

POPE FRANCIS' INTENTION FOR MARCH

No simple solutions

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In praying for a Christian response to bioethical challenges this month, Pope Francis is asking us to consider what actions respect human dignity.

In public debates about such bioethical issues as abortion, euthanasia, gender change, compulsory vaccinations and genetic modifications, Christians are often made to feel that they are the last soldiers left to fight a losing battle. They alone, it can seem, stand in the way of barbarism. They alone defend the dignity of human life from its beginnings until its endings in the face of a society that is willing to treat human lives as means to an end.

If we see the world in that way the Pope's March 2022 Prayer intention for a Christian response to bioethical challenges would commit Catholics to oppose at all costs developments in genetics, aged and end of life care, in vitro fertilisation etc, and so to defend human dignity. We would pray for the strength to be faithful to this struggle.

Though it has much to support it, this picture of Christians as the last defenders of truth is perhaps too stark. Although discoveries in genetics and other sciences have made possible interventions in human life that would certainly involve disrespect for the human beings affected, they have also pushed us to ask ourselves more seriously just what respect demands of us. In developing our capacity to develop human possibilities, they have opened a wide range of possible actions whose morality calls for careful reflection. In this ethical reflection Catholics do not always have the privilege of certain answers. They must join with others who differ from them in detailed and complex conversation on complex bioethical and social issues. Catholics who share a common respect for human dignity may also differ with one another about what this demands in complicated circumstances.

We have seen this in the United States where Catholic politicians who agree in believing abortion to involve disrespect for human life but nevertheless disagree on whether it should be made illegal. In Australia opinions were simply divided in the referendum to legalise same sex marriage. People on both sides would argue that their stance is based on a respect for human dignity.

The challenge of bioethical science is that it makes possible or at least conceivable interventions that once would have been considered impossible. It raises new questions. As a result, we are forced to think about the previously unthinkable. Two generations ago we could never have known whether a child would be born with some physical or mental handicap. Now that these things can be known, parents are asked to decide whether they wish to abort the foetus. An old ethical question is now given a sharp new focus.

At the end of life, too, euthanasia is generally being legalised with some restrictions throughout Australia. Most Catholics would see this as showing less than due respect for human life. The legislation, however, will open further debates about the treatment of elderly and handicapped

people in hospitals, and whether doctors should be able more freely to take human life in a world where such changes will seem to be economically advantageous.

As genetic knowledge grows, too, possibilities of addressing genetic diseases and changing human qualities will seem possible. Genetic modification of crops is common, raising questions about its effect on people in an economy based on individual profit from scientific advancement. Discerning what kinds of intervention are compatible with respect for human life and the environment will be necessary and demanding.

In all these varied issues the key question to ask is whether actions that are now possible will respect and enhance human dignity or demean it. Pope Francis recognises the urgency of this question, and asks us to pray and work to ensure that our society makes life-enhancing decisions.