

BIOETHICS/HEALTHCARE—TOPIC SESSION

Convener: Meghan J. Clark, St. John’s University  
Moderator: Michael Jaycox, Seattle University  
Presenters: Christine McCarthy, Fordham University  
Matthew Shadle, Marymount University  
Paul Scherz, Catholic University of America  
Joshua R. Snyder, Labouré College

In their paper, “Pope Francis and the Zika Virus: Gender, Poverty and Integral Ecology,” Christine McCarthy and Matthew Shadle sought to contextualize and interpret Pope Francis’ comments regarding the Zika virus and birth control on a February 2016 flight from Rome to Mexico. After examining a wide range of responses from theologians, McCarthy and Shadle argued that all of the American theologians commenting failed to account adequately for the context of Latin America in interpreting the Pope’s reference. Instead, they contended that three factors provide the context for interpreting the pope’s statement: 1) the role of machista culture in sexual relations and family planning; 2) the prevalence of violence against women; and 3) the lack of basic women’s healthcare among the poor most at risk of the Zika virus. In light of this, and accounting for his understanding of integral ecology, McCarthy and Shadle maintained that Francis’ comments are best read as an insistence that these women should be empowered to exercise responsibility over family planning.

In his paper, “Prudence and Radical Uncertainty: Health Benefits and Ecological Risks of Gene Drive Therapies,” Paul Scherz also took the threat from mosquitos as his starting point to evaluate the ethics of new gene drive technology. Gene drive therapies target a particular gene on a chromosome and could be directed to target specifically the malaria virus or sterilize carrier mosquitos. Using the work of Alasdair McIntyre and Thomas Aquinas, Scherz asked whether it is prudent to embrace this technology or whether the inherent level of uncertainty involved is simply too great. Ultimately, it is impossible to predict a gene drive therapy’s possible bad effects and once deployed, it would be impossible to reverse. Combining insights from Pope Francis and economic risk analysis, Scherz argued that the level of uncertainty and potential harm is just too high for a prudent use of gene drive technology in this way.

In his presentation, “The Impact of Climate Change on Health within Indigenous Communities: A Moral Analysis,” Joshua R. Snyder focused on the health implications of climate change on indigenous communities in the United States. Looking at *Laudato Si’*, Snyder argued that integral ecology brings together the preferential option for the poor and the safeguarding of the natural environment. According to Snyder, a crucial aspect of integral ecology is respect for the cultural identity and the practical context of indigenous communities. Using examples of the Navajo in New Mexico, Blackfoot Nation, and Alaskan communities, he argued that indigenous communities have a greater reliance on the natural environment and therefore are at greater risk from climate change. The physical and mental health of communities are at risk as climate change threatens both the natural environment and communal cultural practices, such as Alaskan indigenous communities’ traditional methods of food storage as the permafrost thaws.

The proceeding discussion was wide-ranging. In particular, the possibilities and dangers of CRISPR gene drive technologies were addressed. Granting that over-

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caution can be a vice contrary to prudence, how do we balance the potential benefits versus possible harms of new medical or scientific technology? Scherz responded that this particular technology itself is used for many different things, but always prudence must be applied. Subsequent questions and discussions raised the underlying problem of who decides research agendas and allocation of resources. The challenge posed by Zika and the risk of birth defects is not abstract; it must be accompanied by attention to the medical and social resources needed for the flourishing of children with disabilities. Questions of social sin and health disparities linked all three of the papers in the discussion. As teachers, we raised multiple questions for how to engage these issues with our students. For some, science is treated as a god thus making discussions of moral limits challenging. Lastly, addressing the structural violence done to indigenous communities can create its own challenges. How do we increase encounter without perpetuating poverty tourism?

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