreheads and I understand this to be an ancient custom. I'm not advocating cultural relativism here, but there is a social element to this morality. In Western societies however, a tattoo would serve a very different function e.g., mere decoration. So when would the decoration be unacceptable? Here are a few guidelines:

1. If the tattoo damages the body (which is a temple of the Holy Ghost), then this is a sin against the 5th Commandment. Some tattoos do just this and thus constitute self-mutilation. In fact, any tattoo (or jewelry for that matter) which is contrary to good health (tongue piercing for example) is against the 5th Commandment. If the damage to the body or to health is serious, then the sin is serious. If the damage is slight, then the sin is slight.

2. If the tattoo is a diabolical image, this obviously would be against the 1st Commandment. Any sort of pictures of the devil or of pentagrams or what-not which extol or honor evil violate the commandment, though the pictures could be a serious or a slight violation. You may find this odd to say that it could be slight, but

in the sense of a cartoon or impish playfulness it could be only slightly sinful or perhaps not sinful at all.

3. If the tattoo extols what is base or ugly (remember beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, but is an objective reality), then it is contrary to the virtues of modesty and purity. Rejoicing in or promulgating what is ugly is also against the proper order of creation and the Creator. Again, this promulgation can be serious or slight.

4. If the motivation for the tattoo is to shock or repel others, then this is contrary to fraternal charity. If the motivation is to shock or repel one's parents, then the sin is against the 4th Commandment.

5. If the tattoo is designed to be irreverent, such as tattooing a crucifix or an image of Our Lady, then this is contrary to the 2nd Commandment. This also applies to the tattooing of the Holy Name on the skin. The violation of the 2nd Commandment can be slight or serious in this regard too.

6. If the tattoo is the result of vanity – showing off to others how cool (or daring or brave or whatever) you are, then this is contrary to humility, and is an exercise of the sin of pride. This really has to do with intention however and not so much the external reality.

7. If the tattoo is procured as a result of immaturity, self-centeredness then it is contrary to the virtue of humility. I think it is rare that the sin in this sense would be serious. This would be more in line with a "youthful rebellion," though I don't mean to excuse it.

In short, it would be very hard to justify a tattoo of any kind in our country. I can

think of no good reason to get one and plenty of reasons why not to get one. When I refer to a good reason I am referring to the goal of this life, which is union with God and everlasting life in heaven.

Even presuming for a moment that the tattoo did not violate any of the Commandments or virtues, it is still dangerous psychologically. Here in Colorado it is state law that the one giving the tattoo must inform the recipient that the reception of tattoos is psychologically addictive. I don't know much about the effectiveness of such warnings, but the fact that they must be given is significant.

Furthermore, I can think of nothing which would justify the expense of getting a tattoo. They are not cheap. Their removal is even more expensive, leaving behind

damaged skin. So if there is some justification for it, I just don't know what that would be.

If a Catholic has a tattoo, are they morally obliged to remove it? That depends on several things. If the tattoo is a serious violation of a commandment, then yes, a serious obligation to remove it exists. If the tattoo is not visible to the public or is only slightly sinful then the obligation of removal is slight. If one does not have the financial means to remove it, then that too is a mitigating factor to its removal.

Finally, it seems clear that tattooing is contrary to right reason. Human skin is not canvas. It was created for a different purpose.