

POPE FRANCIS' BIOETHICAL VISION—SELECTED SESSION

Convener: Jason T. Eberl, Saint Louis University  
Moderator: Jason T. Eberl, Saint Louis University  
Presenters: Christine McCarthy, Fordham University  
Jason Keune, Saint Louis University  
Jason T. Eberl, Saint Louis University

In her paper, “Pope Francis and the Primacy of Conscience: The Decentralization of Catholic Bioethics?” Christine McCarthy responds to Italian evangelical theologian Leonardo Di Chirico’s claim that Pope Francis is decentralizing Catholic bioethics by focusing on action informed by the “primacy of conscience” rather than the “sacredness of life,” “truth,” and “deontological ethics.” McCarthy shows how Pope Francis is offering a more expansive lens through which bioethical issues may be critically examined. While not arguing that Pope Francis explicitly has these models in mind, McCarthy links Pope Francis’ project with the critical methodologies of feminism and intersectionality. These methodological perspectives stress both the inherent relationality among human persons, and the concomitant reciprocal obligations of responsibility, as well as the interconnection of various moral issues that particularly affect individuals representing certain gender, race, religious, sexual orientation, or ethnic identities. This viewpoint is represented in Pope Francis’ linking, particularly in *Laudato Si’*, traditional issues regarding the protection of the unborn and the dying, which are of primary concern to deontological ethicists such as Di Chirico, with the plight of those living in extreme poverty throughout the world and who suffer more than others the negative effects of environmental degradation, including compromised health and shortened lives. In the ensuing conversation, McCarthy was asked to further elaborate upon how she saw the lenses of feminism and intersectionality directly influencing changes in public policy as well as the extent to which these relatively novel moral perspectives might constructively inform, without necessarily displacing, more traditional methodologies of moral analysis, such as Thomistic natural law theory.

In his presentation “Contextualizing Surgery in a Twenty-First Century Catholic Health Care System: Pope Francis’ Writings on Science, Technology, and Poverty,” Jason Keune examines Pope Francis’ perspective on ethical business practices, as well as the larger tradition of Catholic Social Teaching on which he draws, and the application of such to the organizational practices of Catholic health care institutions. Prominent issues in Pope Francis’ oeuvre, such as technology, poverty, and science are considered as they apply to the healthcare setting. Keune explicates several prominent themes derived from Pope Francis’ various writings and addresses, including the ever-present themes of mercy and joy. Concerning the latter, Keune notes that, instead of striking a condemnatory tone regarding bioethical and other moral issues, Pope Francis explicitly calls for a celebration of the joy of Christian life, which renders the Church’s moral message, now positively reconstructed, more attractive. This call for a renewal of expressive joy in moral evangelization is not a mere attempt to improve public relations or the Church’s public image; rather, it is an organic outgrowth of Christ’s own healing ministry.

During the conversation that followed, Keune was asked how Catholic Social Teaching, particularly the principle of solidarity, may inform practical changes to how

individuals access health care. Keune provided the example of how certain large corporations are “disrupting” the current health care system in providing care directly for their employees. Although he considers such initiatives to be still “elitist” insofar as they provide only for each of those company’s own employees and thereby do not expand health care access to the underserved, they may nevertheless provide a model for how the current inadequate system of health care access may be fundamentally “disrupted” in favor of a framework that better enshrines an ethic of solidarity.

Finally, in my presentation “Culture of Life, Culture of Death, and Culture of Waste,” I demonstrate the continuity of Pope Francis’ bioethical teaching with that of his predecessors, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, even as he adopts a more multi-valent perspective and recovers the “consistent ethic of life” previously popularized by the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. Occasionally invoking the framing language of his predecessors—“culture of life,” “culture of death,” and “dictatorship of relativism”—Pope Francis’ primary moral lens through which to examine bioethical and numerous other moral issues is the “culture of waste” that informs global society’s “sin of indifference.” I then show how Pope Francis approaches issues such as abortion and euthanasia in the context of his emphasis on mercy and accompaniment. Yet, even here Pope Francis is not advocating a radical departure from his predecessors, who also called attention to the difficulties faced by women experiencing unplanned pregnancies and the loneliness often experienced by the elderly, disabled, and dying. I conclude that the moral conclusions Pope Francis draws strengthen the foundation for supporting a “culture of life” that crosses conservative and liberal political boundaries to address bioethical and other moral issues systemically in order to create a “culture of encounter and peace.” The conversation that followed focused upon the purported change from a “binary” mode of engaging bioethical issues—e.g., “culture of life” over against “culture of death”—to Pope Francis’ less combative approach. Acknowledging the limitations of a mere binary approach, I noted that Pope Francis still employs the language of “culture” in the same way his predecessors did—viz., to emphasize the fundamental societal mindset and value-orientation that informs individual consciences and which must be challenged at the root level.

JASON T. EBERL  
*Saint Louis University*  
*Saint Louis, Missouri*