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## [Book Review of] *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life*, by William E. May

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*Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life*, by William E. May (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Books, 2000) 272 pp., pb., \$17.95.

The field of bioethics is today enormously complex. Regularly, new discoveries are announced in the area of genetics, for example, that raise ethical concerns. Issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and various techniques of artificial procreation are not going away. Indeed, the average person, not to mention the specialist, is not only aware of, but often must confront critical bioethical problems that can strike very close to home. One has only to think of the moral questions associated with organ donation or those surrounding the provision or withdrawal of nutrition and hydration for comatose or otherwise unconscious persons in order to glimpse the complexity of the issues involved.

In this current situation, there is a pressing need for a resource that provides both specific answers to bioethical questions and a framework for moral decision-making grounded in the truth of objective moral norms, the dignity of each human person, and the authentic teaching of the magisterium of the Church.

Fortunately, there is such a resource at hand. Professor William E. May, an internationally noted moral theologian, and Michael J. McGivney Professor of Moral Theology at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute in Washington, D.C., has published his book, which addresses critical bioethical issues.

In eight chapters, Dr. May covers the principal moral questions surrounding the gift of human life at its beginning and its end, and at every stage in between. Particularly helpful are the first two chapters, which provide a masterful summary of magisterial documents relevant to bioethical issues and the importance of a sound methodology for making true moral judgments and good moral choices. In succeeding chapters, Dr. May applies the Church's Gospel of Life and the wisdom of her magisterium to questions regarding the generation of human life (Chapter Three), contraception (Chapter Four), abortion (Chapter Five), experimentation on human subjects (Chapter Six), euthanasia, assisted suicide and care of the dying (Chapter Seven), and finally the definition of death and organ transplants (Chapter eight).

This work, however, is more than simply a restatement of Catholic moral teaching. Indeed, May recognizes that on a number of specific issues, the Church has not pronounced a definitive judgment, and that therefore, the arguments, both pro and con, must be engaged on their own merits. For example, in Chapter Three, May discusses the controversy over the "rescuing" of frozen embryos. He fairly and patiently presents the arguments on both sides, and critiques their weaknesses before offering his own position (in favor of the moral licitness of the proposal).

Further, May is conversant with contemporary literature on the bioethical issues he examines. This is evident throughout the entire book, but especially so in Chapter Eight, when he deals with the definition of death and its resultant impact on organ donation. May here adopts the criteria proposed by D. Alan Shewmon, M.D., in order to determine the moment when death occurs. In a relatively recent series of articles, Shewmon has criticized the prevalent notion of "brain death" as equivalent to the death of the person. Shewmon proposes instead as a criterion for determining when death has occurred the complete and sustained cessation of circulation of oxygenated blood. May accepts this criterion and, in fact, states that, as a result of Shewmon's interpretation of the relevant medical evidence, May himself has changed his position and can no longer in conscience accept "brain death" as equivalent to human death. This view is sure to draw criticism (and has already done so), but May defends his opinion with reasonableness and clarity.

If a subsequent revision of this book were to be issued, I would suggest that Dr. May seek to incorporate, in his discussion of the definition of death, the address given by Pope John Paul II to an International Congress on Transplants (August 30, 2000). Here the Pope seems to adopt (with appropriate cautions) the very neurological criteria rejected by Shewmon and May as being able to provide moral certainty that the death of the person has taken place. Of course, debate over the moment of death and the definition of death highlights the need for a sound anthropology, one capable of treating the human person in his physical-spiritual unity. This is a concern shared by all who seek to defend the integrity of the human person, and one with which Dr. May would readily agree.

Throughout his work, Dr. May assists us in seeing the truth and life-giving insight of the Church's teaching through careful scholarship and cogent argumentation. This work of Dr. May's will, I believe, prove to be an invaluable aid to anyone who is interested in examining bioethical issues reasonably and in light of the intrinsic dignity of the human person, for, as Dr. May recognizes and defends so well, it is the person who must always take priority over all forms of utilitarian and technological manipulation.

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