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"Bioethics and Christian Anthropology"

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On Religion:

Bioethics and Christian Anthropology

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This essay deals with four things, each of which deserves book-length treatment. First, biomedical technology and the gospel of life; second, bioethical principles and Christian witness; third, the unity of the person and moral absolutes that protect human life; and fourth, personal vocation and bioethical decision making.

Biomedical Technology and the Gospel of Life

During the past century, biomedical science and the technology which applies it have progressed with increasing rapidity. That astonishing progress has rapidly increased human power over human life processes and the diseases and injuries that interfere with them. Like all power, however, biomedical technological power is sometimes abused.

Often, biomedical technology is used well: to save people's lives, promote their health, and help them function as well as they can despite injuries and defects. But some people abuse biomedical technology to satisfy unreasonable desires. Among these are desires to prevent unwanted pregnancies and to get rid of inconvenient unborn children and other burdensome people. Biomedical technology also is abused to produce babies to order, to prolong some people's lives by methods that unreasonably burden them and others involved, and to strive vainly and wastefully to prevent inevitable death.

Many factors help explain why the actions of human individuals and social groups often fall short of what they should be. Natural defects and psychological illness, ignorance and mistakes, faulty institutions and breakdowns in communication, technical failures and lack of creativity in dealing with problems—all these can adversely affect human actions and impede people's fulfillment. But none of these explains the widespread abuse of biomedical technology. That abuse is a moral evil, which cannot be reduced to any one or combination of the factors I have mentioned. Moral evil is the abuse of the ability to make free choices; it is choosing unreasonably.

The extent of abuses of biomedical technologies suggests that the wrongful options are very appealing. Why is that? Human beings exist in a fallen condition. With profound anxiety we face inevitable death. Moreover, our human relationships are distorted by sin, so that we often fall into conflict with one another rather than live in solidarity and cooperate for common goods. In this fallen situation, choosing uprightly often seems impractical. Lacking hope for any happiness beyond death, people go after what they imagine might make them happy during this life.

Even when they recognize certain kinds of acts as always wrong, many people have no compelling motive to endure burdens and sufferings that can be avoided only by doing acts of those kinds. Though aware that they are incurring guilt, such people often give in to temptation and then try to rationalize what they have done. Understanding the wretchedness of the fallen human condition and disgusted with their own moral failings, people who are more thoughtful and honest look for a way out.

Jesus Christ proclaims God's offer of salvation from the fallen human condition and shows us the way out. Assuming our fallen human nature, Jesus not only shows us how to live good and holy human lives in this world but offers us a share in his own Divine Nature. He invites fallen men and women to become adopted children in God's family, members of his kingdom. He leads them to hope for happiness beyond this life: to look forward to enjoying forever in heaven a good and rich human life in a perfect society, as well as joyful intimacy with the Divine Persons.

Moved by that hope, people can repent and seek first the kingdom of God. Seeking God's kingdom, they can find it practical to choose uprightly despite the fallen human condition. When upright choices lead to suffering, even that suffering can be accepted joyfully. Accepting it out of love helps carry on Jesus' mission by spreading his message and bringing others into God's family.

Unless others come to share this Christian hope, we cannot reasonably expect them to accept as realistic and to try to live by the moral truths that flow from the sanctity of human life and the dignity of human persons. No matter how clearly those truths are articulated or how firmly they are taught, they will seem unrealistic and impractical apart from their context in the gospel as a whole.

Thus, there is no gospel of life except the integral gospel that Jesus preached. There is no culture of life other than the culture that is formed by the redemptive work of God in Christ and built up by those who carry on his mission. And the culture of life always will be challenged by a culture of death until Jesus comes again and hands over to the Father a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace.

Bioethical Principles and Christian Witness

In treatments of bioethics, some people virtually absolutize patient autonomy or individuals' rights—for example, the right of patients to decide about their own treatment or the rights of women over their own bodies. And some people regard public laws as settling moral issues—for example, once *in vitro* fertilization or euthanasia is legalized, they think everyone may or even should cooperate in such practices.

All faithful and clearheaded theists reject both of those erroneous approaches. For all theists—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—hold that we are creatures. Though we can generate new meanings and values, our creativity presupposes fundamental meanings and values—the starting points of all human practical reasoning. We could never generate any new meaning or value if we did not know certain things beforehand. Human creativity always presupposes that good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided; and that life and health, truth and skills, harmony with others, and so on, are goods to be safeguarded, sought, and promoted, while their opposites are evils to be avoided and resisted.

Since those principles of practical reasoning provide intelligible direction, they cannot have come from subhuman nature, even if we somehow evolved from it. Since those principles direct us toward what is still to be, we cannot have learned them by experiencing the way the world is or by reflecting upon theoretical truths about human nature. Since those principles are presupposed by all our deliberation and free choices, they cannot have arisen from previous human actions.

Those basic truths are like a law written on our hearts to shape our deliberation and guide our free choices and actions. A law written on our hearts by whom? Written on them by our Creator. The God-given principles of practical reason direct human beings toward their own fulfillment. Thus, humans are not the ultimate source of meaning and value. God, their wise and loving Creator, is the ultimate source of meaning and value.

It follows that theonomy (God's guidance) is more basic than either individuals' autonomy (self-direction) or public authority (social norms). The alternative to being fully reasonable and obeying all the guidance God provides is to become enslaved to one or more cruel masters. That slavery can be to one's own passions and desires. It can be to public opinion or to the people who hold political power. It can be to demons—the diabolical powers that Christ defeated but did not eliminate. The only way to avoid that slavery is to follow Jesus closely and walk in the truth—in the light that comes from above.

Consequently, there are objective principles for ethics, including bioethics. Those principles, applied to possible human acts, entail moral norms—truths about what is right and wrong, good and bad, for human societies and individuals. Absolutely everyone—including health care professionals and those they serve, scientific investigators and government officials—either conforms to those moral truths or deviates from them. There are only two possibilities. Either people act uprightly and pursue what truly fulfills human beings or they violate moral truths and so injure both themselves and others.

Moral truths do ground and justify limited autonomy for individuals, and limited authority for community leaders. In other words, someone enjoys autonomy only insofar as others have a moral obligation not to interfere with what he or she is doing, and someone exercises authority only insofar as others have a moral obligation to cooperate in acting as he or she directs.

If moral truths remain at the abstract level, they are unlikely to be understood and taken to heart. Jesus' teachings and life not only clarified the truth about human

goodness. His loving self-sacrifice for others also bore powerful witness to that truth. The Church's teachers are charged with carrying on Jesus' prophetic mission by clarifying and emphatically proclaiming the truth about human good. But all Christ's faithful are charged with bearing witness to that same truth by imitating Jesus' self-sacrificing love. And though we often fail to speak and act as we should, some of the Church's teachers and members are clear-headed, courageous, and holy. Such good pastors and faithful Christians serve humankind well by concretizing moral truths so that they remain understandable and inspiring.

The Unity of the Person and Moral Absolutes

Some people suppose that human persons are not living bodies but rather are conscious subjects who only have and use their bodies. On that dualistic view, human bodies are not in themselves personal. They belong to subhuman nature. Those who hold that view suppose that bodily life itself is not an intrinsic good of human persons. They suppose that life is good only insofar as it is a necessary condition for realizing other goods, goods they do consider intrinsic to persons—such as interpersonal relationships and worthwhile experiences.

All clear-headed theists reject that dualistic view. The human person is neither the body nor the soul taken separately, but a unity involving both. Because of this unity, a person's body is not like clothing that he or she owns and wears but could replace or do without. Rather, the human body itself is personal. Therefore, human life is the concrete reality of human persons. For them, as for other organisms, to be is to live, and to die is to cease to be.

That is why human salvation must involve resurrection, as Christian faith makes clear. God's saving work in Christ was not completed by his suffering and death. It was completed by his resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit, who gathers Jesus' disciples into bodily communion with Jesus and with one another by means of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood, his disciples look forward to the resurrection of their own bodies and to life everlasting.

What, then, of the soul? This spiritual element of the person survives and subsists after death, and it will experience heaven or hell. However, the Church also teaches definitively that until death the soul is the "form" of the living human body.[1] In the technical sense in which *form* is used here, it does not refer to a mere quality, such as the contour or structure of the body. Rather, *form* refers to the intrinsic principle that makes a material thing be the kind of bodily reality it is. So, this Church teaching means that one's soul is not oneself, but rather is a spiritual constituent of oneself that, until death, makes the stuff of one's body into the human person one is.

It follows that life and health are *intrinsic* goods of human persons. Choosing to destroy, damage, or impede those goods—or any other intrinsic good of the person—always is contrary to love of neighbor or self, and therefore always is wrong. So, there are moral absolutes—that is, exceptionless moral norms safeguarding human life and health. For example, one may never choose to do anything to impede

[1]DS 902, 1440.

conception or to kill the unborn or those who are regarded as useless. And again: one may never use psychoactive substances except to promote healthful functioning.

Personal Vocation and Bioethical Decision Making

Many people mistakenly think that they may do whatever they wish as long as they have some good end in view and do not violate any exceptionless moral norm. But the choice to do an act of a kind that is permissible in itself can be unreasonable. One must ask whether it is right to do this act *under these circumstances*. To answer that question, one should take into account one's personal vocation.

Before Vatican II, Catholics often used the word *vocation* to refer to the special calling of some men and women to be priests or religious. The Council broadened the concept by teaching that the whole Church is called to holiness, and every member is bound to respond to that universal vocation by exercising love of God and neighbor in fulfilling the responsibilities of his or her unique *personal vocation*.

This idea is not entirely new. Scripture tells us that we are saved by grace through faith, but that God's saving grace includes the gift to each of us of a unique life of good works prepared for us in advance (see Eph 2:9–10). Faithful Christians always have believed that God's providence extends to the details of each individual's whole life, and that one works out one's salvation by trying always to do God's will.

To organize their lives, people without faith must clarify what they want and figure out how to get it. By contrast, people with faith should try to discern God's plan for their lives, especially in respect to the major decisions that shape life as a whole. Among these are decisions whether to marry or to forgo marriage for the kingdom's sake, and decisions about what sort of work to do and how to prepare for it. But one also should seek God's will in all other matters. His plan for one's life includes fulfilling civic duties, cultivating certain friendships, participating in certain voluntary associations, residing here or there and moving from time to time, enjoying one or another hobby or form of recreation, and so on.

God's providence directs everything toward creation's eventual consummation in his heavenly kingdom. Of course, nothing we can do will bring about that kingdom; it will be God's new creation. Still, as Vatican II teaches, good works in this life are important for God's kingdom. In a mysterious way, he will salvage what is good in those works and use it as material for the kingdom. So, those who during this life obediently promote human goods in the Spirit of the Lord and in accord with God's plan will find those goods again in heaven—purified, completed, and transformed.[2]

One's personal vocation therefore becomes an important standard for determining one's affirmative responsibilities—that is, what one should do as distinct from what one should refrain from doing. That is true in bioethical matters as well as in others. When using biomedical technology, one not only must treat everyone concerned fairly and refrain from violating any good intrinsic to persons. One also must protect and promote one's own and others' lives and health according to the requirements of one's personal vocation and within the limits of that vocation.

[2]See *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 38–39.

The vocations of personal friends and of members of families and family-like communities include being one another's keepers. So, personal friends and members of families should help one another in health care and avoid behavior likely to harm one another's health. One's vocational responsibilities often provide morally compelling reasons for taking care of one's own health. At the same time, other vocational responsibilities compete with health care. Sometimes the competition is direct—fulfilling a responsibility can harm one's health, yet the responsibility can justify and even require that one accept the harm. Sometimes the competition is for resources: time, energy, money, and capacity to endure stress.

As one ages and other vocational responsibilities drop away, they no longer provide reasons for taking care of one's health. Of course, the intrinsic goodness of life and health always is a reason for accepting health care. However, in these circumstances, established practices and strong emotional motivation generated by the prospects of pain, impaired functioning, and death can lead people to go to unreasonable lengths in caring for their health. Even if accepting health care is not unfair to others, Christians often may forgo the health care to which they are entitled. When that is so, Christians rightly do forgo care out of mercy in order to make the resources available for others who are in need.

People engaged professionally in health care and other professionals concerned with biomedical technology should undertake their work as an important part of their personal vocations. They should commit themselves to use their gifts in service to others. They should dedicate themselves to meeting others' real needs. If professionals make that commitment and are faithful to it, they will never subordinate others' best interests to their own convenience or to their ambition for status and wealth. They will never help others achieve what is not truly good for them. They will gently tell people the truth about their condition and never encourage false hopes. They will be candid about their own limitations and will humbly admit their mistakes.

In return for their service, such dedicated professionals will deserve the affection and gratitude of those they serve. If they are equally faithful to their entire vocation, they will become holy. Then, when at last they die, Jesus will welcome them: "Come, O Blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt 25:34).