

Pontificia Academia pro Vita

**Human Life in some Documents of the Magisterium
Most Rev. Gerhard L. Müller**

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Introduction

Dear Friends in Christ,

I am grateful to Bishop Ignacio Carrasco de Paula and to the Pontifical Academy of Life for inviting me to speak to you today and I am delighted that so many of you have made the time to be here to discuss and to learn about some of the most sensitive moral issues of our day.

It is not insignificant that we are meeting during the Year of Faith which recalls the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the twentieth anniversary of the promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In the light of this Year of Faith, therefore, I would like in this short talk firstly to offer some brief comments on the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* which sets forth a global vision for the mission of the Church in today's world. I will then propose for your consideration the two fundamental bioethical criteria articulated in the Instruction *Dignitas personae* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. And I will conclude by revisiting the famous image of the “seamless garment” as a description of the Church's moral teaching.

The Vision of *Gaudium et spes* and our mission in the Church

I am sure that I do not need to convince you of the difficult social and political context in which the Church today is called to fulfill her mission, particularly with regard to biomedical issues. The process of de-Christianization in the Western World has reached a climax in the “new atheism” of thinkers like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens—whose books are “best sellers” in many countries. And while in its essentials it is neither particularly new nor particularly insightful, this so called “new atheism” uses the architecture of astrophysics and neurobiology and the wizardry of contemporary means of mass communication to propose to credulous “modern man” a world view that not only discounts God, but also displaces the human person from the center, and assigns him to a mechanistic periphery.

This is our Areopagus! This is the context in which we are called to fulfill our mission, and difficult as it may be it is not that different from the context in which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council found themselves, addressing the Church and

the world just twenty years after the conclusion of the Second World War. In contrast to the evident inhumanity and intolerance of the National Socialist project in Germany and the atheistic Soviet regime in Russia, today's so-called scientific atheism presents itself as a form of humanism. However, it fails to be humane precisely by excluding *a priori* all reference to the transcendent. In this sense, godless scientism is but the latest inheritor of a dark patrimony, which always lurks just below the surface of history exposing the human family to the risk of new forms of political totalitarianism.

Then as now, man seeks his place in the world. The Council's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* frames the fundamental existential question of man in this way: "But what is man? About himself he has expressed, and continues to express, many divergent and even contradictory opinions. In these he often exults himself as the absolute measure of all things or debases himself to the point of despair. The result is doubt and anxiety" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 12). The utopian vision which historically has been the promise of the atheistic world view is as illusory now as in the heyday of the Stalinist revolution. Rather, a sense of moral crisis has taken hold of human society as evidenced by repeated failures in the attempt to construct a just global society, by the continued abuse of the environment and the depletion of natural resources, and by an unbridled financial system which has brought the western world once again the verge of ruin. The Council, for its part, not only acknowledged the nihilistic crisis of meaning which ultimately results from godless socialism and scientism, it offered a telling and timely diagnosis: in refusing to acknowledge God as creator and source of all things, man obscures his own proper and ultimate goal as well as distorts his relationship with other persons and with all created things (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 13).

But the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council did not content themselves with diagnosing the problem. Rather, they spoke directly into the problem by reminding the Church and the world that God is the only true measure of man and that the will of God, echoed in the voice of conscience, is the only sure source of moral obligation. "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience speaks to his heart when necessary: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 16). Ethical reflection is, therefore, not primarily a religious pursuit but rather arises from the intellectual nature of man. The Council Fathers highlighted the necessity of a rationally-based ethics because the Natural Law is grounded in human nature itself and therefore accessible to all.

The intellectual nature of the human person which grasps the law of God is perfected in faith which gives him the power to be united to Christ, the fullness of divine Revelation. And so the Council teaches: "The root reason for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin, man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully

according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to his Creator” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 19). The fundamental questions of human existence and meaning have not changed - if anything the problem we face today in a media-saturated culture is a large scale avoidance of philosophical questioning and rational argumentation. How could it be otherwise when so many people today are educated without a solid formation in the Christian faith or, more fundamentally, without a philosophical basis which enables rational argumentation and rigorous thinking. Such people seem to react instinctively against the idea that there are objective norms, and they live under a philosophically impoverished conception of “tolerance” which leads to the ultimately destructive idea that each person is able to decide for himself what is right, just, acceptable, and even moral. But let us not mistake this for an intellectual rejection of truth! It is rather the failure to engage the intellect in pursuit of truth.

Here, therefore, is where the Church must begin her engagement with contemporary society. In her teaching she must capture the heart of modern man, so as to encourage an engagement of his mind with the truth. This indeed is the vision of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* which articulates - in terms that are as relevant today as they were fifty years ago - both a diagnosis of the contemporary socio-political situation as well as a remedy; namely, the proper presentation of the Church’s teaching accompanied and amplified by the integral life of the Church and her members. We must reject the characterization of our teaching as out-dated and tired. The overarching message of *Gaudium et spes* is that the Church is thoroughly concerned and engaged with man at the most basic levels of identity, meaning, and moral discernment. We cannot allow our moral teaching to be frozen in the political categories of liberal or conservative, modern or out-dated. Our categories are orthodoxy or heterodoxy, the measure by which something corresponds to the Gospel and to the God-given nature of man or distorts it. The Church’s moral reflection is not simply a collection of teachings, more or less related. Rather, ours is a sustained reflection in faith on Divine Revelation, the Word of God which brings life and light. For this reason, the Council observed: “Above all, the Church knows that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart when she champions the dignity of the human vocation, restoring hope to those who have already despaired of anything higher than their present lot. Far from diminishing man, her message brings to his development light, life and freedom” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 21).

The Instruction *Dignitas personae* and Fundamental Bioethical Criteria

With this vision of *Gaudium et spes* in mind, let us now consider the teaching of the Church on human life in more recent years, particularly as expressed in the Instruction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled *Dignitas personae*. In the twenty years since the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we have witnessed extraordinary advances in bio-medical technology. On the one hand, research into the use of adult stem cells and the development of new treatments for infertility have opened up new possibilities which would have been

considered impossible just a few years ago. On the other hand, each new development in technology gives rise to new ethical questions, not only in terms of the application of the Church's moral teaching, but often enough touching on the very nature of the human person. Consider, for example, the host of moral implications which arise from embryonic stem cell research, attempts at therapeutic cloning, or the practice of cryogenically freezing tens of thousands of embryos.

It was precisely to enable the Church to respond prudently to these new questions that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decided that a new survey of the horizon of bioethics was necessary. The fruit of this survey, which involved several years of study and consultation with the theological and scientific communities, and especially with the Pontifical Academy of Life, was the Instruction *Dignitas personae* which was published in 2008. With this document, the Congregation intended to offer the pastors, theologians, and faithful of the Church an aid towards the correct formation of consciences and a measure by which biomedical research could be judged in a way that truly respects both the dignity of each and every human person and the dignity of human procreation.

Drawing “upon the light both of reason and of faith and [seeking] to set forth an integral vision of man and his vocation” (n. 3), the Instruction presents rather succinctly two fundamental ethical criteria by which biomedical questions should be evaluated. These two criteria concern the dignity owed the human person and the intimately personal nature of the sexual act. *Dignitas personae* articulates the first criterion in this way: “The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life” (n.4). The second fundamental criterion follows from this: “The origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and in the family, where it is generated through an act which expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman. Procreation which is truly responsible vis-à-vis the child to be born must be the fruit of marriage” (n.6).

From these two criteria, the whole of the Instruction's reflection on complex biomedical issues proceeds. The genius of these criteria, if I might say so, is three-fold.

First, these criteria are *simple*. How many of our clergy perceive bioethical issues as too complex or beyond their level of understanding? But the principle of the dignity owed to the human person is straightforward and unburdened by overly technical or medical jargon. It also happens to be true, and so instilling this basic principle into our faithful empowers them to confront specific bioethical issues in their own lives, whether in the media discussion, at the ballot box, or in medical decisions facing family members.

Similarly, the teaching about the uniquely personal nature of procreation and the sexual act is marked by a compelling and beautiful simplicity. So many people ask

why the Church is so concerned with sex—they mean this as a criticism, of course. The Church is so concerned with sex because sex has everything to do with love, and God is love! There is plenty of loneliness, brokenness, and unhappiness in the world. Yet often the Church is the only voice speaking to the *cause* of that existential loneliness and unhappiness. The degradation of the sexual act, reducing it to a function of pleasure, power, or control, demeans the human person. The great lie of the sexual revolution is that sex always leads to happiness and personal liberation. The sexual union of a man and a woman does lead to integral fulfillment in its authentic context, which is when it is open to new life within the life long bond of marriage. However, out-with this context it invariably leads people into the desert of meaninglessness. In the stark simplicity of our moral teaching and through the working of grace in the sacrament of Penance, there is a tremendous power for liberation and happiness if we can just communicate to people the intrinsic meaning of sex within the Christian vision of love.

Secondly, these fundamental moral criteria are *recognizable as true by human reason*. At the heart of our bioethical and moral teaching is the conviction that the Natural Moral Law is engraved on the heart and soul of each and every human being. It is human reason, therefore, which ordains man to do good and to avoid evil. Sadly, civil society is increasingly forgetful of this original moral sense in its public discourse. For its part, the media nearly always portray the teaching of the Church as sectarian or based entirely on articles of faith—and often purposely so in an attempt to relativize and dismiss that teaching. And yet, human reason, that great gift of our Creator, will not be so thwarted! God created man a rational being who can initiate and control his own actions. Because the dignity of the human person and the nature of human sexuality are concepts accessible by reason, it is possible to set forth the Church’s teaching in a convincing way that rouses the intellect from its rational amnesia.

Thirdly, these criteria are *reinforced by our Christian faith*. The revealed knowledge that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by the Precious Blood of Christ Jesus the Lord opens our moral and ethical reflection to an eternal horizon. Human dignity takes on new, vibrant dimensions when man understands himself as possessing “an eternal vocation...called to share in the Trinitarian love of the living God” (n. 8). Human sexuality cannot be divorced from faith, rather faith helps us discover its true meaning and beauty. From within a prayerful meditation on the divine Mystery, we come to understand that procreative acts “are a reflection of Trinitarian love. God, who is love and life, has inscribed in man and woman the vocation to share in a special way in his mystery of personal communion and in his work as Creator and Father...The Holy Spirit who is poured out in the sacramental celebration offers Christian couples the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus” (n. 9).

Conclusion: Teaching the “Seamless Garment”

We are all familiar with the image of the “seamless garment” which is used to illustrate how Catholic moral teaching is a consistent whole - uniting ethical, religious, and political threads in a unified moral vision. Attributed to Cardinal Bernardin, the “seamless garment” image was used to great effect to root the Church’s response to various moral issues - from nuclear proliferation to poverty - within the overarching teaching on the sanctity of human life, from natural conception to natural death. Unfortunately, however, it is also true that the image of the “seamless garment” has been used by some theologians and Catholic politicians, in an intellectually dishonest manner, to allow or at least to justify turning a blind eye to instances of abortion, contraception, or public funding for embryonic stem cell research, as long as these were simultaneously accompanied by opposition to the death penalty or promotion of economic development for the poor - issues which are also part of the fabric of Catholic moral teaching.

Often this abuse of the “seamless garment” theory stems from a natural tendency on the part of some in the Church to look for “common ground” with the surrounding culture; that is to say, to emphasize in their teaching and preaching those elements of Catholic doctrine that are acceptable to the non-Catholic ambient culture; for example, social justice, human rights, and other similar issues. This is understandable and sometimes it is an appropriate pastoral strategy. But what also must be taken into account is the *difference* which exists between those elements of Catholic teaching that may be attractive to the surrounding culture and those elements which are profoundly counter-cultural and which *Catholics themselves* need to hear proclaimed by their pastors.

There is a beautiful coherence to the Church’s moral teaching, but that coherence can only be demonstrated, and its truth apprehended, when the moral teaching of the Church is taught in its entirety and lived out integrally. As the fundamental moral criteria articulated in *Dignitas personae* indicate, the separation of the sexual act from its proper context is at the very core of many of the bioethical problems which confront us today. The prophetic teaching of *Humanae vitae* both on human dignity and on the intrinsic meaning of the sexual act is so important that without it we cannot engage our faithful—to say nothing of the larger society—in a coherent discussion of the problems and moral evil presented by techniques of artificial fertilization, preimplantation diagnosis, cryogenic freezing of embryos and “embryo reduction”, human cloning and the therapeutic use of stem cells. Our teaching is based in an inspired vision of the meaning of love wherein the sexual act finds its proper place as an expression of nuptial intimacy and openness to the life-giving creativity of God. In marriage, sex is an expression of love with a particular and intrinsic meaning. Once the sexual act is removed from this defining context - the “seamless garment” begins to unravel.

We are told again and again by the media that a majority of the faithful have rejected this teaching of the Church on the meaning of love and sex. I propose to you that this not true. What many have rejected is but a caricature of the Church's teaching. The truth is that many have never heard the fullness of the Church's teaching, the profound "yes" to the sanctity of sexual love lived-out in marriage and the family; the "yes" to responsible parenthood; the "yes" to the dignity of the woman against manipulation by a process that views her body as a problem to be overcome or circumvented.

Over the last forty years, the so-called sexual revolution has led to the widespread acceptance of a profoundly distorted understanding of sexual intercourse – which in the minds of many is now denied any intrinsic meaning and reduced to a merely pleasurable pursuit or a morally irrelevant activity. The experience of the Church in this same period demonstrates that where the Church has tried to accommodate her teaching to this secular understanding by deemphasizing the specific witness of her moral teaching, this has led neither to a greater societal acceptance of the Church nor to a renewal in her own life. Rather where the teaching of *Humanae vitae* has been down-played, or worse still ignored, we have witnessed a collapse of family life, an increase in extra-marital infidelity and a diminishment of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.

On the other hand, we have also seen that in those places where Catholic teaching has been robustly presented, it has indeed taken root and has flowered in a renewal of family life and a new vitality for the Church. In many respects, this situation was foreseen and predicted by *Humanae vitae* as a consequence of a contraceptive culture. These experiences have shown that the only response of the Church to modernity has to be one which is completely faithful to the teaching of the Magisterium, above all on matters of sexual morality because this is precisely where doctrine touches life.

We are to exercise our mission in such a way that faith is presented in its entirety and integrity with particular attention to the interrelatedness of the various aspects of our teaching. Yes, we fight for peace and justice in the world, and at the same time we need to set forth persuasively the Church's vision of life, love and sexuality, including the intrinsic immorality of abortion and contraception. If our teaching on the essential dignity of the human person and the intrinsic meaning and value of the sexual act is *not* presented in our schools, in homilies, by diocesan offices, in our Catholic newspapers, in marriage preparation programs, how can we legitimately expect that this vision will form consciences and equip our people to confront the moral decisions in their own lives? Only through an integrated and enthusiastic presentation of our teaching can we begin to reclaim the language and concept of human rights as it relates to family life and especially to marriage as constituted by one man and one woman.

In the specific field of bioethics Bishops, moral theologians, researchers and specialists have a vital role to play in the articulation of the Christian vision of human

dignity and the sanctity of human sexuality. We must work together to promote an integrated vision of the faith which informs bioethical considerations. With the strength offered by this global vision, Bishops may engage physicians, medical researchers and health care professionals in a dialogue based on truth and charity in order to promote a more human civilization, a civilization of life and love. At the same time, if Catholic theologians and medical professionals are to begin to combat the secular vision of life dominant in the world of contemporary health care, they must acknowledge the normative role of Magisterial teaching.

Finally, the image of the “seamless garment” reminds us that faith, worship, and life are interwoven. We know that the Church’s moral teaching must be lived by fallen human beings prone to sin. But where sin abounds, God’s grace abounds all the more! And so our teaching is supported by frequent reference to the sanctifying power of the sacraments of the Church. It is no small task to which we have been called, and it must be said that this hopeful vision of human life in God, a vision captured by *Gaudium et spes* and *Dignitas personae*, has found expression in the renewal and resurgence of ecclesial life in many parts of the world. I hope and pray that the Pontifical Academy of Life continues to play a vital role in this renewal and in the promotion of the Gospel of Life. Thank you.