

**Pope Francis and the Crucial Importance of Catholic Bioethics.  
Loyola Marymount University  
September 3, 2019**

I want to thank Professor Dell'Oro for his invitation and kind welcome, and I want to say what an honor it is to meet and speak with you at Loyola Marymount, not only because of the academic excellence of your programs but additionally because I know that you have the ability to spread throughout the academic world, especially among Catholic institutions, the substance of what we say here in a way that will help the current generation of students face more effectively, and more joyfully, the life-related challenges that society presents to them, particularly in the United States.

My visit to America will be short—this time. Here with you today and on Thursday with Microsoft in Seattle, but I am realizing more and more how important it is for us in Rome to understand the complexity of the bioethical questions that you face, and indeed how true it is that many of the bioethical questions that are now being dealt with globally had their origin in the United States. All too often we witness a failure of communication on these issues, whether through linguistic differences, cultural differences, or indeed surprisingly different theological or philosophical approaches that condition the ways we address and teach the things that are foundational to our Catholic Christian faith and commitment.

To help make you more aware of this situation, and perhaps help us move more surely toward a common understanding and appreciation of our task as bioethicists, I would like to tell you something about the Academy for Life today and about how its course has now been charted by the very important letter that Pope

Francis wrote to the Academy on the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of its founding by St. John Paul and the Servant of God and great scientist, Jérôme Lejeune.

In that letter, written on January sixth of this year and called *Humana Communitas*, the Pope recalls for us the great theological truth that must be our guiding principle—all of creation is brought into being by God's love, a love that is so profound that itself it is a family, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and that it is a family so fruitful that it has produced on Earth a family that mirrors it—the great family of humanity that is able to know who brought it into being, to love its Creator, to manifest that love through service to God and humanity, and at the end of time to live forever with that same loving Creator. Moreover, the passionate family love that has brought the human family into being, so loves that family—the *Humana Communitas*—that, through Jesus Christ, God has become our Brother—to redeem us, to comfort us, to remind us constantly of our dignity as God's creation, and to guide us through life to our eternal home.

In his letter, the Holy Father attempted to give us such a solid and loving theological basis for the work of the Academy that we will be able to address and overcome the concerns and the hesitations that have greeted the renewed structure of the Academy (and I might add of its sister entity, the John Paul II Institute as well).

Thus, my message today is that to understand the mission that the Holy Father has given to the Academy, and the Institute, we have to understand that while science and technology do contribute to the overall good of man and the fulfillment the God's plan for salvation, and that our members and programs will continue to offer solutions to specific societal concerns, we must now work more broadly—toward an

understanding, an appreciation, of life itself—which is the great expression of the love that is God.

And we must work to teach the women, men and children of today what life itself means, what God had in mind when, as an outpouring of the passionate love that makes God a family, the *Humana Communitas*, the human family, came into being, and God Himself, in Jesus Christ, became its first-born member.

As a very practical first step, we must reassure our friends, and our enemies, that we will never slacken our resolve to protect and promote human life from its beginning to the end of its earthly days, and that our dialogue with others who do not share our understanding of God’s fruitful love and of the nature of the human family and its challenges, does not mean that we are abandoning Catholic orthodoxy.

With that, however, we must also make it clear that the Pope wants the Academy, and the Institute, to (1) widen its scope of reflection, not limiting itself to addressing “specific situations of ethical, social or legal conflict,” (2) articulate an anthropology that sets the practical and theoretical premises for “conduct consistent with the dignity of the human person,” and (3) make sure it has the tools to critically examine “the theory and practice of science and technology as they interact with life, its meaning and its value.”

In addition, the Academy in particular is to become more and more a place of competent and respectful meeting and dialogue among experts, including those from other religious traditions as well as proponents of world views the Academy needs to know better in order to widen its horizons.

Further, in line with the Holy Father's own commitment "to promote appropriate synodality at all levels of ecclesial life," we consider this broader mandate an encouragement to develop, in our own way, a "synodal" approach to our activities—generous collaboration leading to enthusiastic evangelization.

As we see that our world is changing at an ever-increasing rate, with the greatest changes taking place in technology, we are trying to keep our expanded mission in clear focus as we examine the world around us.

Much of what we see today is the result of a hyper-individualist perspective that is affecting and weakening all social relations. Society is becoming "fluid," with the "me" prevailing over the "us." Paradoxically, in a globalized world, the more welcoming and inclusive that "fluidity" appears to be, the more people feel "lost," and want to close in on themselves, to concentrate on their own interests.

Between the individual and the human community, a real schism seems to have developed, with serious consequences for the crucial question of the unity of the human family and its future. Just when humanity possesses the technical-scientific ability to reach generalized well-being, which could help to realize God's loving vision for the human family found in the Scriptures and reflected in the Church's social teaching, we see a worsening of conflicts and a breakdown of relationships. As a result, we witness the well-known decline of the Enlightenment myth of progress and generalized suspicion about techno-scientific activity, particularly in life-related areas.

Technology has changed from being a positive tool for well-being, to becoming a threat to life, as it feeds risk and uncertainty in society. Solutions

proposed by techno-science give rise to challenging and complicated problems. Look at the following examples: the environmental crisis—today we must defend nature from technology just as technology defended us from nature in the past—and, in the field of medicine, the appearance of diseases (or pathological states) that were unimaginable in the past and are now common, for example, conditions that arise in neonatal intensive care or in vegetative states.

To provide guidance on how to deal with today's anthropological and ethical questions, the Pope's letter offers the Academy various ideas. First, he warns us that it is risky to look at human life in a way that detaches it from experience and reduces it to biology or to an abstract universal, separated from relationships and history. Rather, the term "life" must be redefined, moving from an abstract conception to a "personal" dimension: life is people, men and women, both in the individuality of each person and in the unity of the human family. Starting from our origin from the one Father, "all of us in the universe are united by invisible bonds and in a way we form a universal family." (LS 89). The Pope thus evokes the dynamics of generation—passive reception of life is the premise for every subsequent activity, leading to the recognition of being one's child, welcomed and cared for, even if not always adequately. This is the starting point for the recognition of the social bond that makes us support one another and that, because it is reciprocal, asks us to be responsible for each other: The Pope tells us that ... "It seems reasonable to build a bridge between the care that has been received since the beginning of life, and that has enabled it to unfold throughout the course of its development, and care that is to be given to others." (N. 9).

This way of understanding human life, starting from the experience that ties it to relationships, asks, from the beginning, to be appropriately connected to the multiple ways in which bioethics considers the questions of life. It is a task that

requires commitment. It is a reference point, not only for the ethical questions that are asked about the beginning and end of life, but also for questions of synthetic biology or about organisms that combine biological tissues and electronic devices.

### **Global bioethics**

The Pope's letter also discusses a number of particular questions. First, he encourages the Academy to participate actively in the dialogue that is inspiring bioethical reflection in the context of globalization (Par. 10-11). It is imperative that we search for ethical reference points from which to measure developments in the natural sciences and bio-technologies. Given today's intense interaction between different cultures, it is necessary to work out universally shared operational criteria that can influence national and international policies. Human rights are in many respects the field on which this confrontation takes place, because they involve a series of questions shared by all human beings. Tellingly, recent Catholic thinking has given new attention to the doctrine of natural law in the search for a universal ethics. For example, the Holy See's International Theological Commission has produced a study entitled *In Search of a Universal Ethics: A New Look at Natural Law*, (Vatican City, 2009).

### **“Emergent and convergent Technologies”**

A second front that Francis points out as an area for commitment is the one that deals with the technologies defined today as “emergent” and “convergent.” (N. 12) These terms refer to nanotechnologies, biotechnologies, information technologies and cognitive sciences. We talk about NBIC (Nano-, Bio-, Information-, Cognitive- technologies). Their appearance in the activities of research institutions and industry accelerates change, expanding the areas where reality can be affected. Drastic interventions become available, not only therapeutic

ones, but also those designed for the enhancement of living organisms, as well as new organizational procedures, including the transfer to artificial support of functions previously performed by the human body. We are faced not only new technical tools, but also with changes that deeply affect our relationship with the world: new IT devices are hidden with increasing pervasiveness in various areas of reality, including our body, which is increasingly exposed to the dynamics of biopolitics or psycho-politics.<sup>1</sup>

The Academy has started working on these issues beginning with its General Assembly last February, which was dedicated to robotics. It intends to take up the question of artificial intelligence next year. In fact, the possibility of intervening on living matter at ever smaller orders of magnitude, of processing ever larger volumes of information, of monitoring-and manipulating-the cerebral processes of cognitive and deliberative activity, has enormous implications: it crosses the threshold of the biological specificity and the spiritual nature of what is human. And it is necessary to keep clearly in mind, and maintain an adequate basis for, the specific difference between human life and other forms of life and autonomous activity.

Certainly we must remind ourselves, as Pope Francis did at our February meeting, that, “Artificial intelligence, robotics and other technological innovations must be used in a way that serves humanity and contributes to the protection of our common home, instead of doing the opposite, as unfortunately sometimes happens.”

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The terms come respectively from Michel Foucault (as control and use of the personal body and the species) and from Byung-Chul Han. The latter believes that in contemporary society the paradigm of “biopolitics” is in decline, in favor of that of “psychopolitics”: power no longer regulates bodies but shapes minds, does not force but seduces, so it does not meet resistance, because each individual has internalized the needs of the system as his own. (see Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics. Neoliberalism and the new techniques of power*, Milan, Nottetempo, 2017).

The inherent dignity of every human being must be placed without fail at the center of our reflection and action.

The ongoing debate among specialists already shows the serious problems of the governability of algorithms that process huge amounts of data. Likewise, technologies for manipulating genetic realities and cerebral functions also raise serious ethical questions.

On the other hand, the knowledge on which emergent and convergent technologies develop offers us great potential for improving the conditions of human life. From the data of the empirical sciences we can get indications that make anthropological reflection possible, in both the philosophical as well as the theological field, as indeed has always been the case. We must remember, however, that in the context of that reflection, it would be decidedly contrary to the Academy's tradition to continue to use categories linked to the past that do not allow us to interpret today's phenomena or to communicate within today's cultures.

As our discussions today proceed, I would ask you to keep in mind what the Holy Father has asked the Academy to do, and copies of his letter are available. We must enter with wisdom and boldness into today's bioethics arena so that we can understand our heritage of faith with a rationality that is worthy of man. It is for this reason that the Academy, and the Institute, without in any way abandoning the tradition and accomplishments of their founders, will participate in dialogue with everyone so that the development and use of the extraordinary resources that the Pope speaks of is oriented toward promoting the dignity of the person and the human family in the light of the passionate Divine love that brought it into being and will lead it safely home.



Thank you very much.