

**How does its treatment of the great ethical questions in both teaching and research show the specific nature of the catholic university?**

## Bioethics

Recent decades has seen a dramatic interest in Bioethics in most societies ; amongst academics [philosophers, theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, scientiests, legal experts] ; the general public as reflected in current affair programmes and the content of many ‘soap operas’ ; governments and legislators. In recent years the focus has been on embryonic stem cell production and use, euthanasia/physician assisted suicide and cloning. The number of academic journals dedicated exclusively to issues in Bioethics increases year on year. Most universities teach modules on Bioethics and have a dedicated chair that looks at issues in bioethics from a range of perspectives and disciplines.

The reason for the high and sustained level of academic, public and government interest in bioethics is because contemporary developments in biotechnology raise important new questions that are of interest both to individuals and their families and to society in general. Many of the substantive questions raised are ones that previous generations never reflected upon or reflected upon within very narrow parameters eg the nature of human parenthood and whether there is a ‘right’ to have children.

How individuals and societies respond to these new questions reveals a lot about *who* we are and *what* we value; about *how* we make ethical judgements; and our understanding of the *scope and limits* of individual freedom and choice.

The secular discipline of bioethics has for many decades been dominated by an approach centred around the four principles of justice, beneficence, nonmaleficence and autonomy. Though these principles can be very useful they do not, on their own, enable an adequate ethical analysis. They are also self evidently vague and need to be unpacked. How, for instance, are we to understand the scope of autonomy ? Does it have any limits ? Likewise, how is justice to be understood ? Justice for whom ? Furthermore how do we resolve competing claims when principles clash. Is there a hierarchy of principles ? Does the principle of justice, for example, trump the principle of autonomy or vice versa ? These are questions that have been around for a long time and are well discussed both within the Catholic moral tradition and outside of it.

The Catholic moral tradition has played, and continues to play, a very important role in the world wide debate on issues that flow from scientific developments affecting the human family. In many instances it offers a severe critique of the method, content and conclusions of much of the international debate. This is seen very clearly in recent debates, conducted in a variety of countries, on embryonic stem cell research and use and on euthanasia.

The contribution of the Catholic tradition and Catholic universities and centers of learning is, I think, potentially prophetic because it highlights an understanding of reality and of the human person that are denied in much of the international debate.

### Why a Catholic bioethic ?

As Christians we are called to be a dynamic and living presence in the world ; a presence in the world that makes a difference. The Scriptures invite and challenge us to be ‘the salt of the earth and the light of the world’; to contribute to the building up of God’s kingdom.

There is a great paragraph in the Compendium of Catholic Social doctrine [quoting John Paul II] that I introduce my students to at the beginning of my module on Catholic Social teaching. It sums up beautifully, I think, the oneness of the Christian life ; the integration of faith into every aspect of our lives.

*‘In the experience of believers, in fact, ‘there cannot be two parallel lives in their existence :on the one hand, the so called spiritual life, with its values and demands ; and on the other the so called ‘secular life’, that is life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture.’ [Compendium # 546 ]*

For people of faith there is just one life and that is an integrated life where our faith shapes and gives direction to our attitudes, actions and horizons in all areas of life, including bioethics.

There is here a clear rejection of an understanding that would restrict faith to the sanctuary or see it as a ‘private matter’ with no legitimacy in societal debates on bioethics or politics or economics. An essential part of Christian identity is, rather, to strive to bring the values of the Gospel to bear on all realities [politics, science, economics] that impact on the human family and the common good. Catholic interest in developments in medicine and science is therefore an imperative that flows from our self understanding as witnesses to Gospel values in the world.

### The Distinguishing features of a Catholic bioethic ?

What then is the *distinctive* contribution the Catholic moral tradition, as seen in the Catholic university and elsewhere, makes to the debate about developments in bioethics ? What are the distinguishing features of the Catholic contribution to debates on issues as diverse as stems cells, euthanasia, genetic modification and access to health care ?

The distinguishing features of a ‘Catholic’ bioethic can be readily and usefully identified and organized under two broad headings ; how we understand the world and our place in it and our understanding of the human person.

1] how we ‘see’ the world/creation and humankind's place in the world.

Christians see the world/creation as ‘gift’ from a loving God. It has both meaning and purpose. This is a very different starting point from that of one who sees creation as a consequence of a random act of chance. All of creation reflects God’s majesty and love for humankind. Furthermore, as the Psalms remind us, contemplation of the wonders of creation can lead us to know God.

Intrinsic to this understanding of God as Lord and Creator is the acceptance of human persons as ‘creatures’ [in the language of an older theology] or stewards of God’s creation. The notion of human stewardship places limits on human activity. We cannot do as we please with what we have been ‘gifted’. Rather we are called to use wisely and respectfully the creation we have received. Our engagement with reality should always be marked by a sense of awe, wonder and gratitude. Again this is a very different starting point from one which sets no limits on human intervention and creativity in the world of bio medicine and elsewhere.

The notion of responsible stewardship leads the Christian tradition to reject the scientific imperative – ‘if we *can* do it, then we *must* do it’ – in favour of an approach that looks at the means used and ends pursued. Much contemporary debate, and disagreement, in bioethics centers on how people arrive at ethical judgements. The prevailing culture is one in which many evaluate human actions on the basis of [good] intentions alone or on the basis of [good] ends alone. The Catholic moral tradition has always taken a very different approach – one that it claims pays more adequate attention to reality – insisting that any evaluation of human actions must include an evaluation of the act itself [what is actually happening] as well as intention and ends.

This insistence on looking at the bigger picture was stated very clearly in *Donum Vitae* # 4, written in 1987 as the first response to developments in reproductive technologies ;

*‘But what is technically possible is not for that very reason morally admissible. Rational reflection on the fundamental values of life and of human procreation is therefore indispensable for formulating a moral evaluation of such technological interventions ---.’*

It is of course a principle that applies to all areas of life not just the area of bioethics. In *Evangelium Vitae* Pope John Paul II applies the same principle to democracy. Though he acknowledged that the Church values the democratic system, because it promotes freedom etc, he cautioned against idolizing democracy. Rather he argued ;

*‘—the value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes. #70’*

The same is true of scientific research and developments. On the one hand they are a positive reflection of human genius and creativity but, on the other hand, should not be

[uncritically] idolized. They must, rather, be evaluated from the perspective of their impact on the human family.

This Christian notion of human stewardship also makes the link between human ecology and environmental ecology. This link was made most clearly in *Caritas in Veritate* where Pope Benedict argued that the environment is ;

*'a wondrous work of the Creator containing a 'grammar' which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation. #48'*

and later in the document ;

*'the book of nature is one and indivisible :it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations ----- Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. # 51'*

In the Catholic moral tradition the two ecologies [human and environmental] are linked by a common source in a loving God. Both should be appreciated as a 'gift', possessing an intrinsic meaning and purpose. This link between the two ecologies is, I think, a very profound insight that Catholic contributors and institutions can bring to the international debate. Because of this theological link the tradition can argue that one can not be against abortion and indifferent to poverty or environmental destruction. Similarly it can credibly argue that one cannot be for the protection of the environment and be indifferent to all that crushes the dignity of the person.

2] how we understand the human person.

How we understand the human person is of central importance in any discussion about what should be valued and promoted in society. The Christian understanding of the human person flows from reasoned reflection on experience and our faithful embracing of the Scriptures. The Pontifical Biblical Commission [2008] in its publication on *The Bible and Morality* made this very point. It identified two fundamental Biblical criteria that impact on our understanding of morality. The first of these is the 'biblical concept of human nature.' How we understand the human person impacts decisively on what we value, protect and promote in our own lives and in society. Since the Catholic moral tradition claims that politics, economics, and, indeed, society itself are at the service of the human person then it is essential to have an adequate understanding of the human person.

Indeed, addressing a different context, Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* # 13 noted the need for a credible anthropology on which to build societies. In that document though he acknowledged the role of inefficiency in the fall of the Soviet Bloc he argued

that 'the fundamental error of socialism is anthropological in nature.' Later in the same document he argued that ;

*'Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person.'* #46

A society built on an inadequate understanding of the human person was, in his analysis, doomed to fail. The understanding of the person operative in pre 1989 Soviet Union was inadequate because it denied the spiritual/Godly dimension of humanity, denied people the freedom to seek religious truth and to embrace that truth and placed the person at the service of the state rather than vice versa.

Similarly, contemporary debates on developments in science and bio technology will arrive at inadequate solutions if they are built on a flawed anthropology.

What then is the content of a Christian anthropology ?

The Biblical understanding that we are created in the 'image of God' has some very obvious but important implications.

A] Dignity as intrinsic.

Every person has an innate dignity that flows from their very nature as sons and daughters of God. It is intrinsic to who we are as persons created in God's image. This is a very different starting point or stance to that promoted by those who would make human dignity a function of health, wealth or achievements. Or to those who argue that our dignity is bestowed on us by our parents or society.

B] Equality of persons.

Christian anthropology claims that all persons are created in God's image and have an intrinsic dignity. Not just Christians or the virtuous but everyone. It is important to acknowledge that this radical claim was only slowly grasped by the Church itself as seen in the pained history of women and people of colour in society and Church. Indeed the full implications of that claim are still being teased out as is evident in the debate surrounding the treatment of members of the gay, lesbian and transgendered community.

C] Since we are created in the 'image of God' human persons are more than one dimensional.

There is a spiritual, Godly, or transcendent dimension to each person that needs to be acknowledged and protected. Christian teaching has always resisted political, social and economic structures that employ a reductionist understanding of the person with its emphasis on material well being only. Catholic social teaching, for example, in its

reflections on development has long promoted integral human development ; ‘the development of the whole person and every person.’

D] Person as social by nature.

A Christian anthropology understands the human person as a Person- in-community. Created in the image of a relational God humankind are naturally relational and social. Consequently the Catholic moral tradition rejects as inadequate approaches, in the area of bioethics and elsewhere, that promote a rugged individualism that emphasises individual *rights* without due regard to *duties*. In the area of bioethics this is most clearly seen in approaches that over emphasize the principle of autonomy or turn that principle into an absolute that trumps all other principles. In contrast a Catholic theological approach advances the common good as the ultimate criterion with which to evaluate developments in bioethics, economics and politics.

E] Persons endowed with reason.

A fundamental part of the Catholic understanding of the human person is that we are creatures endowed with reason who can comprehend the world we live in. God did not create us and abandon us to darkness and incomprehension. Rather God endowed us with reason so that we can understand our world and identify the things that contribute to human flourishing and those that frustrate or deny that flourishing. This optimism about the human condition, and our ability to grasp what is ‘good’, is in sharp contrast to the pessimism that underlies the moral skepticism and moral relativism evident in many contemporary debates. In this regard the Catholic moral tradition has a vital contribution to make in opposing this moral skepticism and encouraging the search for the ‘good’ while at the same time acknowledging that, at times, this search may be hugely time consuming and difficult in a complex world of ever expanding possibilities.

F] The biblical narrative in the Book of Genesis identifies original sin and human finitude as essential dimensions of our humanity.

We are not perfect creatures living in Utopia. We are, on the contrary, limited and prone to sinfulness ;selfishness, pride, indifference to others etc . This insight should caution us to be self critical and alert us to the possibility of deluding ourselves and overstretching the mark. The reality of our sinfulness should encourage us to see the importance of communal discernment where the Spirit inspired insights of the whole community are engaged. The previously mentioned text from the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality*, identified discernment as the sixth specific criterion

and presented Acts 15.1-35 [amongst others] as a model of ‘ecclesial discernment.’ [This raises interesting question re methodology : who discerns ?]

G] Finally a Christian anthropology highlights our Resurrection Destiny.

We are called to share the resurrection destiny of Christ and return to God from whence we came. This understanding of our ultimate end has obvious implications for how Christians engage with sickness and death. Though illness and death can fill us with sorrow and grief they are ultimately encountered through the lens of Easter hope and joy.

### Challenges.

To finish then, and as a form of a summary, I would like to briefly name the challenges and opportunities that a Catholic bioethic encounters as it engages in debate with ethicists, legislators and the media on issues of real importance for individuals and society.

- A] A reductionist understanding of the human person.
- B] A narrow focus on individual autonomy to the detriment of the common good and the social dimension of human existence.
- C] The prevailing culture of moral skepticism and relativism.
- D] A consequentialist approach to ethics that evaluates actions on the basis of their [good] ends and [good] intentions only.
- E] An attitude that would reduce faith to a private reality without legitimacy or relevance for the public domain.
- F] A flawed understanding of Freedom that detaches it from truth and morality and promotes it as an absolute value.
- E] A vision of civil law that is not rooted in the protection and promotion of human dignity, the common good and human solidarity.

In responding to these challenges the Catholic moral tradition – and Catholic universities and institutions of learning- have the opportunity to present 1] a robust and adequate understanding of the human person, 2] an understanding of human stewardship that both appreciates the wonders of human creativity and genius and accepts the limits placed on such creativity by the very ‘grammar’ of creation, 3] an understanding of human freedom that see it as ‘freedom *for* truth’ rather than ‘freedom *from* truth’, and 4] an understanding of society and the civil law that places them at the service of the human family.