



The Importance of Bioethics

Our contemporary world is in desperate need of morally and intellectually sound bioethics. We are in the midst of a “perfect storm” combining unprecedented cultural confusion about the nature and identity of the human person and a biotechnological revolution that is fast transforming what was merely science fiction in the past into realistic scientific possibilities today or in the near future. There has never been a time when advancement in the biological sciences and technology have made such radical interventions on the human body and the created world so easy to carry out. These developments prompted the doctrine committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to issue an important document: [Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body](#).

The USCCB’s doctrinal note rightly observes that many biomedical breakthroughs, chemical, surgical, genetic, etc., have made the curing of previously untreatable conditions and illnesses possible today. This is a great good for which we should be immensely grateful. On the other hand, this newly acquired power over biological beings, humans foremost, but also animals and plants, is being terribly misused all over the world. It prompted two popes to issue documents condemning the abuse of the created order. Pope Francis wrote an encyclical, [Laudato Si](#), pointing out (n. 106) that a new “technocratic paradigm” has led much of humanity to treat nature as an object of manipulation without respect for the order of creation.

Earlier, Pope Benedict XVI declared in his encyclical, [Caritas in Veritate](#) (n. 48) that the Catholic view of the intervention of science and technology on human beings and the natural world falls between two extremes.

When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God's creation.

I believe Pope Benedict was prophetic when he said that the great challenge of the future would be mankind rejecting God the Creator.

Today many scientists and others are nearly blind to the fundamental distinction the Church and well-grounded bioethicists make between what can be done using modern biomedicine and technology and what should be done. Some researchers pursue experimental breakthroughs by sacrificing the lives of human embryos completely heedless of the violation of the fundamental right to life of all human beings. Others radically surgically and hormonally alter the bodies of people without seeing that they are mutilating these poor persons and transgressing against human nature itself.

Our Catholic vision of bioethics is that it is a compassionate and objective search for what is true and good when ethical dilemmas arise in medicine or scientific research. We have very clear principles. A direct attack on the life of an innocent human being can never be sanctioned. Also, we cannot accept “the end justifies the means” reasoning that seeks to bring about a good end through evil acts.

Faithful Catholic bioethicists can provide an invaluable service in assisting the laity and clergy in difficult moral decision making. This assistance is all the more necessary when patients or family members are distraught and vulnerable because of physical suffering or emotional distress. People can be manipulated into bad decisions. They need solid and morally clear advice.

The National Catholic Bioethics Center has for years offered a [free ethical consultation service](#) for individuals. Many people face hard ethical choices. Modern medicine can do more and more, but what ethically *should* be done is sometimes unclear. Some choices, like assisted suicide, are never morally acceptable. Hard discernment comes into play when we look at the shifting line between extraordinary and ordinary means of preserving a patient’s life. Pope Pius XII reaffirmed this vital ethical distinction in the 1950s. We are only morally obligated to use ordinary means to safeguard our lives. Extraordinary means can be chosen as well, but they are morally optional, part of the great freedom we all have as believers.

Pope Pius XII and a wise priest friend of mine both insisted It is hard to strive to be a good Catholic. We should not place any burdens beyond what is morally required. Jesus condemned the Pharisees who piled heavy burdens on others but did not lift a finger to help. Bioethicists can help people to discern what is

proportionate and what is disproportionate in medical care. Some interventions are burdensome and provide very little benefit. In the most extreme circumstances, frequent violent resuscitations or certain other medical interventions can cross the line that separates health care from physical abuse and even disrespect for the human person. Cutting off some basic care, on the other hand—or giving dangerously high doses of pain medication—can go from allowing a person to die peacefully to a form of euthanasia.

Bioethics can be a remarkable force for good and the Gospel of Life. When it is perverted, however, it loses the vital connection that promotes the unique dignity of the human person in a compassionate and truthful way. Some scientists and doctors are tempted to play God and disregard our just limitations as created beings. Good bioethicists are guardians of what is sacred and inviolable in our brothers and sisters, defenders of the dignity of the human person and our created world.

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