
**Conference at the Center for
Bioethics and Human Dignity,
Chicago**

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Trinity International University, just outside of Chicago, is a large, evangelical institution of higher learning. In July 2005, the Director of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute (CCBI) and I attended a bioethics conference on genetics and the technology of assisted reproduction. We presented a paper on *in vitro* fertilization, using a “tested and true” Catholic methodology of reason informed by faith. I mention this because of the culture shock we experienced in conversing with people who either are suspicious of natural law argument or totally reject it. Of course, we knew well the classical Protestant position on natural law as a moral guide, but meeting this “in the flesh” was a different experience. The evangelical approach is thoroughly scriptural. Speakers from this tradition, as well as conference attendees, spoke a language that was foreign to our normal mode of conversing about ethics.

It was refreshing to be in an ambience where there was no hesitation about dealing with God’s concern for His creation, or Jesus’ redemptive work, and relating this to activity in the world. Some of the thoughtful people we spoke to were struggling to combine Scripture and the hard facts of modern science. The first keynote speaker was an evangelical scholar. He dealt with the status of the embryo and the fetus according to the revelation of Scripture. I thought that he did a fine job - for believers. Of course, what he said would have had no impact on a non-believer. My colleague was less impressed, wondering if Scripture could be “used” in this way.

The second and third keynote speakers were Lutheran and Jewish. Both made mention of God in their talks, but mostly relied on natural law arguments, though they did not refer to this term. As the conference progressed, it became obvious to us that what has been claimed by natural law devotees is true: there can be no such thing as *Sola Scriptura* and that it is impossible to have dialogue with non-believers when the only language one has is that of Scripture.

First, *Sola Scriptura* is a myth. Any time we use words, we are using human constructs, and the Word comes wrapped in words. Investigating the meaning of the terms used in Scripture and stating this meaning in human language already implies the use of human reason. It is true that the Fall means that human reason is damaged, but in Catholic teaching it is still able to attain to truth, including the truths of faith and morals. Certainly, bias is a constant threat to authentic reasoning, besides the fallibility of reasoning in itself. For that reason, Pope Pius XII, while upholding the capacity of human reason for truth, said that revelation is necessary for the natural law to be known quickly, with certitude and with no admixture of error. (*Humani Generis*, Sec. 3)

Second, natural law arguments are required to bring non-believers into the dialogue. This was not understood fully at the conference. When a Catholic keynote speaker spoke about the status of the embryo using only human reason with no reference to God or revelation, his reception was politely lukewarm at best. The speaker is a practising Catholic and God is very much part of his life, but his purpose at this point was to provide a way to influence non-believers in order to bring about just laws. This speaker’s grasp of natural law was solid. This was not true of other speakers. There is still the temptation to see the meaning of “natural” as “the opposite of artificial”, evident, for example, in one speaker’s notion of Catholic teaching on sexuality.

Evangelicals are strong allies of Roman Catholics where many life issues are concerned. It was instructive to experience their commitment to work for truth and justice in these areas. We must, however, work towards a common understanding of faith and reason in the matter of morals. The Second Vatican Council demanded that Catholic moralists turn to Scripture as their source and life. This should play an essential part in terms of intentionality and motivation. But more, the great truths of Scripture for the moral life are the foundations of practical judgements. Catholics are still in need of clarification in these areas. Evangelicals would be advised to see how human reason must be employed for the Kingdom of God. Both of our denominations will benefit greatly from having the other as ally both with respect to the instruction of our members and also for action in the public domain.