
Bioethics Outlook

Plunkett Centre for Ethics

A joint centre of Australian Catholic University and St Vincent's Health Australia (Sydney)

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Accompanying Life

New Responsibilities in the Technological Era

Pope Francis address to Pontifical Academy for Life

I am pleased to join you for this annual meeting and I thank Archbishop Paglia for his kind words of introduction. I am grateful to all of you for the contributions you make; as time passes, their value becomes all the more evident for the advance of scientific, anthropological and ethical knowledge, and for the service of life, particularly for the care of human life and of creation, our common home.

In this issue

Both articles are by Jesuits!

In the first, the Pope initiates a new discussion of the today's biotechnologies and the opportunities they offer, as well as the obstacles they create, for what he refers to as 'accompanying life'.

In the second, and in the context in which several Australian parliaments are considering changing the law so as to permit doctors to assist some people to commit suicide, Brendan Byrne SJ rejects the view that the Church should retreat from the wider society, living its own life according to its own beliefs and laws but not trying to influence or make its voice heard in matters affecting society at large.

The theme of your meeting – Accompanying Life: New Responsibilities in the Technological Era – is one that is demanding and much needed, as it deals with the challenging combination of opportunities and issues associated with recent technological developments in the life sciences. Serious questions are being raised by the power of biotechnologies that, even now, enable the manipulation of life in ways hitherto unimaginable.

There is an urgent need for greater study and discussion of the social effects of this technological development, for the sake of articulating an anthropological vision adequate to this epochal challenge. Your expert advice, however, cannot be limited solely to offering solutions to the questions raised by specific ethical, social or legal conflict situations. The proposal of forms of conduct consistent with human dignity involves the theory and practice of science and technology in terms of their overall approach to life, its meaning and its value. It is from this perspective that I would like to offer you my reflections today.

1.

Human beings seem now to find themselves at a special juncture in their history, in uncharted territory, as they deal with questions both old and new regarding the meaning of human life, its origin and destiny.

The key feature of this moment is, in a word, the rapid spread of a culture obsessively centred on the mastery of human beings – individually and as a species – over reality. Some have even spoken of an egolatry, a worship of the self, on whose altar everything is sacrificed, even the most cherished human affections. This approach is far from harmless, for it induces people to gaze constantly in the mirror, to the point of being unable to turn their eyes away from themselves and towards others and the larger world. The spread of this approach has extremely grave effects on every affection and relationship in life (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 48).

Clearly, this is not to deny or minimize the legitimacy of the aspiration of individuals to a certain quality of life or the importance of the economic resources and technical means that can make it possible. Still, we cannot ignore the crass materialism that often typifies the linkage between the economy and technology, and ends up treating life as a resource either to be used or discarded for reasons of power and profit.

Sadly, throughout our world, men, women and children are realizing with remorse and grief the fallacious promises of technocratic materialism. This is also the case because, contrary to propaganda about expanding markets automatically resulting in greater prosperity, the zones of poverty and conflict, rejection and abandonment, resentment and despair, are spreading. Authentic scientific and technological progress ought instead to inspire policies more worthy of man.

Christian faith prompts us to reclaim the initiative, without yielding to nostalgia or complaint. The Church has a long tradition of noble and enlightened minds that paved the way for science and social consciousness in their day. The world needs believers who, joyful yet unassuming, are creative and proactive, humble and courageous, resolutely determined to overcome the divide between the generations. This divide disrupts the transmission of life. We applaud the exciting potential of young people, but who guides them to fulfilment as adults? Adulthood means a life of responsibility and love for both future and past generations. When fathers and mothers grow old, they rightly expect to be honoured for what they have generously given, not to be cast aside because they are no longer useful.

2.

The inspiration for reclaiming this initiative is once again the word of God, which sheds light on life's origins and destiny.

Today, there is great need of a theology of creation and redemption capable of finding expression in words and acts of love for each life and the whole of life, in order to accompany the Church's pilgrim path in this world. The Encyclical *Laudato Si'* is one sign of this renewed attention to the way God and man regard our world, starting from the revelation found in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. There we learn that each of us is a creature willed and loved by God for his or her own sake, not merely a combination of cells organized and selected by a process of evolution. All creation is in some way part of God's special love for human creatures, a love extending to every generation of mothers, fathers and children.

God's original blessing and his promise of an eternal destiny are the basis of the dignity of every life; they are meant for everyone. The men, women and children who make up the peoples of the earth are the life of the world that God loves and desires to save, without exception.

The biblical account of creation needs to be read and reread, in order to appreciate the breadth and depth of the loving action of the God who entrusts creation and history to the covenant of man and woman.

This covenant is certainly sealed by the personal and fruitful union of love that, through marriage and the family, is the means of transmitting life. In addition to this seal, the covenant between man and woman is called to be a guiding force for society as a whole. We are invited to be responsible for the world, in the realms of culture and politics, in the world of work and economic life, as well as in the Church. This is not merely a matter of equal opportunities or mutual appreciation. It involves the way men and women understand the very meaning of life and human progress. They are called not only to speak to one another about love, but to speak with love about what needs to be done so that the human community can take shape in the light of God's love for all his creatures. Men and women are called to

speak to one another as covenant partners, because neither of the two – neither man nor woman – can assume this responsibility alone. They were created together, in their sacred difference; together they sinned, for their presumption in trying to take the place of God; together, by the grace of Christ, they return to God’s presence, as stewards of the world and of the history that he has entrusted to them.

3.

We can say, then, that we are currently on the verge of a cultural revolution. And the Church must be the first to play her part in it.

In light of this, we need first all to acknowledge honestly our shortcomings and failures. The forms of subordination that have tragically marked the history of women have to be abandoned once and for all. A new start must be made in the ethos of peoples, and this can be achieved through a new culture of identity and difference. The recent proposal to advance the dignity of a person by radically eliminating sexual difference and, as a result, our understanding of man and woman, is not right. Instead of combatting wrongful interpretations of sexual difference that would diminish the fundamental importance of that difference for human dignity, such a proposal would simply eliminate it by proposing procedures and practices that make it irrelevant for a person’s development and for human relationships. But the utopia of the “neuter” eliminates both human dignity in sexual distinctiveness and the personal nature of the generation of new life. The biological and psychological manipulation of sexual difference, which biomedical technology can now make appear as a simple matter of personal choice – which it is not! – runs the risk of dismantling the energy source that feeds the covenant between man and woman, making it creative and fruitful.

The mysterious bond between the creation of the world and the generation of God’s Son is revealed by his taking flesh in the womb of Mary – Mother of Jesus and Mother of God – out of love for us. This mysterious bond never fails to amaze and move us; its revelation fully illumines the mystery of being and the meaning of life. Henceforth, the mystery of human generation radiates a profound wisdom about life. Received as a gift, life is itself exalted. Generating life regenerates us; by giving of our lives, we are enriched.

We are challenged, then, to counter an atmosphere of intimidation that surrounds the generation of life, as if it were somehow demeaning to women or a menace to our collective well-being.

The life-giving covenant between man and woman protects, not hinders, the dignity of our human family. Our history will not continue to be renewed if we reject this truth.

4.

A fervent concern to accompany and care for life requires, in the history of individuals and societies, a constantly renewed ethos of compassion and tender love for the birth and rebirth of humanity, in all its differences.

We need first to become sensitive once more to the different stages of life, especially of children and the elderly. Their frailties, their infirmities and their vulnerability are not exclusively the concern of medicine and health care. They also have to do with the soul and with human needs that must be recognized and taken into account, protected and esteemed, by individuals and the community alike. A society that considers these things as buyable and sellable, bureaucratically regulated and technically managed, is one that has already lost its sense of the meaning of life. It will no longer pass on that meaning to its young, or revere it in its aging parents. Almost without realizing it, we have now started to build cities increasingly unfriendly to children and communities increasingly unwelcoming to the elderly. They have walls but no windows or doors; meant to protect, they in fact stifle.

Faith's witness to God's mercy, which refines and perfects all justice, is an essential condition for the growth of compassion between generations. Without that mercy, the culture of the secular city is defenceless before the deadening and decay of the human spirit.

It is against this new horizon that I view the mission of the renewed Pontifical Academy for Life. I realize that it is a difficult, yet also exhilarating one. I am certain that there is no shortage of men and women of good will, scholars included, with differing approaches to religion and with a variety of anthropological and ethical visions, who are agreed on the need to propose a more authentic wisdom about life in view of the common good. Open and fruitful dialogue can and must be pursued between all those committed to seeking meaningful foundations for human existence.

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Render to Caesar

Brendan Byrne SJ

It is something of a coincidence that we should be hearing the Gospel I've just read this weekend when the lower house of our Victorian parliament has voted to allow what is called voluntary assisted dying, a form of what is otherwise known as euthanasia. Though Catholics may have different views on the matter—and some Catholic members of Parliament voted for the bill—the measure, if passed also in the Upper House, would legally establish a practice clearly contrary to traditional Catholic teaching: the intentional taking of an innocent human life.

If the measure is passed, it becomes a striking area of morality where what is legal and acceptable in wider society is at odds with what the Church has always believed and taught. When I was young, there was a lot of division and even hostility between various Christian traditions—Catholics versus Protestants of various denominations (Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, etc). But across such divisions between Christians and also between Christians and Jews there was basic agreement on what was right and wrong in a general sense, and the law of the land reflected these values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

With the gradual legalizing of abortion from the 1970's, a gap began to open up between Christian morality and the law of the land. Now, a very significant widening of the gap appears to be very likely if the voluntary assisted dying bill becomes law. It raises the whole issue of the relationship between the church and the state in a far more acute way.

There has been a lot of public comment—in the press, on television, and social media—to the effect that those who oppose the bill on religious grounds should not be imposing their views on others who do not share their belief in God; that they should practice their own beliefs as they see fit, but stay out of the debate and allow their fellow citizens to make their own free choice in the matter. In other words, the church should keep to itself and leave wider society to get on with its business according to the developing social understanding of the times.

All this criticism is of course exacerbated by the fact that at the present time—and especially in view of the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse soon to deliver its findings—the Catholic church, in particular, has lost a lot of public credibility in the moral area. And this despite the fact that the Catholic church has long been one of the largest and most experienced providers of palliative care to the sick and dying.

What is really being said, when all the criticism adds up, is that the Church should withdraw and become something of a sect within wider society, living its own life according to its own beliefs and laws, but not trying to influence or make its voice heard in matters affecting society at large. That is, of course, how at times in other countries Christians have had to live when the political setup has been quite hostile to the faith, even to the point of persecution: in nominally communist countries such as China, Vietnam and Cuba, or in countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, even Malaysia, where a radical form of Islam determines the laws and practice of society.

It has never, however, been the way of the Catholic tradition to separate itself out like a sect from wider society. Sometimes, as in the Middle Ages in Europe, the Church has been too identified with the State, a state of affairs that made things very hard for minority non-Christian communities, especially the Jews. But since the spread of democracy across the globe in recent centuries, Christians and other religious traditions have been able to live together, sharing common values, in societies that are basically tolerant and cohesive.

Though our Catholic view of morality is basically derived from the Bible, especially as interpreted by the teaching and practice of Jesus, it has long been the Catholic way, not to impose such teaching from on high simply because of what the Bible says in a particular case. Over many centuries, employing not just biblical teaching but the best of philosophy and other human spheres of learning going right back to the Ancient Greeks, the Church has tried to argue for its view of what is best for human beings and society on principles that all can share. In the area of dying, for example, it has argued not simply from the traditional sense that human life is sacred but from its vast experience also in palliative care.

The Catholic community in coming years may find itself more at odds with the general run of Australian society than in past times. There has always been a cost involved in being a practicing member of the church, at least if one is a truly faithful disciple of Jesus. That cost may grow somewhat higher in years to come. But the Church cannot and will not cease to maintain its God-given view that human life flourishes best when it acknowledges that it owes its existence to a Creator, who has given us the supreme dignity of being made in his own image and likeness, an image set before us in absolute perfection in the person of his Son Jesus Christ.

We recognize that image of God and the dignity that goes with it in every human life—unborn, dying, unattractive maybe and even seemingly useless. We believe that each

human being is precious in God's sight and that we are accountable to God for the way we have treated each other and arranged human society for the benefit of others, including the most vulnerable and least productive.

In his response when challenged about whether taxes could be paid to Caesar, the Roman emperor or not, Jesus did not provide a blueprint for how his followers should relate to the state. He avoided the trap by throwing the question back to those who set it for him. If he agreed that taxes should be paid to Caesar, he would lose his standing with the people, who resented being taxed by a foreign power. If he forbade paying taxes to Caesar he would be in trouble with the Romans themselves as a dangerous threat to their rule. Jesus refuses to endorse either choice. His questioners had set the issue simply in terms of obligation to Rome; they had not brought God into the equation at all. His majestic answer, "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar—and to God what belongs to God," takes possession of the moral high ground by setting responsibility to the civil power (which he does not deny) within the broader and higher framework of obedience to God. It is within that higher framework that they—and Christians down the ages to ourselves—have to determine how to relate to the state and to the civic society as a whole in which we live. So Jesus, like the good teacher that he is, sets us a task rather than giving a simple answer for all time. He has left it to us, guided by the Spirit, to work out how we should live as his followers in the changing circumstances of each age.

2018 PLUNKETT LECTURE

“Should We Take Away Hippocrates’ Licence?

Professionalism, Conscience, and Tolerance in a Good Society”

Daniel Sulmasy

Professor of Biomedical Ethics

Georgetown University, Washington DC

5.30pm Thursday 22 March 2018

St Vincent’s Clinic, 438 Victoria St, Darlinghurst, Sydney

To register your interest email Plunkett@plunkett.acu.edu.au

