

Pope John Paul II and **Bioethics**: Bodily Life as Integral to the **Human Person**

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October 7, 1979 is one of the most memorable days in my life. It was the day that Pope John Paul II, on his first apostolic visit to the United States, celebrated Mass on the Capitol Mall in Washington, D.C. He called his homily, one of the most eloquent and powerful he ever gave, “‘Stand Up’ for Human Life.” Its key theme – the preciousness of *all* human life as a great and surpassing gift of God – was a major one of his entire pontificate. In this inspiring homily John Paul II declared: «all human life – from the moment of conception and through all subsequent stages – is created in the image and likeness of God. Nothing surpasses the greatness or dignity of a human person. Human life is not just an idea or an abstraction; human life is the concrete reality of a being that lives, that acts, that grows and develops; human life is the concrete reality of a being that is capable of love and of service to humanity»¹. As this text shows, John Paul II vigorously affirmed the truth that bodily life is integral to the *being* of the human person; and I think that his insistence on this truth and his identification of a dualistic anthropology as the root of the “culture of death” is his greatest contribution to bioethics. It is worth noting that Leon Kass, the chairman of President Bush’s Council on Bioethics, pointedly observed, in a passage echoing John Paul’s homily, that the kind of human “dignity” associated with the new biology and its underlying anthropology is “*inhuman*” because it «dualistically sets up the concept of “personhood” in

opposition to nature and the body» and thus «fails to do justice to the *concrete reality of our embodied lives*»².

John Paul II clearly identified a dualistic understanding of the human person as a major root of the “culture of death.” Thus in his 1995 Encyclical *Evangelium vitae* he wrote that the culture of death is rooted in the «mentality which tends to *equate personal dignity with the capacity for verbal and explicit, or at least perceptible communication*» (no. 19). But long before 1995 John Paul had emphasized the bodily character of the human person’s existence. In his mind-opening audiences on the “theology of the body” which he initiated on September 5, 1979 and continued through November 28, 1984 he time and again insisted that the human body “reveals” or “expresses” the person and that it is, as it were, the sacrament of the person – an outward sign not only pointing to and signifying a person but inwardly participating in the being of the person³. Moreover, in his apostolic exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the world today, *Familiaris consortio* (1981), he boldly declared: «the difference, both *anthropological* and *moral*, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm of the cycle, is much wider and deeper than is usually thought. It is a difference which, in final analysis, is based on *irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality*» (no. 32). By this John Paul II meant that the acceptance and practice of contraception was based on a dualistic anthropology, one separating the person from

his/her body, whereas “recourse to the rhythm of the cycle” is grounded in a wholistic anthropology that recognizes that the human person is a unity of *body* and *soul*.

The truth John Paul here affirmed was demonstrated by Germain Grisez in an essay written four years before Karol Wojtyła was elected pope. His brilliant analysis of the “working paper” of the Majority members of the papal commission⁴ shows that for its authors human biological fecundity, of itself, is *subpersonal* and *subhuman*, a part of the world of impersonal nature over which man has been given dominion. The clearest evidence of this dualism is the claim that «biological fertility is not continuous and is subject to many irregularities; therefore it must be assumed into the human sphere and be regulated within it» (*“foecunditas biologica non est continua et est subiecta multis irregularitatibus, ideo in sphaeram humanam assumi et in ea regulari debet”*). As Grisez says, «if the biological fecundity of human persons is *per se* human, it does not need to be assumed into the human sphere. Nothing assumes what it already is or what it has of itself. Thus the majority theologians of the Commission clearly, although implicitly, asserted dualism...; sexuality in and of itself is a physiological process belonging to the physical world; the body in and of itself is not the person; the goods of the body are altogether subordinate to “personal” values⁵.

Moreover, as Grisez notes, “if the person really is not his body, then the destruction of the life of the body is not directly and in itself an attack on a value intrinsic to the human person”⁶. Thus: «Christian moral thought must remain grounded in a sound anthropology which maintains the bodiliness of the person. Such moral thought sees personal biological, not merely generically animal biological, meaning and value in human sexuality. The bodies which become one flesh in sexual intercourse are persons; their unity in a certain sense forms a single person, the potential procreator from whom the personal, bodily reality of a new human individual flows in material, bodily, personal continuity. An attack on this bio-

logical process is an attack on the personal value of life, not always, indeed, on an existing individual’s life, but on human life in its moment of tradition [=handing on]»⁷. John Paul II vehemently rejected this dualistic anthropology in his great Encyclical of 1993, *Veritatis splendor*. In it he faced head-on the charge, commonly made by revisionist theologians, that the Magisterium’s understanding of natural law is “physicalistic” or “biologistic” (n. 47). He declares that this claim «does not correspond to the truth about man and his freedom», and that it «contradicts the Church’s teachings on the unity of the human person» who, «in the unity of body and soul...is the subject of his own moral acts» (n. 48). Since the definitive teaching of the Church (cf. Council of Vienne, const. *Fidei Catholicae*, Fifth Lateran Council, papal bull *Apostolici Regiminis*, and Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 14) maintains that the human person «entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure», it follows that «the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods» (n. 48), goods such as bodily life and marital communion (cf. n. 13).

He explicitly repudiated as «contrary to the teaching of Scripture and Tradition» (n. 49) the view of those who “reduce the human person to a ‘spiritual’ and purely formal freedom” and thus misunderstand the moral meaning of the body and human acts involving it. Likening this view to “certain ancient errors... always... opposed by the Church” (e.g., Manicheism), he then appealed to the teaching of Paul in 1 Cor 6.9-19) on the gravity of such sins as fornication and adultery and to the teaching of the Council of Trent which «lists as “mortal sins” or “immoral practices” certain spe-

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cific kinds of behavior the willful acceptance of which prevents believers from sharing in the inheritance promised to them» (n. 49).

Another remarkable witness to John Paul II's vigorous presentation of the preciousness of human bodily life and the truth that the human body is integral to the human person is provided by his December 1989 "Discourse to the Participants of the Working Group [on the Determination of Brain Death and Its Relationship to Human Death]". John Paul II began by emphasizing that the value of human life "springs from what is spiritual in man," and that the body «receives from the spiritual principle – which inhabits it and makes it what it is – a supreme dignity, a kind of reflection of the Absolute. The body is that of a person, a being which is open to superior values, a being capable of fulfillment in the knowledge and love of God (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 12, 15). When we consider that every individual is a living expression of unity and that the human body is not just an instrument or item of property, but shares in the individual's value as a human being, then it follows that the body cannot under any circumstances be treated as something to be disposed of at will (cf. *ibid.*, 14)»⁸.

Throughout his pontificate John Paul II unequivocally affirmed the intrinsic goodness of the human body and human bodily life. He in effect said: «a living human body is a living human person». Hence, so long as we have in our midst, a living human body, we have in our midst a living human person, and we have such a body in our midst from conception/fertilization until death, until the body is no longer *living*.

This truth is not only crucial for sound philosophy and morality⁹; it is central to Catholic faith. Unlike modern dualists, who claim that to be a person one must have minimally exercisable cognitive abilities and that the body is instrumental to this conscious subject, the Church teaches us and reminds us that when God created man (a person like himself) he did not create a conscious subject to whom he added

a body as an afterthought; rather «male and female he created them» (Gen 1:28), i.e., as living flesh and blood. Moreover, when his Uncreated Word became man, as it were, God's "created word," he became flesh: *logos sarx egeneto* (John 1:14).

Note

¹ I use the text of "'Stand Up' for Human Life" found in *Enchiridion Familiae*, eds. Augusto Sarmiento and Javier Escrivá Ivars (Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, 1992) 3.2378–2387. Toward the conclusion of the homily John Paul II committed himself to the defense of human life and challenged all those present to «'Stand Up' for Human Life». In an especially eloquent passage he declared: «We will stand up every time that human life is threatened. When the sacredness of life before birth is attacked, we will stand up and proclaim that no one ever has the authority to destroy unborn life. When a child is described as a burden or is looked upon only as a means to satisfy an emotional need, we will stand up and insist that every child is a unique and unrepeatable gift of God, with the right to a loving and united family(....). When the sick, the aged, or the dying are abandoned on in loneliness, we will stand up and proclaim that they are worthy of love, care, and respect».

² Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), p. 17; emphasis added.

³ See the following General Audiences: October 31, 1979; November 14, 1979; January 9, 1980; May 28, 1980.

⁴ The working paper, popularly known as the "Majority" Report, was called in Latin *Documentum Syntheticum de paternitate responsabili*.

⁵ Germain Grisez, "Dualism and the New Morality", in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale (Roma-Napoli, 12-17 aprile 1974): Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo Settimo Centenario*, Vol. 5, *L'Agire Morale*. Napoli: Edizioni Domenicane Italiane, 1975, pp. 328–329.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 330

⁸ "Discourse of John Paul II to the Participants of the Working Group," in *Working Group on the Determination of Brain Death and Its Relationship to Human Death* (10–14 December 1989) (*Pontificiae Academiae Scientiarum Scripta Varia*, 83), eds. R. J. White, H. Angstwurm, and I. Carrasco de Paula (Vatican City: Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 1992), no. 2, p. xxiv.

⁹ Two superb philosophical works showing the errors of dualism and giving good arguments in support of a wholistic anthropology are: Germain Grisez, "When Do People Begin?" *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 63 (1989) 27–47; and Patrick Lee, *Abortion and Unborn Human Life* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997).