Bioethics and Church Teaching

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For some critics, Church teaching on the subject of bioethics is nothing more than an unbroken series of “noes” to many biotechnological innovations which, presumably, stand to provide immeasurable benefits for countless human beings. This view of Church teaching as basically negative and antihumanistic is both crass and superficial. A more valid criticism may be leveled against these very critics themselves who are more enthusiastic about what contemporary scientists produce than about what original man needs. What is merely novel in biotechnology often has a hypnotic charm which can easily cause people to lose sight of what is original in the human being. And as a result of this infatuation with novelty, the potential harm to human beings which certain biotechnological innovations pose is either ignored or minimized.

But the Church has not forgotten the original constitution of man, nor has it forsaken its responsibility to protect that fundamental and original good. Church teaching on bioethics is based on a clear understanding of this good, and an equally clear realization of the moral principles which must be applied in order to safeguard that good. “Good” and “moral principles,” therefore, are correlative terms, for the latter exists in order to insure that the former preserves its essential quality. At the same time, it is
useful to clarify the meanings of these basic terms.

The substantive notion of "good," in the sense that the human being is entitatively "good," is based on the scriptural notion that man is created in the image of God. Man is good inasmuch as he participates in or is a reflection of the deity who is good in an absolute sense. God is all-good and as such invests goodness in everything He creates. A fundamental affinity therefore exists between God and creation such that goodness inheres in everything that He creates.

With respect to the human being, we may understand his good in a general way and speak of a general principle which safeguards that good. Accordingly, Pope John Paul II states that "since, in the order of medical values, life is man's supreme and most radical good, there is need for a fundamental principle: First prevent any damage, then seek and pursue the good."

On the other hand, it is possible to understand the good of man in more particular ways. Hence, we may speak of man's dignity, unity, integrity, identity, and spirituality:

1) **Dignity:** By dignity, we refer to the fact that man is an intrinsic good and as such is an end in himself and therefore not a means to another good or another end. Man has dignity because he is not subordinated to any other creature. Dignity is the regal quality in man whereby his good shines as an end in itself.

2) **Unity:** Man is naturally constituted as a single, unified being. He is not to be regarded as so many parts or as certain parts dominating other parts. He is a unified wholeness. This wholeness is a good inasmuch as it is a natural affirmation of his reality as one being.

3) **Integrity:** Man is more than a natural unity; he is also a moral unity. His crowning moral good is achieved when his life is in harmony with his nature, when his moral "ought" is in agreement with his natural "is." Through will and effort, man achieves an integration of life and nature, freedom and destiny. His integrity is a good that results from a harmonious synthesis of what he is by nature and what he becomes through choice.

4) **Identity:** Man has a specific identity as a member of the human species and as an individual person. These identities are good in themselves. One should not renounce either identity in quest of a different one. Identity is a specific good which distinguishes one good, either as a species or as an individual, from other like goods.

5) **Spirituality:** Spirituality belongs to man as a good which accords with his origin (as created by a spiritual God), his life (as sharing God's life), and his destiny (as being with God). Man is not merely a material being and is not reducible to a collection of material parts. His spirituality is a good that proclaims his kinship with his Creator.

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Each of these particular goods calls out for moral principles which are their natural and logical correlates. A good and its correlative moral principle may be analogously compared with "value" and "protective policy." A man owns an automobile or a house which are said to have a certain market value. An insurance policy is routinely drawn up as a way of protecting these values. People readily understand that wherever there is a good or something of value, there should also exist some principle or policy to protect it. Just as an insurance policy protects an owner from losing the value he invested in his automobile or his home, so too, moral principles are designed to protect and safeguard the fundamental good of man.

Particular moral principles relate to particular goods. With respect to the five particular goods we have just enumerated, the moral principles are described as follows:

1) Since man has dignity, he should always be respected as an inviolable end and never used as a means.
2) Since man has unity, he should be honored as a whole, and none of his parts should be treated in isolation of that whole.
3) Since man has integrity, his moral good should be upheld, and his morality should never be divorced from his nature.
4) Since man has identity both as a member of the human race and as a unique person, these identities should be valued and allowed to develop and no attempt should be made to modify or radically alter them.
5) Since man has spirituality, that quality should be affirmed, and no attempt should be made to reduce him to his material components or to limit him to what is merely natural.

Without the benefits that man stands to gain through the application of these moral principles, there exists the imminent danger of his falling victim to five forms of dissolution: 1) exploitation, 2) fragmentation, 3) disintegration, 4) dehumanization, 5) despiritualization.

Thus, Church teaching on bioethics has both a positive as well as a negative function. It is positive in that it seeks to affirm and cultivate the substantive good of man. In its negative role it seeks to protect man from the real dangers that certain uses of biotechnology represent. It might also be said that Church teaching is highly realistic. Not only is it based on a profound vision of man as he is originally constituted as a creature of God, but it is equally cognizant of specific threats which beset man in the present age. There can be no argument raised against the claim that modern biotechnology poses real threats to man in the way it can exploit, fragment, disintegrate, dehumanize, and despiritualize him. We need only think of a few biotechnologies in order to be assured of the reasonableness of this claim: using the human fetus as an experimental object or as an organ-farm for organ transplants (exploitation); employing abortion, contraception, and sterilization to divorce procreation from sexual
intercourse (fragmentation); the attempt to perfect man through psycho-
surgery and genetic manipulation (disintegration); attempts to produce
mutants, cyborgs, super-men, hybrids, etc., which radically alter the
identity of man (dehumanization); and attempts to program the behavior
of man through various forms of genetic engineering, including genetic
surgery and cloning, which regard man as merely material
(despiritualization).

The following excerpts from recent declarations of popes and bishops
exemplify how Church teaching on bioethics is aimed at defending and
promoting the particular goods of the human being:

1) Concerning man’s dignity:

On this subject of *in vitro* fertilization, the bishops of Victoria, Australia, where the most advanced experiments in this field have taken
place, have stated:

We the Catholic bishops of Victoria, believe in the human dignity and the human
rights of every human being without exception. We insist especially on the dignity
and rights of those who have no one to speak out or lobby for them.

We therefore categorically condemn any using of a human embryo, or of any
other human being, as a mere means to others’ ends and purposes, however
admirable—e.g., for scientific experiment or as therapeutic source material. 2

Pope Pius XII had denounced the notion that a married couple (or
anyone, for that matter) had a “right” to have a child. The basic right
involved in marriage, as the Church has consistently taught, is the right to
acts apt by their nature to the generation of children. To claim that a
couple has a “right” to have a child implies that one human being (the
child) is to be radically subordinated to another human being. Such radical
subordination is contrary to human dignity which demands that one
person not be treated as an object, or as a means to an end, even if this end
be the fulfillment of the married couple. Thus, Pius condemns artificial
insemination, arguing that “The matrimonial contract does not give this
right, because it has for its object not the ‘child’, but the ‘natural acts’ which
are capable of engendering new life and are destined to this end.” 3

Pope John Paul II condemns experimentations on human embryos for
the same reason, namely, that all human beings, because they have their
own intrinsic dignity, are unexploitable. He writes:

I condemn, in the most explicit and formal way experimental manipulations of
the human embryo, since the human being, from conception to death, cannot be
exploited for any purpose whatsoever. Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council
teaches, man is “the only creature on earth which God willed for itself.” 4

2) Concerning man’s unity:

The Church has always taught that man is a unification of body and
soul. He is “corporis et animae unus,” as Vatican Council II teaches. 5 Man is
an “embodied spirit” or a “unity in multiplicity.” The Incarnation, which is
the fusion of the Word with human flesh, and the Holy Trinity, which
presents God as one, yet triune, offer fundamental images of unity which

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are central to the Church's moral teaching. Thus, the Holy Father writes:

The substantial unity between spirit and body, and indirectly with the cosmos, is so essential that every human activity, even the most spiritual one, is in some way permeated and colored by the bodily condition; at the same time the body must in turn be directed and guided to its final end by the spirit. There is no doubt that the spiritual activities of the human person proceed from the personal center of the individual, who is predisposed by the body to which the spirit is substantially united.⁶

But man's unity is twofold. Not only is there unity between body and spirit, but there is also an organismic unity within the body which is characterized by a harmony of all bodily parts and functions. With this twofold unity in mind, Pope John Paul II writes:

It is important not to isolate the technical problem posed by treatment of a certain illness from the attention given to the person of the patient in all his dimensions... You must at least try continually to consider the profound unity of the human being in the evident interaction existing among all his bodily functions, but also the unity of his bodily, affective, intellectual and spiritual functions.⁷

3) Concerning man's integrity:

The very mission of the Church, as Pope John Paul II points out, is to restore man "to his spiritual and moral integrity, to lead him toward his integral development..."⁸ One aspect of this integrity which the Church has regarded with special concern involves the marital act. Accordingly, the Church teaches that conjugal union should be an integration of body, emotions, and love which is both spiritual and unselfish. Pope Pius II writes:

The child is the fruit of the conjugal union when that union finds full expression by bringing into play the organic functions, the associated sensible emotions, and the spiritual and disinterested love which animates the union... Never is it permitted to separate these various aspects to the positive exclusion either of the procreative intention or of the conjugal relationship.⁹

Pope Paul VI confirms this integration of the physical and spiritual in the marital act when he speaks of "the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning."¹⁰ This integration of meanings, of course, does not mean that every act of intercourse should result in fertilization. But it does signify that procreation should never be regarded as a mere biological function, and that the unitive aspect of sexual intercourse should never be viewed as a mere expression of affection. The integration of the bodily and the spiritual, the procreative and the unitive is the very "nuptial meaning" of our bodies, as Pope John Paul II explains.¹¹

4) Concerning man's identity:

The Church has always taken pains to affirm the unique identity of each person. The "conjugal act," for example, as Pope Pius XII asserts, in its
natural structure is a personal action, a natural self-giving which, in the words of Holy Scripture, effects the union "in one flesh." The marital act is so profoundly personal, so resonant in its affinity between person and person, that it can effect an interpenetration of personal identities which results in two being united as one. Love is man's most personal act and flows essentially from his unique identity as a person.

Through the body, man may be personally united with another. At the same time, the body is an inseparable part of his identity as a person. For this reason, Pope John Paul II warns against genetic manipulations aimed at altering man's identity, those "adventuresome endeavors," as he describes them, "aimed at promoting I know not what kind of superman." In addition, certain genetic manipulations can alter the identity of one's offspring, the offspring of their offspring, and so on, through countless generations. Given this anthropological vision, the Pope asserts that "The biological nature of each person is untouchable, in the sense that it is constitutive of the personal identity of the individual throughout the whole course of history."

Man's identity as a person, a lover, and as a generator is a good and should not be placed at risk by non-therapeutic biotechnological interventions.

5) Concerning man's spirituality:

Pope Pius XII denounced artificial insemination because it reduced the conjugal act to a mere organic function, and converted the "domestic hearth" into "nothing more than a biological laboratory." More recently, the Catholic bishops of England denounced in vitro fertilization for similar reasons since, in their opinion, this procedure treated the embryonic human being as if it were a product rather than a person. Concerning genetic manipulation, Pope John Paul II avers that it "becomes arbitrary and unjust when it reduces life to an object."

Church teaching on this point is based on the understanding that man is more than a mere biological phenomenon or even a mere product of culture, and the consequent realization that it is a grave injustice to man to try to enclose him in a material world or to imprison him in a secular one. From the very beginning of his life, man is a spiritual being, a person who transcends materiality. This is evident from the fact that he is generated by agents who are themselves personal and spiritual beings. Thus, as Pope John Paul II writes, human fertility "is directed to the generation of a human being, and so by its nature it surpasses the purely biological order and involves a whole series of personal values." The process by which parents beget new life is essentially personal and involves an intimate communication between spiritual, personal beings, including a personal, creative God.

The Church is progressive in that it encourages man to gain dominion over the visible world. But it is progressive in an ethical way and denounces the misuse of the technological power which man has at his disposal—
what one theologian has repudiated as the “anthropology of domination.” The difference between “dominion” and “domination” in this matter lies precisely in the difference between an inclusion and an exclusion of a bioethics founded on the original, constitutive good of the human being. In his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II places the true progressive spirit of the Church, that is, one which unites progress with ethical principles, in perspective when he states that the essential meaning of this “dominion” of “man over the visible world, which the Creator Himself gave man for his task, consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the superiority of spirit over matter.”

**References**

5. Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 14, par. 1. “Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity.”
15. Pius XII, Pope, 1951, *op. cit*.
16. *Catholic Bishops' Joint Committee on Bio-Ethical Issues to the Warnock Committee on Human Fertilization and Embryology*, para. 20.