



THE DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Office of Human Life, Family and Bioethics



Bioethics Comes to DRVC



As the last few days of summer splendor tempted many to relish one more weekend at the beach, fifty intrepid individuals convened at St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre on September 11 and 12 to dive into bioethics. Clergy and professionals in health care, social services, and education, hailing from as far as Houston, attended the “Catholic Health Care Ethics Seminar: A Tradition of Compassion and Care for the Human Person” presented by bioethicists from the National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC).

This was the first of what will be an annual event hosted by Catholic Health Services of Long Island and the Office of Human Life, Family and Bioethics of the Diocese of Rockville Centre. Whether novice or seasoned in their fields, all who came found what might have surprised them: bioethics is relevant and important for everyone.

What is Bioethics and why now?

Science and technology have advanced in leaps and bounds, but sometimes this unrestrained growth, in the context of a permissive social culture, has infringed on the very dignity of the human person, the sanctity of marriage and God’s plan for His creation. *Just because we can do*

something, does not necessarily mean we should do it. But how do we know? Bioethics is the field of study that helps us to determine what is morally permissible (and not) when difficult situations arise in the fields of medicine, health care and the biological sciences. The seminar offered an overview of the main areas of bioethical dilemmas confronted today in our culture. Sandra Genao, D.D.S, a student enrolled in the NCBC Certification Program, said, “It scares me to see where we are going...we need to get the right information behind the ideas that affect our dignity as a human being, and share that with others.”

Today we live in a world where there is so much confusion regarding the morality of embryonic stem cells, *in vitro* fertilization, assisted suicide, and gender reassignment surgery, to name just a few topics covered in the two-day seminar. These subjects almost invariably have ubiquitous appeal in secular circles but also are associated with grave moral implications—and this is true even among Catholics *and* despite clear Church teaching on many of these issues. These are not just areas of political debate, but concerns that affect our own families and the mission of the Church in its pastoral duties in the care and support provided through its hospitals and ministries. In the words of Joseph Meaney, Ph.D., President of the NCBC, “The Catholic Church represents one of the few remaining coherent institutional voices of morality in a world under the tyranny of relativism.” Although it may be impossible to change the entire world, we have a duty to seek the truth on these issues and live them in our communities.

The Bioethics priority in DRVC

To address these challenges, Bishop John Barres has prioritized the development of a genuine appreciation for and a basic understanding of bioethics within our diocese. To this end, late last year, the former Respect Life Office was renamed the Office of Human Life, Family and Bioethics. The Office has been mandated to advance this bioethics objective within the diocese and particularly in coordination with its Catholic Health Services and Catholic Charities partners. But Bishop Barres credits the prescient vision of his predecessor, Bishop William Murphy, for the groundwork in this effort.

The seminar was a major step in that direction. The NCBC is an internationally recognized non-profit research and educational institute founded in 1972, when bioethics was just beginning as a discipline, and long before many of the dominant bioethical issues of today were even on the horizon. It is an independent organization, but it works very closely with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, dioceses, and health care systems. Probably one of the most valuable services the NCBC provides to individuals is the free personal consultation for those seeking guidance on Catholic moral teaching during a health care crisis. However, the NCBC bioethicists are also busy helping Catholic institutions develop policies and ensure compliance with the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services (“ERDs”), a brief document that describes the ethical standards of Catholic moral teaching and provides authoritative guidance on ethical behavior in Catholic health care settings. The NCBC will have an increasingly

significant role in advancing bioethics in the DRVC by helping to build a network of faithful Catholic witnesses across our diocese and across the professional spectrum who have a more advanced knowledge of bioethics. The need is great: “Without an ethical framework, it would not be possible to make sense of the promise and perils of science and technology,” observed Laura Cassell, CEO of Catholic Charities, who attended the two-day seminar.

The NCBC 2020 Fall seminar

Although some attended only the two-day seminar, for others, this was a required element of the National Catholic Certification Program in Health Care Ethics, a year-long in-depth course offered by the NCBC and designed to equip students with a solid foundation in Catholic moral tradition in health care. This “will give us the ability to discuss important ethical answers with people who do not share our faith,” Thomas Costello, M.D., enrolled in the Certification program, said. It is a goal for the Diocese to promote the certification program so that we have a strong corps of faithful Catholics living and sharing Catholic bioethics in their homes, professional work and ministries. These are our friends, co-workers and fellow parishioners in the pews witnessing to the Gospel of Life.

The seminar itself went without a glitch despite its inaugural distinction and the significant burden imposed by the COVID-19 regulations, ranging from limitations on the number of registrants to recording the temperatures of all participants on arrival, and yes, masks.

The seminar began with a brief moment of prayer and reflection in remembrance of the tragedy of 9/11, but quickly delved into a short history of the NCBC and an overview of the ERDs by Dr. Meaney. Later in the day, he covered how contraception and sterilization oppose the purpose of marriage on the one hand, and how natural family planning, on the other hand, embraces it. His final talk on respecting conscience rights reviewed the history of conscience protections in the U.S., highlighting the unfortunate reality that conscience protections have become a direct function of political ideology; right now, conscience rights are vigorously defended on a federal level but that changes with administrations.

Rev. Tadeusz Pacholczyk, Ph.D., generally known as “Fr. Tad” and the author of the nationally syndicated “Making Sense of Bioethics” column, is Director of Education. He covered the principles of cooperation with evil that govern the moral permissibility of working with others in healthcare (whether individuals or institutions) who may not share Catholic values. His presentation on transgender and gender dysphoria issues highlighted the actual impossibility of divorcing gender identity from biological sex and the fundamental problems that result when the culture says you can. Finally, he gave an overview of the moral issues that arise through the biological manipulation of stem cells and creating genetically modified humans that gets to the heart of our human dignity. Science is meant to serve us, not exploit the human person.

Dr. DiAnn Ecret, Ph.D., used examples from her extensive nursing experience, to discuss the ethical approaches to perinatal complications (including the hazards of prenatal screening) and introduced the moral distinction of ordinary and extraordinary care. On the other end of the spectrum, she examined the problems of advance care planning at the end of life, again addressing benefits and burdens that define moral obligations of care. While medical orders for life sustaining treatment are not advised because of their inflexibility and binding nature, we are strongly encouraged to identify in writing a health care proxy to make decisions, if or when we become unable to make medical decisions ourselves.

Dr. Edward Furton, Ph.D., M.A., editor of the NCBC's publications, presented the moral failings of common reproductive technologies (e.g. *in vitro* fertilization) in contrast to NaPro technology which cooperates with the nature of the reproductive system. If we live according to nature's purpose, we also live according to God. On physician assisted suicide he emphasized that even good motives to relieve suffering cannot justify killing a patient, and stressed the important difference between foregoing disproportionate care and killing a patient to end suffering. His final presentation covered the determination of death for organ donation.

Towards the end of the second day, the general audience was subdivided for small group discussion of case studies which highlighted some of the issues covered in the preceding sessions. This intense introduction to bioethics capped off with a 30-minute Q&A for the full panel of bioethicists. Lauren Semon, a registered nurse pursuing the NCBC certification this year, said, "This seminar has provided me with a stronger foundation to uphold ethical standards owed to any patient or family who may be facing life altering decisions."

A primary purpose of the seminar was to include all dimensions of Catholic witness. Catholic Health Services of Long Island and Catholic Charities were well represented, as well as members of the Catholic Christian Family Movement (an apostolate serving Hispanic families), clergy and religious in our Diocese, and college students. In addition, the recently chartered Long Island Guild of the Catholic Medical Association (CMA) was on hand recruiting new members. The CMA and NCBC collaborate often to issue position statements on important bioethical issues.

"The presentations were outstanding and, as we know, many other things were accomplished during these days," Bishop Barres said. "I'm very grateful for the way the work of Catholic Health Services and the DRVC Office for Human Life, Family and Bioethics are connecting. I was also very impressed that three members of the Senior management team of Catholic Charities were present throughout the entire seminar; thus, emphasizing our continual DRVC theme of the unity of the Gospel of Human Life and Catholic Social Justice teaching."

And so, this new bioethics initiative in the Diocese of Rockville Centre is off to a promising start.

If you would like to support this initiative, please contact:

For more information about the National Catholic Bioethics Center and the Certification Program or to support their work financially, please see www.ncbcenter.org

Please refer to www.respectlife.org and the monthly newsletter for upcoming events in bioethics and more.