



Catholic Bioethics in the Third Millennium

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With disputes over bioethics issues continually in the news, Catholics are under ever more pressure to defend their stance on topics ranging from abortion to euthanasia to organ transplant and freedom of conscience.

Bishop Anthony Fisher, OP, recently launched his new book, "Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium," (Cambridge University Press), in which he seeks to explain and defend the Church's position on a range of bioethical issues.

Bishop Fisher is not only the bishop of Parramatta, in Western Sydney, but also a professor in moral theology and bioethics at the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family in Melbourne.

There is much to celebrate about contemporary health care and bioresearch, he acknowledged in the book's introduction. Yet, when it comes to ethics the mentality of what he termed "the technological imperative" is often present. Namely, that if something can be done it should be. Opponents of this mentality are then characterized as opposing progress.

Bishop Fisher outlines a number of guidelines that should be taken into account. They include the fact that there are objective truths about the human person, that as persons we possess an intrinsic dignity, that human acts are often complex, and that we have a responsibility to protect life.

One chapter is devoted to the theme of conscience, which is not, Bishop Fisher, explained merely some kind of strong feeling or sincere opinion. Our conscience, he explained, needs to be guided by objective principles or it risks degenerating into the mere expression of our personal preferences.

Informing conscience

The teaching of the Church, he continued, "is not some external source of moral thinking with which private conscience must grapple. Rather it, it informs conscience, much like a soul informs a body, giving it shape and direction from within."

The bulk of the book consists of chapters on specific subjects, such as when human life begins, euthanasia, transplants and abortion.

In the chapter on stem cells he pointed out that the exaggerated hype about all the promised cures as a result of embryonic stem cell research has fallen on its face. Bishop Fisher pointed out that by now even Ian Wilmut, the creator of Dolly the cloned sheep, has given up on human cloning and embryonic stem cell research, and he says that reprogramming adult stem cells is the way to go.

Even if the promises of embryonic stem cells had come true the chapter goes on to explain that it is still unethical given that the early human embryo is truly human.

Christianity is not anti-science, as some allege, Bishop Fisher maintained, it is pro-science, but also has consistently defended human life from its earliest stages.

"Once parliaments, medibusiness or individual laboratories take us down the slippery slope of killing some for the benefits of others, we are well down a path towards other developments tomorrow that public opinion today would not countenance," he warned.



Turning to the theme of abortion and genetic testing in another chapter, Bishop Fisher argued that the focus on rights and autonomy is not very helpful in determining what to do. "Motherhood is not about ownership or competition," he observed.

Talking about supposed abortion rights fails to take into account our relationships with others and the implications of our choices for other people's lives and for the common good, he pointed out.

When it comes to aborting embryos suffering from some kind of defect Bishop Fisher reflected that, instead of asking whether they would be better off dead, if compassion were our real concern we would be ensuring that disabled children were given adequate treatment and every form of assistance.

Without that effort, then instead of compassion it is more a matter of prejudice when it comes to prenatal screening and abortion, he adverted.

Sign of contradiction

In his chapter on artificial nutrition for unresponsive patients Bishop Fisher made a more general observation about Catholic bioethics. Catholicism, he noted is opposed to many of the shifts in attitudes to the human person and has become a "sign of contradiction."

That has come about, he continued, due to changes in philosophical views that today see the human person as some kind of functional system.

By contrast: "Christianity holds to a realist account of the person as a being that is material, living, animal, rational, free, social, emotional and immortal, and so offers metaphysical and biological arguments for this personhood from the first moment of that being's existence to his or her last."

Autonomy is not the source of human value or values, he noted, quoting John Paul II.

Two other very relevant chapters examine the role and responsibilities of Catholic hospitals and how Catholic politicians should act in their political duties.

While the book is set at quite high a level the many reflections in Bishop Fisher's book make it a valuable guide to today's contentious debates over bioethics.