

**O'MALLEY CHAIR LECTURE 2019**  
**INTRODUCTION**

Good evening. My name is Roberto Dell'Oro. I am the Director of the Bioethics Institute, and on behalf of all our staff, would love to welcome you to the 2019 O'Malley Lecture, *Radical Bioethics: Disability, Difference, and Desiderata*.

It is a great privilege for our university to have with us, for an entire semester, Prof. Mary-Jo Iozzio as the Visiting O'Malley Chair. At the Bioethics Institute, and in the context of our Masters Program in Bioethics, she is currently teaching a graduate class on "Bioethics and Disability." Tonight lecture is the high point of her presence at the Institute, and we are very excited about what will come from her provocations. I will introduce more formally Prof. Iozzio shortly. But first, let me say a few things about the topic itself.

That the question of disability ought to concern the field of bioethics should not come as a surprise. Bioethics deals with questions concerning the "ethics of life," especially those emerging in the fields of medicine and the life sciences. At stake in those questions is, ultimately, our *human condition* in all its potential for flourishing, but also in its inescapable vulnerability. If we think about it, our human condition is indeed one of vulnerability. *We are* vulnerable beings: subject to illness, suffering, disability, and, ultimately, death.

And yet, although a universal dimension of human existence, we have a tendency to bracket our vulnerability, in the meantime, pushing to the side also the particular vulnerability of persons with disabilities. Our almost natural attitude, especially in the scientific world-view, goes in the opposite direction: in striving to *enhance* our human condition, to overcome

diseases, devise new therapies, and search for powerful remedies in the pursuit of ultimate happiness.

As an example, think of how medicine pushes us to “perfect” our bodies through ever sophisticated and invasive forms of cosmetic surgeries, an effort driven by an ever expanding market of sellable images, available for public consumption.

Or think of how medical research, often with questionable public consensus, and not without financial incentives, seeks new avenues for experimentation on human beings, or the engineering of embryos, genes, tissues, and organs.

Unfortunately, such pursuits of perfection coexist with wider manifestations of collective vulnerability. The physically and intellectually disabled, the poor and socially marginalized still haunt our “will to power” like a nightmare, awaking our own imagination and creativity to the crude reality of the vulnerability we will always have *with* us, indeed *within* us.

The challenge of tonight topic, then, is clear: what if persons with disabilities were to be a powerful reminder of the fact that we become *truly human* when, attending to their vulnerability, we also become able to accept more patiently our own? How would such a realization re-orient our aspirations, how would it change our being-in-the-world-with-others and inspire our generosity. And finally, how would it re-define our relationship to God?

As we will learn from the lecture itself, the issue is also political: the particular call of disability, not unlike diversity in its various forms, is a call for recognition; it entails struggle. The right of all human beings to be able to flourish to the fullest of their capacity depends, after all, on society’s willingness to envisage dimensions of solidarity hitherto concealed behind the

veil of ignorance, prejudice, and intolerance, and to translate such political will into policy options on behalf of people of disability.

I think it is not an exaggeration to say that Prof. Iozzio is a national and international authority on the topic of ethics and disability. And so let me introduce her more formally. Mary Jo Iozzio is a professor at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. She earned her doctorate in Systematic Theology with a focus on Moral Theology from Fordham University (1994). Before coming to Boston College, she held teaching positions at Barry University, Fordham University, Providence College, and the University of Rhode Island. Her professional work includes appointments on several editorial and publishing boards. More relevant to our own discussion tonight, she serves as inaugural member of the American Academy of Religion Committee on the Status of People with Disabilities in the Profession, and as co-chair of its Religion and Disability Studies Group.

Prof. Iozzio is a very prolific scholar, who has published many books and articles in national and international periodicals. She has been for many years the editor of the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*. Among the titles of her books are *Self-Determination and the Moral Act: A Study of the Contributions of Odon Lottin* (1995); *Considering Religious Traditions in Bioethics: Christian and Jewish voices* (2001), *Calling for Justice throughout the World: Catholic Women Theologians on the HIV/AIDS Pandemic* (2008); and *Sex and Gender: Christian Ethical Reflections* (2017). Finally, two forthcoming book projects directly deal with issues of disability: *Radical Dependence: A Theological Ethics in the Key of Disability* and *Disability Ethics/Preferential Justice*.

Please, join me now in welcoming Pro. Mary Jo Iozzio!

