

National Resource for Deacons

Exploring the National Catholic Bioethics Center

By Father Tadeusz Pacholczyk

The staff of The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) consults regularly on issues in the life sciences and medicine with hospitals as well as with many other groups, including the Vatican and its various offices, the U.S. bishops, public policymakers and allied organizations of all faiths. Along with Dr. John Haas, president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, five full-time ethicists serve as staff members in Philadelphia, and many of them are sought-after speakers, presenters and consultants.

I'm glad to be able to offer the diaconal community an overview and a few insights into the work of the center in the hope that we can serve as a useful resource for your ministry.

The National Catholic Bioethics Center was established almost 50 years ago and has been working quietly within the Church to provide much-needed ethical guidance regarding contemporary medical and scientific developments. Its mission includes reflecting on these scientific developments while promoting and safeguarding the dignity of the human person in health care and the life sciences. Each of us is made in God's image, but too often in contemporary society the vulnerable human person is looked upon as a drain on financial resources or, more chillingly, as a resource of raw materials for transplanta-



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tion or research. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops noted in the 1995 document "Critical Decisions: Genetic Testing and Its Implications" how "the scientific community cannot shoulder the whole burden of bringing ethics to bear. Catholic clergy and laity must become knowledgeable about emerging biotechnologies if they are to help people make the critical decisions they will inevitably face. Both the Church and scientific community, we believe, can benefit from the efforts to harmonize scientific advancement with religious insight."

The NCBC is unique among bioethics organizations. All of its work is done in conformity with the official teachings of the Catholic Church, teachings drawn from a moral tradition that acknowledges the unity of faith and reason and builds on the solid foundation of the natural law. The NCBC is an independent, not-for-profit or-

ganization that is not affiliated with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops or any other official Church entity. Therefore, we are not funded by the institutional Church but accept donations and raise money to keep the center functioning.

Few would dispute that our society faces unprecedented scientific developments that touch upon the mysteries of human life and that pose serious ethical challenges to society. These range from sexual reassignment surgeries, to the distinction between direct and indirect abortion, to concerns raised by the use of contraception or in vitro fertilization. The center works to carry out its mission through educational programs, publishing, consultation and research.

The center's educational programs include the National Catholic Certification Program in Health Care Ethics, one- and two-day seminars, and other events directed to the bishops themselves. The NCBC ethicists travel frequently to speak at convocations of clergy, pro-life events, colleges, universities and gatherings of professional associations. Dr. Haas and myself, for example, have spoken to thousands of clergy at presbyteral and diaconal gatherings in recent years.

Educational outreach has long been at the core of the mission of the National Catholic Bioethics Center. Church leaders and Catholic health care executives turn

to the NCBC not only for guidance and counsel, but also to train individuals to become more knowledgeable about the Catholic moral tradition and competent in its application to specific clinical cases. Some facets of the NCBC's educational outreach and consultative work are summarized below.

Workshop on Bioethics

Every two years the NCBC, in collaboration with the Knights of Columbus, offers a special conference to 150 bishops from the United States, Canada, Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and the Philippines. It is the largest gathering of U.S. bishops outside of their own USCCB meetings. The center's conference is held in Dallas and focuses on a range of current clinical and pastoral topics, ranging from collaboration between Catholic and non-Catholic institutions, to emerging cultural and political threats, to Catholic health care ministry, to problematic understandings of the human person in certain emerging gender theories.

The Speakers' Bureau

The center's ethicists are available to travel and speak on a variety of the major medical/ethical issues of our day, from stem-cell research to end-of-life decision-making, from assisted reproductive technologies to contraception and human sexuality. Parishes, professional and trade organizations, pro-life groups and educational institutions routinely turn to the center to provide informative, thought-provoking and well-prepared teaching presentations.

Seminars

The NCBC offers one- and two-day seminars on topics such as the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and specific beginning-of-life and end-of-life issues. Continuing education credits are available for

Chaplains Eugenia Lai and Deacon Bill Wilson of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston offer spiritual care for patients at Baylor St. Luke's Medical Center and Texas Children's Hospital in Houston in this 2018 file photo. CNS photo/Jo Ann Zuniga, Texas Catholic Herald



NCBC PUBLICATIONS

The National Catholic Bioethics Center is a leading Catholic publisher of books and other scholarly and popular works in bioethics, including:

- **The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly:** A scholarly journal addressing ethical, philosophical and theological questions raised by the rapid pace of modern medical and technological progress. It has repeatedly won first place for scholarly excellence from the Catholic Press Association.
- **Ethics & Medics:** A monthly publication that provides analysis and commentary on matters of current interest in health care, medicine and law.
- **Bishops' Workshop Proceedings:** A collection of presentations from the biannual Dallas bishops' conferences that take place every two years.
- **Making Sense of Bioethics:** A monthly newspaper column on bioethics that is nationally syndicated to more than 40 diocesan newspapers in the United States, and which also has been carried by newspapers in England, Canada, Poland and Australia.
- **The New Charter for Health Care Workers:** Translated and published by the NCBC, this publication, along with the original Italian, are the official texts for this Vatican document.
- A wide variety of other books and monographs on current and emerging medical-moral issues from the perspective of Catholic teaching and the Judeo-Christian heritage.

physicians, nurses and chaplains through most of our seminars, which are offered in different cities around the country each year. These seminars offer an excellent introduction to Catholic bioethics or a helpful refresher for those who may have done studies previously.

Certification Program

In 2005 the center began to offer a National Catholic Certification Program in Health Care Ethics for health care professionals, members of ethics committees

and others interested in pursuing advanced understanding of the application of the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services. Graduate credit toward a Master of Science degree in bioethics is available for this program through a special collaborative arrangement with the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota, or through the distance education Master of Arts degree in theology with a concentration in bioethics at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Further information about the work of the NCBC, including how to take advantage of its free consultation service, how to invite one of its ethicists to speak on bioethics, or how to take out an individual or parochial membership in the center is available at nbccenter.org. It also offer resources useful for instructing Catholics about the Church's teachings in ethics and the life sciences.

Institutional Consultations

The center works with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops through its Pro-Life Activities Committee and Doctrine Committee. Many bishops in the country are diocesan members of the center and turn to us for assistance in addressing vexing medical-moral questions and developing policies and teaching documents. Many health care institutions depend on the center to provide guidance from the Church's moral tradition, and through its research the center also serves dicasteries of the Holy See. An expanding area of work for the center involves ethics audits of Catholic hospitals and health care systems, done in collaboration with the local ordinary of the diocese. These "Catholic Identity and Ethics Reviews" have been requested by the bishops of a number of states and involve a detailed ethics audit of their Catholic hospitals.

Individual Consultations

The ethicists of the center are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, via phone and email, to provide guidance from the Catholic moral tradition to those facing professional challenges, health care dilemmas and sometimes heartbreaking personal decisions in the care of loved ones. They provide this service without charge to more than 2,000 people a year. In addition to serving those in pastoral ministry, the ethicists advise health care professionals and their patients on difficult beginning-of-life and end-of-life issues.

Public Policy

The center believes that the moral teachings of the Church have a place in the public forum and ought to inform public-policy decisions. The moral wisdom of the Church touches on the very nature of the human person in the areas of bio-

technology, medicine and the life sciences. The center regularly contributes to public commentary on proposed federal and state regulations and legislation. The center also prepares a semi-monthly public policy report that is sent to all members of the center and to the directors of state Catholic conferences throughout the country who are the principal lobbyists for bishops in each state. This contributes to the center's ability to educate the public to its responsibility for promoting public policy consistent with the common good. Such efforts have impacted government policies in such areas as informed consent for organ donation and conscience protection for health care professionals.

Commentary

The center's ethicists frequently are called upon to offer commentaries on breaking news stories for media outlets.

These have included groups and entities such as "NBC Nightly News," CNN International, National Public Radio, The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. In addition, ethicists from the center routinely contribute to Catholic print, radio and TV outlets, including "The World Over" with Raymond Arroyo, "EWTN News Nightly," Relevant Radio, SiriusXM and many others.

We work closely with clergy and deacons, and we look forward to the opportunity to be of service to you in your diaconal ministry. **DD**

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