

CONFERENCE ADDRESS ON BIOTECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

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In the field of biotechnology, developments are far-reaching and frequent. As soon as we hear of one breakthrough, another is usually not far behind. The pace of change alone has made conditions unfavorable for the kind of moral analysis that is needed. As we struggle to keep up with all that is new on the scientific side of the field, we ought to turn to something that is old—as in forty years old now—for critical moral discernment. At a conference on biotechnology last year at the Catholic Studies Center of the Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York, Msgr. Robert J. Batule, Professor of Systematic Theology at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, New York, noted how the encyclical Humanae Vitae at 40 is helping us to respond intelligently and humanely to the challenges arising from rapid technological change. Here is the address he offered on the occasion.

Those who would dare to address the perils of the biotech revolution are somewhat like those who go around shouting “the sky is falling.” The sky has, demonstrably, not fallen and therefore hardly anyone pays attention. But just because the sky remains in its place, we should not conclude that our culture is free of trouble, ethically speaking.

In C.S. Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*, he relates the story of someone who exclaims, “Man has nature whacked.”¹ The man who utters these words, Lewis points out, is dying of tuberculosis.² The dying man continues, “I know I’m one of the casualties. Of course there are casualties on the winning side as well as on the losing side. But that doesn’t alter the fact that it is winning.”³

The fact that we have had a biotech revolution and not a revolt tells us something right away about which side is winning. Science and technology are winning.

And who doesn’t want to be on the side of science and technology? Were it not for science and technology winning, we would not have found our way today to this College. With the flick of a switch, our darkness this morning became light. With the turn of a faucet, clean and fresh replaced dirty and stale. To get ourselves a burst of energy, we might have popped something in the microwave. We can’t forget the car which brought us here; perhaps too the cell phone we are carrying or the

computer we'll return to later in the day to check email. The scientific advances and technological breakthroughs which gave us electricity, running water, hot food, vehicular transportation, phone service, and personal computers seem ancient if you're tracking the rate of progress. Science and technology have served us well as far as conveniences go. No real downside there. And haven't science and technology made medical cures available, too? And isn't a robust economy tied to scientific and technological prowess?

Let me be clear, then. Science and technology enhance our lives in innumerable ways. But we've moved beyond fixing things and getting ourselves to operate at maximum efficiency. We have inexorably crossed over into Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) with developments in the biotech area.

Science and technology are powers, and thus they have to be harnessed or regulated if there is to be a morally licit way of making the best use of them. In the past, practitioners of various kinds, doctors especially, were reticent about stepping outside a certain boundary as they did not want to be seen or perceived as playing God. It would seem, however, that the boundary line has shifted or the reticence of acting in God's stead has evaporated.

Playing God is not the same as being God. But the fact that such an expression is used suggests that there is a recognized province, a domain belonging to God, and we are not thought fit to tread there. In the terminology of *Humanae Vitae* (1968), [we] acknowledge that [we are] not the masters of the sources of life,⁴ and thus we defer to a mysterious design that God has planned for our welfare.

There is about Pope Paul's encyclical a curious modesty which makes it seem so out of place in 1968. In the age of conquering problems like civil rights and poverty and a new frontier like space, the document urges that "we must accept that there are certain limits beyond which it is wrong to go. . . . These limits are expressly imposed because of the reverence due to the whole human organism."⁵

Tough, intractable problems require aggressive solutions and the word "conquer" is apt for civil rights, poverty and even space exploration. But it wouldn't be right for nature, as in "conquering nature." Yet, that is what we have in the far end of the bio-tech revolution: an effort to conquer human nature.

C.S. Lewis saw this back in 1943. In *The Abolition of Man*, the great Christian apologist described man's conquest of nature. He said then it would result in nature's conquest of man.⁶ Lewis' own words are still prescient:

The wresting of powers from nature is also the surrendering of things to nature. As long as this process stops short at the final stage we may well hold that the gain outweighs the loss. But as soon as we take the final step of reducing our own species to the level of mere nature, the whole process is stultified, for this time the being who stood to gain and the being who has been sacrificed are one and the same.⁷

If we must indeed conquer, we should think of something else which needs to be overcome. In the Farewell Discourse of Saint John's Gospel, Jesus tells His apostles that they should take courage, for He has conquered the world (cf. Jn 16:33). Christ identifies for us the correct object of our conquering. It is not our nature which needs to be overcome; rather, our nature needs to be perfected. And the only way for our nature to be perfected is through grace.

Nature, then, can't be conquered. Grace and humanity cohere together. But even if we were to bracket grace momentarily, the biotech revolution would still mean a lot of trouble for humanity. Leon Kass, the former Chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, says that "as we become more and more immersed in the world of biotechnology, we increasingly sense that we neglect human dignity at our peril, not least in light of our gathering powers to alter bodies and minds in ways that affect our very humanity."⁸

We have, I would argue, a crisis of humanity at hand. It has been this way for decades; the most sensational achievements of the biotech revolution just make it appear that the crisis started yesterday. Four decades ago, Pope Paul VI, taking stock of the changes going on in the world, observed "the most remarkable development of all is to be seen in man's stupendous progress in the domination and rational organization of the forces of nature to the point that he is endeavoring to extend this control over every aspect of his own life—over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life, and even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life."⁹

Meeting the challenges of the biotech revolution head on means going back to the beginning. Earlier this year, Pope Benedict XVI called upon his former Congregation, the Doctrine of the Faith, to give increased attention to bioethics. In laying out the charge, he said "[There are] two fundamental criteria for moral discernment in this field: an unconditional respect for the human being as a person, from conception to natural death; *and* respect for the origin of the transmission of human life through the acts of the spouses."¹⁰ Staying ahead of the bio-tech revolution ethically requires that we evaluate correctly marital acts. Far

from violating the privacy of individuals, the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* that each and every marital act be open to the transmission of new human life¹¹ must be seen as the necessary beginning to insuring ethical soundness at all the other points on the biotechnology continuum. If we want to get the most intricate, complex and frightening issues of the biotech world right, we need to say, believe, and witness with Paul VI that “the marriage act [has been] written into the actual nature of man and woman.”¹² It is not, then, a matter of conquering nature, but of living in harmony with it. The recognition of limits is a way of advancement, too. We advance ethically so that we can advance scientifically and technologically. The sequence here is not unimportant. We must be humble enough to admit our role as ministers of God’s design (cf. *Humanae Vitae*, 13). Ministry is a humble but truthful exercise.

In the last forty years, a lot of people have looked upon contraception as a preventative for things like unwanted pregnancies, financial instability, emotional distress, etc. But in signing on to contraception, the culture has given its approval to the de-coupling of ethics and technology. We’re trying to catch up now. Inserting ourselves “up the line” will not solve our dilemmas. We need to go back to the beginning and learn all over the wisdom of the marital act as nature teaches it. Or else, we should take our cues from the wisdom figures in our midst who have mined the great treasure of human sexuality and brought out its meaning in an attractive and convincing fashion.

Some months ago, the editors at *Our Sunday Visitor* pressed the case for making bioethical education a priority for ordinary Catholics. Speaking of the Church, they said “it has lost the battle regarding birth control.”¹³ Lost, I suppose, if you mean a lot of Catholics engage in contraceptive sex despite what the Church officially and authoritatively teaches.

But who says we can’t reinforce our position with strategic allies like Pope John Paul II, especially his *Love and Responsibility*; the theology of the body; natural family planning and fertility awareness; Dr. Thomas Hilgers and the Pope Paul VI Center for the Study of Human Reproduction; Janet Smith; Christopher West and many others? The argument from nature has been joined by other supportive arguments—ones perhaps more in sync with sensibilities now.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, "The Abolition of Man." *The Essential C. S. Lewis*. Ed. Lyle W. Corset. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988, p. 449.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 13.
5. Pope Paul VI, 17.
6. C.S. Lewis, p. 445.
7. Ibid., p. 455.
8. Leon R. Kass, "Defending Human Dignity." *Commentary*, Vol. 124, No. 5, December, 2007, p. 53.
9. Pope Paul VI, 2.
10. Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (January 31, 2008)." *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 13, 2008, English Edition, p. 4.
11. Pope Paul VI, 11.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. "Bioethical Precipice." Editorial. *Our Sunday Visitor*. January 6, 2008, p. 23.

