

## Introduction

### **Equal beginnings. But then?**

A new season in bioethical reflections is at hand. We are witnessing extraordinary developments in life sciences and in the new "converging technologies" (genetics, information technology, nanotechnologies and neurosciences), which open up unprecedented possibilities for interventions on living matter. The human body is exposed to practices that risk reducing it to the status of any neutral biological subject, as if it were an entity independent of the person rather than its basis in space and in history. This approach, veined with Gnostic contempt<sup>1</sup>, risks obfuscating the symbolic scope of the body and its essential role in the advancement of a meaningful world.

On the other hand, globalization is profoundly transforming the context in which bioethical questions are posed. Cultures find themselves coexisting in closer relations as a direct result of the growth in the movement of peoples and the intensification in communications. There is a growing public awareness that environmental phenomena and peoples' lives are increasingly interconnected. There is also a better understanding that inequalities and imbalances in the conditions of life in society and in the different parts of the planet are not due to random factors, but are the effects of choices that neglect justice and the legitimate needs of all the Earth's populations, present and future. There are many examples of problems related to clinical practice and biomedical research in which these interconnections are apparent. To cite only some which have the most immediate bioethical impact: the definition and compliance with the rules of scientific research that are the same for everyone and equally respectful of the dignity and rights of people; the principle of the prohibition of the commercial exploitation of the human body or its parts on the international market; the prohibition of interventions on the genome that introduce modifications destined to be inherited by descendants; the fight against the threat of bio-terrorism. The classical topics of bioethics have therefore taken on a far wider scope. Then again, the number of themes dealt with has also expanded: food safety, inequalities in access to care and in the distribution of the results of scientific research, environmental factors on health.

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, drawn up by the United Nations, the third objective indicated is "to ensure health and well-being for all and for all ages" and first on the list of goals to be achieved is the reduction of maternal mortality and that of infants and children up to 5 years of age, which continues to suffer an abyss of inequality and injustice between rich and poor. Contributing to the achievement of these goals, in terms of scientific reflection and research and the promotion of concrete initiatives, is one of the forms of witness and commitment to the protection of life in its earliest stages.

These reference points have been illustrated in the introductory report to our working session given by H. E. Mons. Vincenzo Paglia, President of the PAV. He has outlined how the global

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exultate*, n. 37.

perspective that characterizes the theme of this Workshop is greatly encouraged by the teaching of the recent pontificates. The phenomenon was prophetically highlighted in the encyclical of Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (1967). The encyclical does not use the term of globalization, but already indicates its characteristic features, addressing the problems of development and examining its dynamics on a planetary scale. The words that we read are surprisingly relevant to us today: "We are the heirs of earlier generations, and we reap benefits from the efforts of our contemporaries; we are under obligation to all men. Therefore, we cannot disregard the welfare of those who will come after us to increase the human family. The reality of human solidarity brings us not only benefits but also obligations."(*Populorum progressio*, n.17). Furthermore, the text is no longer nonpartisan, limiting itself to reiterating that it is necessary "to give each his own", rather it decisively takes the part of the weakest, of the poor countries and of those who are or are pushed to the margins. St. John Paul II took up this message in the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987) and Pope Francis further developed it in *Laudato si'* (LS), through the innovative paradigm of an "integral ecology". It is a key to understanding phenomena that takes into account the interactions between natural and social systems, thus allowing problems to be addressed not in a fragmentary and partial way, but in a comprehensive and multidisciplinary way: "Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions that consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."(LS, 139). This of course also applies to health issues: "If everything is related, then the health of a society's institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life." (LS, 142).

### **Framework and final reports of the Workshop**

In this context, the Workshop took place according to a two-part framework: first of all a broader reflection on global bioethics, followed by a study on the specific theme of maternal and child health, in which "care" during pregnancy and of prenatal life was examined according to the most relevant aspects of the future of the child and that of the adult.

In the opening video message, Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, stressed the importance of the issues addressed, which also constitute an explicit commitment of the WHO. Starting with the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005), Prof. Stefano Semplici addressed the importance of the role of bioethics in guaranteeing the dignity, rights and fundamental freedoms of all human beings. His report was based on two main questions: the social and cultural function of rights (which should be distinguished from the question of their foundation) and the relationship between their universality and the diversity of

cultures, between equality in dignity, intrinsic to every human being for the mere fact of being such, and the plurality of experiences and paths of freedom.

A specific study on the connections between the encyclicals *Evangelium vitae* of St. John Paul II and *Laudato si'* of Francis was developed by Prof. Rodrigo Guerra Lopez. He identified a common point in their personalist anthropology, presenting how Pope Francis's reflection leads to a fruitful interaction between the social thought of the Church and bioethics. It is about building a new synthesis for a global bioethics that recognizes the centrality of the human person - above all the poorest and most vulnerable - and at the same time the relationship between social life, the natural environment and our history. Formulating the work of bioethics in this light will require an impressive educational effort. Professor Henk ten Have pointed out that it is not just a matter of conveying notions or skills, but also an education that also aims to motivate and inspire. Its purpose is a transformation of character, closely linked to professional skills. It is therefore necessary to proceed by fostering interaction between the level of theoretical knowledge and that of practical experience.

Professor Lisa Cahill opened the second part of the Workshop, discussing the "Ethics of Being Born". The delicate maternal-child relationship is very exposed to the effects of injustice and inequality of opportunity. Little girls and mothers, on whom health depends most at this stage of life, are already more disadvantaged in terms of access to food, care, education and paid work. The encyclical *Laudato si'* offers many insights into nascent life and the principles of Catholic doctrine are clear: it is no longer a question of repeating them with theoretical and rhetorical appeals, but of finding valid and effective means of implementation. Dr. Marta Teresa Fracapani reported on some experiences in organizing perinatal care in Argentina, where positive results in the reduction of mortality and morbidity were reached by regionalizing assistance and introducing new training modalities for healthcare professionals. Prof. Carlo Hanau addressed the topic of mortality and neonatal health, through the lens of economics. The huge difference in mortality between different countries in the world is due not only to the level of income, but also to health policy choices. The political will to invest in solid health systems, which give priority to newborns and reach the poorest and most marginalized, is of fundamental importance. The WHO *Millennium goals* converge towards these objectives. A new look at prenatal genetic diagnosis techniques in a global perspective allowed Professor Marie-Jo Thiel to highlight their socio-political relevance and ethics. Easily dominated by a market logic, their use is allied to the parental dream of a healthy child. However, it actually ends up feeding a selective logic of exclusion of those who do not correspond to accepted models and do not conform to the prevailing canons of efficiency and economy. The phenomenon of forced migration is also a cause of suffering on the health of mothers and of uncertainty about the birth of children, with frequent violations of fundamental rights. In his contribution, Monsignor Robert Vitillo reflected on the tradition of the Church and some elements of international agreements. He also illustrated the constant advocacy activities carried out by the representations of the Holy See to the competent bodies.

The speakers' interventions were then integrated and enriched by the questions and considerations of the various interlocutors who intervened after each presentation, available for

consultation in this volume. The group work of the members of the PAV, divided into the different linguistic areas, also allowed a debate and further elaboration of the reflections proposed in the presented papers: the corresponding reports can be consulted at the end of the text.

## **Conclusion**

At this historic juncture, global bioethics presents itself as a frontier of encounter and elaboration of guiding principles, which, although already present in the nascent phase of bioethics, now require new impulse. The intercultural implications of issues that cannot remain confined to sectoral or circumscribed fields are emerging with increasing clarity. They need to be addressed with a broader vision. There is an increasing urgency to reach decisions which, as far as possible, are shared between different ethical approaches and rooted in multiple worldviews and religious matrices. This compels us to elaborate consensus on the choices to be made and the criteria that inspire them: since their consequences involve everyone, we cannot limit ourselves to partial or procedural solutions. In this perspective, human rights constitute a very important meeting point, for the patient and progressive construction of a consensus that is not only theoretical, but also operational and which concerns the entire planet. Given the complexity of the issues in the field, the pluralism of cultures and opinions must include that between different scientific disciplines, in particular the sciences of nature, the human sciences, including ethics and philosophy, and theological reflection. As believers, it is important that we offer our contribution making that which we grasp in the light of faith available to all, but doing so in a manner that is both communicable and comprehensible even to those who belong to other religions and visions of the world.