

ARCHDIOCESE OF GLASGOW

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Most Rev Mario Conti, Archbishop of Glasgow
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Bioethical Issues we face today ...

This is a catch-all title.

Bioethics, as a branch of moral philosophy, addresses questions to do with life; how we value life; what moral status we give to human life at its various stages, before and after birth, in infancy, puberty, mature adulthood and in senility.

It examines how we treat individual human beings throughout this sequence of their development insofar as we have responsibilities towards them, in order to respect their dignity as human beings, as personal members of the human family, and to treat them justly.

In this description I have distinguished human beings at different stages of their development since the question may be asked whether we have more or less responsibility at different times.

Some argue that the more vulnerable human individuals are the more duty there is in others to protect and support them.

Most people would want to say that our moral duty towards children is weightier in practice because of their vulnerability but surprisingly, perhaps, many would not extend this duty towards unborn children although their vulnerability is even greater.

Most people would defend the special moral duty of concern, which as a society we owe our ageing members but an increasing number perhaps would not extend the same duty of care and protection to PVSs – persons in a permanent vegetative state.

Underlying these apparent anomalies are differing philosophical conceptions regarding what it is to be human, linking perhaps that concept to the notion that only those with the capacity for conscious human activity are truly definable as persons.

So in the case of the unborn child it has not yet become a person; in the case of the senile or comatose individuals the person has gone.

Also in my description I refrained from including any notion of the individual human being's dignity stemming from their having been made in the image and likeness of God. That brings into the argument a notion which arises from a faith perspective.

For those with faith in God this is a powerful motive for respect, as it is a strong component in our describing the dignity of the human person "*in fieri*" as "*in esse*" – as much in their becoming as in their being, since they are called into being by the Creator – a calling which in the Christian dispensation is ultimately towards 'sonship' – 'daughtership' – growth into the fullness of Christ's humanity. Of course this brings in the spiritual dimension, a dimension which can never be lacking in the truly holistic approach of the Christian ethicist.

However to omit this concept of the human individual being made in the image and likeness of God is not to render our argument of the dignity of the individual inadequate, though it loses some of its conviction for persons who do not share this faith perspective – and we should always be aware of this; it helps us to understand why what seems to us to be conclusive still does not carry conviction with others.

Our arguments within a secular context, while attending to and openly admitting where appropriate their connection to a faith dimension, must stand alone on the basis of natural law - namely on the ground of reason as it reflects on the nature of human society; on the natural relationships which arise as a result of our shared humanity and our membership of the human society or family of man.

Pope John Paul II has put it this way: "The divine law 'Thou shalt not kill' regards every person, and obliges every person regardless of his or her religious convictions, because it is the law which the Creator inscribed in consciences as a natural law" (*General Audience, 30 January 1991*).

When we find laws reasonable and generally acceptable we are making our judgement on the basis of what we consider fair and just.

We are implicitly accepting the notion of a natural law since without reference to a fundamental sense of what is right and wrong we would be incapable of making such judgements, though many people today are probably unreflectively ignorant of this self-evident truth, and ascribe all morality to the domain of positive law.

How they make sense of a nagging conscience or a feeling of guilt when acting free of positive law is beyond me.

Again the words of the Holy Father sum up the situation very well:

"For many contemporary thinkers, the concepts of nature, and of natural law appear to apply only to the physical and biological world, or, as an expression of order in the cosmos, in scientific research or in the field of ecology. Unfortunately, in such a view, it becomes difficult to use natural law to mean human nature in a metaphysical sense and to use natural law for the moral order." (Address to Pontifical Academy for Life 27th Feb 2002)

Perhaps one has to accept that there are underdeveloped consciences as well as ignorant minds. However it is with sophisticated but misinformed or misguided minds that some of our main contests occur.

In our prevailing culture of rights there is a constant danger of individual rights, or the rights of specific groups, causing an imbalance.

Cardinal Avery Dulles has written: "The free society rests on the supposition that the members are endowed with inalienable rights. If the rights of individuals were conferred by the state or by the society, they could be removed by human power, and the way would be open to tyranny. As the authors of our Declaration of Independence recognized, the Creator Himself has given human beings an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, though of course the exercise of these rights has to be regulated with regard to the common good."

Furthermore there is a need to remind ourselves that the natural law is not without its absolutes – its guiding axioms - which are not relative or negotiable, otherwise we would be in a position of moral free for all.

I mean statements such as 'Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you'. This has the ring of an absolute.

Of course we could do even better by agreeing that 'we should do to others what we would wish them to do to us'. The Judean tradition goes further still: "love your neighbour as yourself" and the Christian Gospel reaches a moral perfection when Jesus says: "Love one another as I have loved you ... greater love than this no one has than to lay down his life for his friends".

These latter developments of the golden rule are negotiable - the greater the civilisation the more they have applied, underpinning the best in positive law.

We struggle through the Church to establish the 'civilta' d'amore' - the civilisation of love.

Now to an examination of some of the bioethical issues we face today. What are they? Where are the nodal points of our moral concerns in today's society?

Here I need to be selective because there are enormous issues affecting our planet and its human inhabitants which arguably fall within the definition of bio-ethics – the moral treatment of life - of the way we treat human beings.

Even questions of the sustainability of the physical environment have a bearing on human life and the quality of its existence.

There are the questions of the global economy, of the fair distribution of the world's resources at least in terms of the basic necessities of life: food, clothing, shelter, education, gainful employment, medical care and so on. We refer to these as Justice & Peace issues.

And of course the correlation and indeed the inherent inter-connection of these greatly desired things, namely justice and peace, is a constant refrain in the teaching of the Church under the guidance of successive Popes. We are as right in seeing these Justice & Peace issues as broadly bio-ethical questions as we are in counting areas such as abortion as justice and peace issues. We could become too narrowly focussed. However in addressing some of the more frequently termed bio-ethical issues today we are not forgetful of those overriding concerns for the human race.

What would I identify in the narrower field as engaging our (continued) concern?

Number one must be abortion. It strikes at the very heart of our human society since it violates that most fundamental of human relationships, the relationship of mother and child. How can a healthy society, built up as it is on family units, not be concerned that annually 200,000 babies are aborted in this country?

It would be correct to remark that our society is not a (morally) healthy society. I believe that this ill health derives in large measure from the practice and condoning of abortion. From the attitude that considers a child as bringing troubles, we have come to the position of considering the child as itself the trouble – from wishing to avoid the troubles we have moved to avoiding the child. Indeed that is why perceptive individuals link abortion to contraception.

However to be fair, many of those who first advocated the decriminalisation of abortion did so out of a concern for poor and inadequate mothers or poor mothers in inadequate circumstances, many of whom suffered greatly – even to a loss of life at the hands of so-called back-street abortionists.

Only later, and perhaps by way of justification of the increasing misuse of the Act did the cry go up of a woman's right to control her own body. This has since become a woman's right to abortion.

Here is a case of consciences becoming malformed through an appeal to (human) rights too narrowly defined or considered. Would those who now make the demand consider whether it is something they would have allowed others to do to them!

Unfortunately society does not stop there – the "right" is now becoming a right to have a healthy, a perfect child (one without so comparatively minor an imperfection as a remediable harelip).

We are into a consumerist consideration of a quality product!

How do we counter abortion?

We started by condemning it – in the hope of raising the consciences of individuals and through them, the conscience of society in preventing it.

We failed!

'Life', Cardinal Winning's Pro-Life initiative and other groups have seen the need to understand the mentality of those tempted to abort and to offer them a realistic alternative, to provide them with advocacy and practical support, to give them back the dignity of parenthood.

This does not mean a total abandonment of political action to try and restrict the law or its application, nor a retreat from the public argument that seeks to change public opinion. We have seen and admired the action of an Anglican Deaconess in seeking a judicial review of a case of an abortion on the grounds of the baby's imperfection of a harelip. We do well to support such actions.

The reference to a baby as a product brings us to the second bio-ethical issue facing us today. I refer to in-vitro fertilisation and cloning.

When the newly-formed Bishops' joint Bio-ethics Committee (the Bishops' Joint Commission for Bio-ethical issues) studied the Warnock Report and responded to it, we stated that it was wrong to remove conception from the ambit of a human act which had an essential inter-personal character - wherein the conception of a child would be seen as a gift supervening on an act of conjugal love.

We predicted that otherwise the effect would be to see the child as a product - it would be depersonalised. It would be valued for its product quality – and would be in danger of rejection for not meeting consumer demand for the perfect product.

(I may be elaborating the language somewhat but the essential point was clearly made – the overriding danger of removing the conception of a child from its natural setting to the laboratory was of its being treated as a product and not as a supervening gift).

I think our judgement is vindicated every time we cross another threshold such as the pre-implantation diagnosis of sex or genetic makeup; the cull of the supernumerary in a multiple pregnancy and so on.

And while we might have experienced some satisfaction in the decision of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) to attempt to restrict implantation to 2 or 3 embryos depending on the age of the intended birth mother, we have the Chairman of the Authority opining that single woman and lesbian couples should be allowed the services of the laboratory in having babies not only out of wedlock but out of the conjugal partnership of man and woman.

When I pointed out in an article that the logic of allowing in-vitro fertilisation led inevitably to such aberration and would lead by the same inexorable reasoning to cloning I was intemperately attacked by Lord Robert Winston.

However his chief objection to cloning appeared to be the underdeveloped state of the art rather than any objection in principle to the cloned reproduction of an already existing individual who could be the mother or father or even the grandmother or grandfather of the child.

If a certain doctor is to be believed this has already taken place.

Ian Wilmut of the Roslyn Institute, when addressing the Bishops' Joint Bio-Ethics Committee, was frank about the number of failed attempts to clone Dolly the Sheep. One of our own committee has explained the importance of the integrity of the egg's casing in the development of a healthy embryo. Dolly's premature ageing alone gives cause for caution – though our opposition to the procedure lies mainly elsewhere, namely in the right of every member of the human species to his/her integrity, uniqueness and identity – this latter closely connected to the question of relationship.

What, for example, are we to say to a baby cloned from its grandmother's cell when it is at an age to understand. You are Granny's twin?

Most fundamental of all objections is the one which set the Bishops' Joint Bio-Ethical Committee in opposition to Warnock, namely that the natural order should not be subverted: babies are gifts not products.

It does not help our case to condemn the individual couple who, unable to have a child naturally have had one by in-vitro fertilisation and artificial insemination. They may well treat the baby as a gift and be delighted in their parentage.

It should not alter our objective stance on the *process*, nor prevent our continued opposition to all the objectionable developments in the programme, not least, for a whole raft of reasons, our objection to human cloning, whether for so called therapeutic purposes or reproduction.

The procedure is the same – in both instances a human embryo is formed – only the purposes are different. We should recognise and continue to point out that our Government is the exception to the practice of most if not all European Countries, and the U.S.A. and other countries in outlawing all attempts at human cloning, whatever the reason.

The reason the Government allowed so-called therapeutic cloning was to provide a pool of embryonic stem cells for experimentation and research, and this despite the ethical objections raised to the procedure. As debates continue over cloning and the use of human embryos, progress is being made in the far less ethically objectionable field of research with adult stem cells.

Cloning may be said to be the extreme example of genetic manipulation. There are other forms and procedures of genetic intervention on human subjects which I wish to address as my third area of concern.

Simply put, I wish to explore the question "is it good to intervene for medical purposes in the genetic make up of an individual or on the germ-line which will affect the lives of many?"

Genetic manipulation or GeneTherapy can be divided into two branches. Somatic gene therapy is an intervention on an individual with a particular genetic defect with a view to correcting that defect.

Germ-line therapy involves intervening in the genetic make-up of future generations through alteration of the germ-line – the sperm and ova. The aim is to remove defective genes from the hereditary pool. Let us consider these procedures in turn.

But first of all let us remember that there is a principle which must be borne in mind and that is to do with a proportionality between means and ends.

Are the risks we take justified by the good we can expect to come about?

Clearly it would be wrong to risk the life or health of a patient by an experiment which has not been properly tested.

Of course if a potential therapy is the only realistic hope to save a person's life then it would indeed be moral to undergo the procedure even where it had not been exhaustively tested.

In the report of the Bishops' Joint Committee on Bioethics, "Genetic Intervention on Human Subjects" of 1996, we read: "The moral questions raised by somatic therapy are similar to those raised by other forms of therapy and concern the potential benefits to the patient, the risks to the patient and to others and the cost and other burdens of the treatment."

In general then, this form of genetic manipulation is subject to the same ethical considerations as those which govern medicine generally.

Germ-line therapy, on the other hand, is an altogether different matter, more difficult from a moral point of view.

Firstly it needs to be said that positive results from these procedures are far from certain. Their promise is remote, not proximate.

Animal experiments have shown a high degree of mortality and morbidity in embryos subjected to germ-line interventions, beyond any reasonable degree of risk. In addition there is a danger of creating unwanted and unforeseen side-effects, cascading down the generations in an unstoppable flow, perhaps bringing about worse outcomes than the problems they were designed to solve.

But perhaps our greatest concern is that the only way to refine and improve these therapies will be through destructive experimentation on human embryos. This raises questions not only about the ethics of such experimentation but also about the ethics of using the results of it.

Is it right, for instance to undertake a therapy which has only been made possible by the destruction of thousands of human lives, albeit in embryonic form? Is this not a case of using another human being as a means to an end?

And then we must confront the dangers posed by unscrupulous application of these procedures. Are we to countenance genetic manipulation aimed at improving a child's musical ability, changing hair colour or increasing height?

And of course are we not to take into consideration the consequences of failure? What if the attempted manipulation goes wrong and the defective gene is still present.

Abortion? Is that the answer?

Such reasoning is not only gravely immoral but incompatible with the dignity of procreation.

Do you see the connection?

The same fundamental concerns inform all our discourse ... the right to life of the embryo; the right to a family inheritance on the part of every human person. What is at stake, ultimately is the dignity of every human being.

It should be of some consolation to us to see the integrity and the logic of the position which we uphold. But it is not enough that we console ourselves with the rectitude of our reasoning. We must convince others through argument, through logical discussion, but most of all through love.

That is the beauty of the Life organisation.

Your witness to human life through your care for mothers in difficulty is the most convincing argument of all regarding the dignity of the human person.

It is that question of human dignity which is the key to changing the hearts and minds of our generation.

In the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council notes how in the world today there is "a growing awareness of the matchless dignity of the human person, who is superior to all else and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable" (No. 26).

The Holy Father often paints a picture of our world using the technique of *chiaroscuro*... areas of light and areas of darkness. This growing realisation - even among even those who are not our natural allies, of the dignity of humanity, is an area of light.

The promotion and development of this key concept is the great challenge to all of us who claim to be "pro-life" when confronted by the ethical impoverishment of civil laws regarding the protection of certain aspects of human life.

For the positive concept of law, together with ethical relativism, not only eliminates a sure reference point from civil co-existence, but degrades the person's dignity and threatens the fundamental structures of society.

I am certain that everyone here will do all he or she can, with courage and clarity, to ensure that civil laws respect the truth of the person and his reality as an intelligent and free being, as well as his spiritual dimension and the transcendent nature of his destiny.

And I am certain that in carrying out that task, you will do it all with love which is, at the end of the day, the greatest witness that can be borne to the dignity of human life.

Thank you

