

V. PAGLIA (ed.): *Etica teologica della vita: Scrittura, tradizione, sfide pratiche*

---

The volume *Etica teologica della vita: Scrittura, tradizione, sfide pratiche*, edited by Vincenzo Paglia, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life (PAV),<sup>1</sup> collects the Proceedings of an interdisciplinary study seminar promoted by the Pontifical Academy for Life on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of *Evangelium vitae* that took place in Rome in October 2021, moderated by Philippe Bordeyne, President of the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for the Study of Marriage and the Family. The participants' contributions are based on a "base text" (*Testo Base* = TB), intended to reframe a "theological ethics of life" by taking into account Pope Francis's newer doctrinal impulses, which include his encyclicals and apostolic exhortations. The TB was prepared in advance by a group of eight theologians brought together by the PAV.<sup>2</sup> The group of eight authors went through an extensive and progressive process of formulation and editing, seeking to understand how the Catholic bioethical tradition's insights (e.g., *Humanae vitae*, *Evangelium vitae*) are further articulated in light of Pope Francis's evolving theological corpus from *Evangelii gaudium*, *Amoris laetitia*, *Laudato si'*, *Veritatis gaudium*, and *Fratelli tutti*. Other Catholic scholars were requested to provide their support or offer critical evaluations of the base text, thereby maintaining an ongoing dialogue within the church on the sensitive field of bioethics that goes beyond any artificial divisions between revisionists and traditionalists, liberals and conservatives.<sup>3</sup> The TB is offered in Italian, followed by responses in English, French, Spanish, and Italian.

The PAV seeks to promote dialogue among diverse cultural and theological perspectives, in order to encourage a more comprehensive and profound examination of issues related to the ethics of life. The seminar not only sought dialogue between different fields of knowledge, but also between theological perspectives

- 1 Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022 (Theological Ethics of Life: Scripture, Tradition, Practical Challenges).
- 2 The eight scholars who drafted the *Testo Base* were: Carlo Casalone, Maurizio Chiodi, Roberto Dell'Oro, Pier Davide Guenzi, Anne-Marie Pelletier, Pierangelo Sequeri, Marie-Jo Thiel, and Alain Thomasset.
- 3 R. DELL'ORO/M.T. LYSAGHT: "Review Essay of Theological Ethics of Life: A New Volume by the Pontifical Academy for Life", in: *Journal of Moral Theology* 11/2 (2022), 65. During the seminar the invited participants provided critical responses to the TB, and the authors of the TB acted as respondents to these critiques.

and models that develop a more sapiential and pastoral intelligence of faith. The text is rooted in a theological anthropology that draws inspiration from ecclesial faith and engages in a meaningful dialogue with contemporary culture. The aim was to explore the challenging questions surrounding human life and the intricate scientific and ethical matters of the present day. The objective was to respond to the call made in *Veritatis gaudium* (3) to bring about a profound paradigm shift in theological inquiry, although this effort is not without its imperfections.

The volume presents an insightful and courteous discussion among scholars from various theological backgrounds in the tradition of *questiones disputatae*. It also highlights the fundamental principles that make such a remarkable exchange possible, which are demonstrated in the actual practices of studying, reflecting, debating, and interacting personally that took place over an extended period. This has resulted in a thoughtful theological discourse, even though the final product comes across as rather static. Therefore, it is crucial to unpack these principles to give readers a useful framework to engage with the text's dynamism and continue the discussions it puts forward.<sup>4</sup>

As noted by Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia in an interview with Vatican Media, Pope Francis has been kept informed of this initiative from the outset and is supportive of the resulting academic discourse, which has been coordinated by the PAV.

We hear people say that the Holy Father is not interested in theology, but if we pay closer attention to what he is really saying, it does not really seem to be the case. So, we asked ourselves, are we really listening to the teaching of Pope Francis? Are we taking his words seriously in a systematic way, and not just using some of his singular expressions outside the context of his overall reflection? Are we examining the implications that his considerations have for theological thought? If we consider *Evangelii gaudium*, *Laudato si'*, *Amoris laetitia*, and *Veritatis gaudium* in this perspective, we realize that the proposals contained therein open up a new horizon for theology and for the task of theologians, with a strong emphasis on dialogue and the mutual enrichment between different types of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

The volume addresses the fundamental issues of theological bioethics in our current times, including what are often considered the more controversial aspects of the theological ethics of life (6). Given the breadth of the themes covered and the plurality of perspectives represented by the authors, this work represents an especially valuable contribution, precisely because of its inclusive nature and synodal character. Inclusion and synodality are central concepts that can help to unlock the value of this work, which has the potential to inspire a broad-ranging debate in the years to come. The field of bioethics, or ethics of life, extends beyond

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 66.

<sup>5</sup> VATICAN NEWS: "Archbishop Paglia on Pope's Teaching on 'Theological Ethics of Life'", 30 June 2022, available at [www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-06/archbishop-vincenzo-paglia-pope-francis-interview-theological-et.html](http://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-06/archbishop-vincenzo-paglia-pope-francis-interview-theological-et.html).

clinical issues or the protection of participants' autonomy in biomedical research. It encompasses all the significant challenges facing life, not only human life, on our planet. Thus, it is essential to consider topics related to global health and justice, ecology, genetic enhancement technologies, and even war and other forms of violence within the purview of bioethics.

When grappling with complex issues, it is natural to encounter a wide array of approaches, reflecting the diverse intellectual and spiritual traditions of humanity. Such plurality is also present within the Catholic tradition, which has never been monolithic. In order to be effective, good theology must embrace a range of perspectives and methodologies, in keeping with the authentic tradition of *quaestiones disputatae*. The volume that we are discussing is situated within this horizon of dialogue and exploration, representing a valuable contribution to the ongoing search for greater understanding and insight.

The book is divided into three main sections, each of which addresses a different aspect of the theological ethics of life. The twelve chapters focus on a specific topic and are closely aligned with the content of the TB, summarizing the most relevant aspects of Pope Francis's speeches and writings. Despite the breadth of topics covered, it is impossible to comment in detail on all the contributions of this work. The authors acknowledge that the volume is presented as a starting point for discussion, not as a finished and definitive text, evoking some fundamental questions. These questions have been the object of a free discussion among the seminar participants, with the aim of being deepened through an open and respectful dialogue among theologians. Overall, these chapters demonstrate the necessary interdisciplinary nature of theological bioethics, and the importance of engaging with scientific, philosophical, and ethical perspectives in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

### *First Section*

The first section (chapters I-V) explores on the one hand the signs of the times in the light of scripture and tradition in shaping our understanding of the ethical dimension of life and deals on the other hand with an in-depth reflection on conscience, norms, and discernment.

The first chapter explores the theme of human life and the importance of valuing and caring for it. Drawing on insights from significant documents of Pope Francis, this chapter offers a comprehensive overview of the theological principles that guide subsequent reflections in the volume. The document boldly echoes the language of *Laudato si'*, affirming that life is not only a gift but also discovered through joy and attentiveness, and manifested in the real lives of people. It is worth quoting the opening paragraphs of the *Testo Base*:

The joy of life (*gaudium vitae*) is manifested in human history in many ways and has its origin in the gift of life itself. It is a sentiment that is born of the gratuitousness of personal relationships, but also of a "contemplative distance" and of a deep attentiveness vis-à-vis

created things and the universe. It is the grateful joy of the one who receives an act of welcome, a cup of water, a smile, or a hand in moments of difficulty...The joy of life implies freedom from the claim to control and manipulate everything. It is generated by an attitude of “let it be” that reveals openness to welcome the revelation of good in the promise that is inscribed upon existence itself.

The TB presents a comprehensive synodal vision for theological practice, which echoes Pope Francis’s four principles for renewing theological studies (*Veritatis gaudium* 4). The first criterion highlights the contemplative nature of theology, emphasizing that theology delves into “the heart of the kerygma” (TB 7) when it proceeds “in a manner that is spiritual, intellectual, and existential” (TB 7). The second criterion emphasizes the importance of dialogue in theology, as it is through the recognition that encounter is at the origin of any theology because “truth is logos that creates dia-logos”, as noted by Benedict XVI (TB 8). The third criterion stresses that theology must be interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, as revelation does not negate other forms of knowledge, but rather requires them (TB 9). Lastly, the fourth criterion underscores the importance of collaboration among various theological institutions, scientific disciplines, and both lay and ordained members of the community (TB 10) in order to enrich theological practice and understanding.

Chapter one ends with two analyses, by Piero Coda (University of Sophia, Loppiano) and Emilce Cuda (Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina and the Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America).

The second chapter offers a significant contemplation of the relationship between “Sacred Scripture and Life” as called for by the Second Vatican Council fathers. The TB provides several warnings regarding the lack of involvement with scripture among baptized individuals (TB 14) and the possibility of misinterpreting scripture (TB 15-17). Positively, it traces the biblical testimony to not only “life” (as in *Evangelium vitae*) but also to the joy of life and its intrinsic goodness, beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures in a particular focus on their realization in the incarnation, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The predominant message conveyed throughout, as evident from the subheadings, is one of *blessing*. The discussant of chapter two is Andrzej S. Wodka (president of Avepro and former president of the Accademia Alfonsiana, Rome).

The subsequent chapters in the first section provide a sociological and historical context for the theological reflection. Throughout the volume, it is emphasized that theology cannot be divorced from its cultural and historical context.

In a manner consistent with *Gaudium et spes*, chapter three, entitled “Interpreting the Present Time” follows a similar structure by identifying the “signs of the times in the light of the Gospel”. These include, in accordance with traditional views in Catholic Social Teaching, distorted views on anthropology, e.g. individualism, self-centeredness, and increased narcissism, resulting in the breakdown of familial and societal relationships (TB 46-47). Additionally, the chapter addresses the double-edged sword of new technologies, which provide

extraordinary benefits (TB 56-59) while also presenting many ethical challenges. Consistent with Pope Francis's belief that "everything is interconnected", the chapter emphasizes the potential impact of "emerging and converging" technologies not only on the natural world but also on ourselves (TB 63-66). This survey of the contemporary landscape also highlights a crucial element of Pope Francis's papacy, which is often overlooked in Catholic bioethics, namely, the role that economics plays in all of these issues, as noted in the TB:

The technological structure of the industrial revolution and of the digital expansion has resulted in a unilateral and dominant technological-scientific paradigm that has deleted the questions about the meaning of life and about the bonds that create solidarity among human beings. This trajectory intersects with the predominance of the laws of the market, interpreted in the sense of greed and rapacity, and leading to indifference vis-à-vis those who are weakest; here, the wisdom of the peoples and of the poor is forgotten, and there is an erosion of the time devoted to what is more fundamental, such as the search for the good. (46)

The discussant for chapter three is William Desmond (Villanova University, Maynooth University, and formerly KU Leuven). Desmond speaks about "counterfeit doubles of agapeic service that take shape in the dominion of serviceable disposability" and refers by way of illustration to "abortion in the name of compassion" and "the harvesting of body parts and fetal issues – all justified as the compassionate betterment of our lot" (126).

Chapters four and five are of particular interest to moral theologians, with the former critically examining the magisterial and theological traditions' reading of the fifth precept of the decalogue and the latter exploring the relationship between conscience, moral norms, and discernment.

Chapter IV, titled "The Fifth Precept of the Decalogue: A Critical Reading", challenges the traditional theological interpretation of the fifth precept of the Decalogue, "You shall not kill" (see *Evangelium vitae*). It notes that the traditional interpretation of this commandment – the negative precept of natural law – focuses mainly on the absolute prohibition ("semper et pro semper") of the direct killing of innocent persons (TB 74). As a negative precept of natural law, it absolutely obliges without exception, regardless of consequences and circumstances. Indirect attacks can be justified through the principle of double effect. In recent times, the magisterium has expanded its scope to include issues such as abortion, suicide, euthanasia, and capital punishment. The text follows the evolution of the interpretation of this commandment, which can be traced back to the thirteenth-century Scholasticism and the *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 64 (TB 75-76). The journey continues through the growth of moral theology (TB 77-85) and the history of interventions from the ecclesiastical magisterium, including the post-conciliar period (TB 86-108).

The chapter raises some critical questions about this development, asking whether the traditional interpretation of the commandment was too narrow and whether the magisterium's recent pronouncements are consistent with the broader

tradition. The chapter further argues that the precept should not be interpreted in a narrow and legalistic way, but rather be interpreted in a broader sense that takes into account the complexity of situations where human life is at stake. The authors also suggest that the precept should be understood in the context of the Bible as a whole, which emphasizes the value of life and the duty to protect it. The chapter also raises the question of whether the precept should be extended to include the protection of all forms of life on Earth. Finally, the chapter touches on the issue of the morality of war, examining the tradition's just war theory. It highlights the tension between the need to protect innocent life and the need to use force in certain circumstances, and it raises serious questions about the current state of the just war tradition in light of contemporary conflicts and the development of new military technologies.

Overall, the chapter emphasizes that the relationship between magisterium and theology is a delicate one. While both the magisterium and theology serve the people of God, they possess distinct charisms and duties. Rather than presenting the two as opposing forces, the authors advocate for a collaborative approach ("a shared diakonia") to the "intelligence of faith", which both magisterium and theology serve, in their specific roles and functions. This approach aims to overcome the stereotypical portrayal of the magisterium and theology as alternatives to each other. On the one hand, the magisterium has an important role in clarifying the Catholic Church's teaching on ethical issues because it expresses the multifaceted depth of the Christian revelation by emphasizing, through its doctrinal formulations, the essence of the kerygma, which is the "ever fresh and attractive good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (*Veritatis gaudium* 4a). For Pope Francis, theology and pastoral care are inextricably linked, transcending an intellectualist ethical approach that is separated from faith on one side and a magisterial message that is disconnected from history on the other.

On the other hand, theology has the task of inquiring and reflecting critically on these teachings, in dialogue with other disciplines and taking into account the complexity of the issues at stake, in order to enhance reflection. Theology is neither a substitute for the magisterium, nor should it restrict itself to reiterating official declarations. Acknowledging the dynamic nature of the ecclesial tradition and the significance of doctrinal advancements in moral issues is vital to rediscovering a new appreciation for the conversation between theology and magisterium. How are we to remain true to the origins and the doctrinal pronouncements, while also remaining attuned to the present-day challenges, avoiding mechanically repeating abstract formulas? The gospel of life is not simply a statement about life or a rigid normative system that is set in stone, but rather an encounter with the ineffable mystery of its divine origin. The Christian tradition exists in the tension between two fundamental elements that sustain its self-awareness: the Christ event, which is conveyed through Scripture and tradition, and the complexities and cultural expectations of modern society, to which it endeavors to respond. Benedict XVI beautifully characterized this tradition as a "living river that links us to the origins, the living river in which the origins are ever present".



The TB suggests in this regard that “the life of faith *explains itself, thinks itself, it makes itself intelligent*” (TB 5, emphasis in original). In sum, this chapter acknowledges that the tension between magisterium and theology can be fruitful (“virtuous circle” – TB 73), as long as it is carried out in a spirit of mutual respect and collaboration. The whole book demonstrates a significant effort to foster this virtuous cycle.

*Testo Base* 85 discusses the rationalism and naturalistic physicalism present in the argumentation of traditional moral theology, as highlighted by recent theological-moral criticisms, e.g. personalist morals. This approach limits the understanding of the moral norm and the role of conscience to the morality of individual actions. The TB suggests that a more person-centered approach, such as that proposed by the Second Vatican Council, demands a broader understanding of the moral act. Post-conciliar magisterial documents on bioethics, such as *Evangelium vitae*, emphasize the contextualization of normative indications within sociocultural and theological contexts without renouncing the affirmation of absolute precepts, based on the prohibition of direct attack against innocent life. *Evangelium vitae* vigorously reaffirms the total prohibition of direct abortion (EV 62) and euthanasia (EV 65). Despite the continued emphasis on the normative dimension in *Evangelium vitae*, there is a noticeable increase in the consideration of the existential and sociocultural contexts of human action and its moral responsibility. The teachings of Pope Francis, on the other hand, stress the integration of norms into the decision-making process of the individual person, promoting the importance of practical discernment carried out by conscience. This virtuous circularity between conscience and the norm enables a deeper understanding of the moral norm, moving beyond a rigid distinction between the objectivity of the norm and the subjectivity of conscience. Consequently, moral discernment must consider the complexity of the moral act, and not rely solely on a mechanical application of rules in particular circumstances.<sup>6</sup> It is necessary to undertake the challenging task of discernment, which involves considering the individual’s circumstances and their social environment.

The discussant for chapter four is Angel Rodríguez Luño (Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome). Pierdavide Guenzi (John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for the Study of Marriage and the Family, Rome) responds to Angel Rodríguez Luño’s remarks.

6 See INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *In Search of Universal Ethics: A New Look at Natural Law*, 2009, 59: “Natural law could not be presented as an already established set of rules that impose themselves a priori on the moral subject; rather, it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions.” This text is also quoted in AL 305 which adds: “For this reason, a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in ‘irregular’ situations, as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church’s teachings, ‘sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families’.”

Chapter five delves further into the topics introduced in chapter four, which focus on conscience, moral norms, and discernment. The relationship between theological anthropology and ethics is particularly significant. If we adhere to the “personalist” conception of the human being, as found in Vatican II documents and the post-conciliar magisterium (for instance, John Paul II’s emphasis on a principle of anthropological development within Christian theology), moral life cannot be reduced to mere compliance with obligations imposed by an impersonal and predetermined order, as implied by the naturalistic paradigm. Notably, the TB does not adopt the concept of natural law as the theoretical foundation for normative expression, a stance that has been critically examined by some of the contributions in the seminar. We will revisit this issue later, particularly the relationship between conscience and law.

The ethical vision of Vatican II is not only personalist, but also Christocentric and ecclesiocentric. Christian morality, in essence, is a response to the call of Jesus Christ. The *Sequela Christi* serves as the guiding principle of Christian morality. Answering Christ’s call requires a commitment that cannot be achieved alone. Instead, one lives in community, walks alongside others in a communal and inter-subjective commitment. This does not imply that the truth of moral good stems from mere consensus. However, the social and historical context in which moral norms are established must be taken into account. Christian ethics is a faithful response to Christ’s call, manifested in the particularity of each historical moment. The exercise of freedom, an inherent aspect of human nature, always takes place within a historical context and in relation to others. The human person is an entity open to communion and attains fullness in love. Consequently, Christian morality is an ethics of otherness/alterity. In this regard, one of the participants challenges the notion of otherness and suggests using the term “neighborhood” as a more biblical alternative.

It is crucial to note that Christian autonomy should not be equated with the individualistic autonomy found in liberal culture. Rather, it is an autonomy-in-relation because persons cannot fully realize their potential in isolation. Human dignity is also inherently relational and expressed through service, particularly to the most vulnerable members of society, such as the poor, sick, and children who are always recognized as persons. Christian personalism, which is developed through various theoretical models, generally advocates for a relational understanding of freedom that is demonstrated through fraternity, service, and a preferential love for the vulnerable. In this chapter, it would have been beneficial to have a more in-depth discussion about the conception of freedom presented in *Veritatis splendor*.

The communal and relational view of the individual has consequences for how moral conscience is perceived. While conscience is considered the inviolable sanctuary in which an individual encounters God alone (see *Gaudium et spes*, 16), it is not an isolated entity. The person who is accountable to his/her conscience is also responsible for shaping it. Conscience formation occurs within a community, through the dialogue of consciences, and within a particular cultural context.



Examining the topic of conscience formation, it is crucial to clarify the interplay between conscience and the law or moral rules. The TB asserts that while laws and moral norms are essential, they alone cannot determine how to act in a specific situation. The law is incomplete without conscience. It is only the conscience of the moral agent that can formulate the precise rule for action. For instance, the decision regarding the number of children a couple can have is ultimately the responsibility of the couple before God, as mentioned in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (see GS 50; AL 222).

The limitations of the law in determining the good to be done in a particular situation have been identified by tradition. The first reason, according to Thomas Aquinas and reiterated by Francis in *Amoris laetitia*, is that, as one descends to the particular, the level of indeterminacy increases (AL 304).<sup>7</sup> Practical reason does not operate in a syllogistic-deductive mode, and it needs continuous confrontation with experience, taking into account the many changing circumstances that inevitably affect deliberation. The second reason for this limitation is the generality of the law, which is incapable of covering every possible particular situation that arises in reality (AL 304). The third reason is the competition or conflict between various goods and values at stake in each particular situation. Classic examples of this third reason include legitimate defense against unjust aggression, suspension of medical treatments that have become disproportionate in the particular situation of a patient, and responsible decision-making on paternity and maternity that a couple is called upon to make (TB 126-128; and again GS 50; AL 222).

Although these principles are not novel, the emphasis placed on them by Pope Francis's magisterium plays a significant role in revamping theological ethics of life. This approach moves away from the strictness that certain ecclesiastical discourses still endorse and diminishes the misrepresentation of Catholic morality that is often seen in social media, popular perception, and the media. Chapter V has a fundamental position in the overall architecture of the debate.

Discussants for this chapter are Sigrid Müller (University of Vienna) and William Murphy, Jr. (Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, Ohio) who offers an interesting comment on the vigorous debate in 2004 on the use of condoms to prevent disease. Alain Thomasset (Centre Sèvres – Facultés Jésumes de Paris) offers a short response to Müller and Murphy. In a very remarkable contribution, Sigrid Müller quotes first the late Eberhard Schockenhoff who describes two possible ways of reading *Amoris laetitia* and observes the following: “The pope is concerned with nothing less than the change from an objectivist

7 AL 304: “I earnestly ask that we always recall a teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas and learn to incorporate it in our pastoral discernment: ‘Although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects... In matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles; and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all... The principle will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail’.” See *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 94, art. 4.

moral doctrine based on a static metaphysics of essence to a Gospel-based, practical theology characterized by a greater relevance to life.”<sup>8</sup> The post-Vatican II debate in moral theology could be described as “the option for the preference for norms over conscience” and “the option for the preference for conscience over norms”. For Müller this is not the case of merely one option alongside another one. The personalist turn of Vatican II discarded the first option, but she remarks that the second option risks becoming subjectivist. However, this should not necessarily be the case:

if the “option for the preference of conscience over norms” refers to the full sense of moral conscience that includes objective elements of moral discernment, then it is no longer an “option for the preference of conscience over norms” but an “option for the preference of conscience”. Following such an interpretation, it is misleading to oppose norm and conscience to each other. (201)

She presents an excellent summary of the personalist turn of Vatican II, referring to Klaus Demmer’s *Sein und Gebot* (1971) and Bernhard Häring’s *Free and Faithful in Christ* (1978), resulting in an ethics of responsibility, taking as point of departure “the call by God” and “the response by the human person” (see René Simon, *Éthique de la responsabilité*, 1993). This turn to the person in theological anthropology emphasizes the importance of personal moral knowledge. Moreover, the transcendental freedom accentuates the personal responsibility for one’s actions: “By showing that God invites us to freely respond to his call and to take on the task to act responsibly, Christian anthropology shares personal freedom as the common basis for moral engagement.” (209) Finally, she presents conscience, moral discernment, and moral norms or values as constituents of a hermeneutic circle, understood as an ongoing reflection which takes into consideration a particular context, living experiences, circumstances, and new scientific insights. Taking persons seriously includes respect for a personal life history, a particular time and context as a result of the recognition that “the acceptance of the call to responsibility...is the most fundamental aspect of conscience, whereas due to complexity of many situations it is not always clear what in the specific case is objectively right or wrong” (213).

## Second Section

The second section of the collection (chapters VI-IX) deals with a series of practical challenges posed by contemporary ethical issues, such as artificial intelligence, human-machine interactions, new technologies such as genetic engineering, and end-of-life care. All these chapters are introduced with a large section

8 E. SCHOCKENHOFF: “Traditionsbruch oder notwendige Weiterbildung? Zwei Lesarten des Nachsynodalen Schreibens *Amoris Laetitia*”, in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 235 (2017), 148.

on “the great anthropological, ethical, and theological questions”, each with a different field of application.

Chapter six offers global perspectives on our “common home” (TB 134-146; 212-218), mainly summarizing *Laudato si’* on these points. Respondents are Gaël Giraud (Georgetown University & CNRS, Paris) who focuses on a reinterpretation of “dominion” and ecological conversion as mentioned in *Laudato si’*. The second discussant is Marie-Jo Thiel (Strasbourg) who focuses on the often forgotten aspect in theology of human-animal relationships (TB 212f). TB 138 recognizes that all living things – because they are created – have intrinsic dignity but leaves open difficult questions, e.g. what kind of dignity? Is it a matter of protecting dignity through legislation like the Swiss? Promoting animal welfare is a clear objective, but there are different views on animal welfare as is well-known in animal ethics literature. There are far more questions than answers!

Chapter seven, entitled “The Origin of Life and Sexuality: A Theological Approach”, discusses three fundamental aspects of human existence: being born, loving, and generating. Archbishop Carlos Castillo Mattasoglio (Lima) is the discussant, and Maurizio Chiodi (John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for the Study of Marriage and the Family, Rome) responds. Recent cultural changes have brought about a significant contrast between Christian beliefs about marriage, family, parenthood, and sexuality and the way things are perceived in cultural life and secular ethics. Some of the magisterial positions have even become highly controversial topics within the field of theological ethics. In the ecclesial domain, the magisterium has repeatedly intervened in matters concerning responsible procreation since the Second Vatican Council. Notably, *Humanae vitae*’s (HV) teachings emphasize the inseparability of the unitive and procreative aspects of married sexuality and the illegality of artificial contraceptive means. Accordingly, any conjugal sexual act must be open to the transmission of life. In line with this, the instruction *Donum vitae* (DV) states that the transmission of life is only morally permissible when resulting from the sexual union between spouses.

*Humanae vitae* establishes an inherent connection between sexuality, conjugal love, and generation. In a personalist framework, the human sexual act has multifaceted meanings that cannot be reduced to its physiological or procreational dimensions alone. The sexual act involves a mutual exchange of gifts, which could result in the generation, not creation, of a third party distinct from the parents (see TB 171). TB 172 states:

Responsibility in procreation demands a practical discernment that cannot merely be the automatic application and the material observation of a norm; and this is obvious in the practice of natural methods. There are, as a matter of fact, practical conditions and circumstances that would make the choice to procreate irresponsible; the ecclesiastical magisterium itself recognizes this, when it admits the use of “natural methods”. Accordingly, in these methods, which themselves make use of specific techniques and scientific knowledge, there are situations in which two spouses, who have decided or who will decide to welcome children, can carry out a prudent discernment in the concrete case, which,

without contradicting their openness to life, does not envisage this openness at that particular moment. The wise choice will be made with an opportune evaluation of all the possible techniques, with reference to their specific situation, and obviously excluding abortive techniques. These choices are very far from the “contraceptive mentality” that is antinatalist and is rightly criticized by *Humanae vitae* and *Familiaris consortio*. In the perspective that we have outlined, the alternative between “natural” and “artificial” methods is overcome: the radical question comes into play in the concretely possible forms of a generous and no less demanding responsibility vis-à-vis the gift of generating life.

I am of the opinion that the Pontifical Academy for Life and other theologians are operating with a new moral paradigm which is called by Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia* “new pastoral methods” that “respect both the Church’s teaching and local problems and needs”. He seems to defend the priority of the moral subject and her/his conscience in line with *Gaudium et spes*. In *Amoris laetitia* he mentions that the church has “been called to form consciences, not to replace them”. While natural means are still the only morally acceptable form of fertility regulation allowed by official church teaching, he clearly indicates in *Amoris laetitia* that the married couples themselves must ultimately decide in conscience, before God. Indeed, the cornerstones for a Christian personalist anthropology are responsible parenthood and respect for the inviolability of a well-formed conscience. Moreover, the vast majority of Catholic couples consider these points as their compass. Nowhere does Pope Francis mention that *Humanae vitae*’s condemnation of artificial contraception should be considered as infallible teaching.

Since *Humanae vitae* has not explicitly declared a doctrine *ex cathedra* by Paul VI and therefore could not be considered as an extraordinary exercise of papal infallibility, the question is whether it could be declared an infallible teaching of the ordinary and universal magisterium.<sup>9</sup> Such infallibility occurs according to *Lumen gentium* (25) when bishops, “even though dispersed throughout the world but preserving for all that amongst themselves and with Peter’s successor [the pope] the bond of communion, in their authoritative teaching concerning matters of faith and morals, they are in agreement that a particular teaching is to be held definitively and absolutely”. Despite attempts to do so, it has never been declared nor considered infallible teaching. There are of course very good reasons for this. Remarkably, the majority of the commission members on birth control, established by John XXIII and confirmed by Paul VI, disagreed with the claim that artificial contraception is *intrinsece malum* and approved the use of it to regulate fertility in particular contexts and circumstances. Since Paul VI was unconvinced by the arguments of the majority, he adopted the stance of the minority in *Humanae vitae*: “each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life”. The majority defended a personalist view on marriage: marriage itself, but not each and every marital act, should be open to the generation of life. In personalist

9 T.A. SALZMAN/M.G. LAWLER: “Conservative Defense of *Humanae Vitae* is not Just about Contraception”, in: *National Catholic Reporter* (6 February 2023).

morals, marriage is first of all an interpersonal union wherein sexual intercourse is situated as contributing to and strengthening the love relationship of a couple. Openness to children is important in a Christian marriage but of course not the only goal of sexual intercourse.

For many married people, sexual intercourse has no procreative meaning but has relational value. This is not only the case for post-menopausal and infertile couples but also for many fertile couples who already have three or five children and could not afford to have more children because that would be considered irresponsible. A deeper understanding of responsible parenthood will help magisterial teaching surpass its natural law model of marriage and act-focused view of sexual intercourse. This debate is also important in reevaluating homosexual intercourse within stable relationships. The church recognizes that gays and lesbians are naturally sexed human beings but still refuses to recognize the positive value of sexual intercourse from a relational viewpoint. In my opinion, same-sex couples have the right to cherish their personal unions and could be as open to the generation of new life as infertile heterosexual couples who cannot realize their desire to become biological parents.

From a personalist viewpoint the magisterial teachings contradict scientific and experiential facts. The moral argument in favor of the inseparability principle with regard to sexual intercourse is not defensible and, as a consequence, the reasons to prohibit contraceptives are not only crumbling but must be considered as opposing a personalist Christian view on marriage and what it means to be married.

From the previous discussion, it is possible to also distinguish the ethical implications of different medically assisted procreation (PMA) techniques, even if not all PMA applications can be evaluated in the same way.<sup>10</sup>

The *Testo Base* unequivocally expresses a negative ethical viewpoint regarding heterologous PMA. According to this perspective, gamete donors are restricted to providing merely the “biological material”, thereby negating the symbolic significance of parenthood. In instances where a couple “requests” gametes, and one of them is genetically related to the child, the child is not conceived through the personal and mutual commitment of the parents. This genetic discrepancy can lead to an imbalanced relationship, which is even more severe in surrogate motherhood cases. Heterologous PMA and surrogate motherhood reduce one’s body to a mere biological object, thereby voiding relationships of their practical and symbolic implications in the name of a purported absoluteness of the desire to have a child (see TB 173).

The evaluation of homologous PMA is more contentious in cases where it does not involve the creation of excess embryos. This technique does not artificially separate generation from the sexual relationship because the latter is inherently infertile. Rather, the procedure involves an intervention that allows for the treat-

---

10 J.J. FERRER: “Rileggere l’etica teologica della vita: Alla luce delle sollecitazioni di papa Francesco”, in: *La Civiltà Cattolica* 4129/3 (2022), 60-71, available at [www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/rileggere-letica-teologica-della-vita](http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/rileggere-letica-teologica-della-vita).

ment of infertility without replacing the relationship but enabling the possibility of procreation. In a personalist view of marriage, one suggests that a couple that seeks homologous PMA is fulfilling what their sexual relationship alone cannot achieve, which is a very positive good. This means that from a personalist viewpoint, medical technology cannot be categorically and a priori dismissed, but must be examined from the perspective of responsible parenthood which ensures that it also conforms to the principles of care for the individual.

This flexible evaluation of PMA, rooted in a more comprehensive anthropological understanding of the connection between sexuality, marriage, and procreation, raises a compelling point when viewed as a “therapeutic” intervention that enables infertile couples to fulfill their marital relationship responsibly by becoming parents and sharing their love with a new life.

In addition to being in conflict with the wording of DV, albeit viewing homologous PMA as less negative than heterologous PMA, it is worth questioning whether this approach is not somewhat naïve given the current commodification of PMA. Additionally, it may not be as easy as assumed to carry out the so-called “simple case” – utilizing the couple’s gametes and not generating excess embryos – at least in the way PMA services are presently organized in many countries. Moreover, does not in vitro fertilization unavoidably expose the human embryo to the dangers of any laboratory process, such as errors and accidents? One of the arguments that raises ethical objections to laboratory fertilization emphatically endorses the permissibility of intra-corporeal fertilization techniques, which is often insufficiently examined.

Chapter eight explores the profound anthropological, ethical, and theological inquiries about “Suffering and Life ‘Put to the Test’” by transitioning from the beginning to the end of life. Through an extensive examination of scripture, phenomenology, and *Salvifici doloris*, this chapter provides a compelling reflection on how we can reimagine the joy and blessings of life in the face of pain, suffering, and illness, particularly in the context of modern end-of-life healthcare. The discussant is Richard-Nazzareno Farrugia (University of Malta) and Roberto Dell’Oro offers a response (Bioethics Institute, Loyola Marymount University). Dell’Oro refers to William Desmond who sees a dialectic between the “effort to be” (*conatus*) and a more original “porosity to being that signals our undergoing life” which is presented as the “passion of being” (*passio*) (349). The ontological primacy of *passio* over *conatus* introduces us to the suffering of others and in the sharing of that suffering (*com-passio*).

Chapter nine explores the ethical, theological, and anthropological questions concerning “The Various Ages of Life and the Joy of the Life that is Offered”. Significantly, this chapter places aging issues in the context of an entire lifespan, examining topics such as time and its constraints and the way personal identity changes from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood, and finally to old age. One notable feature of this section is the creative use of scripture. The discussant is Théophile Akoha (Cames University & the African Section of the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute in Cotonou, Benin). Bishop Noël Simard (Valleyfield) concludes by providing a response on the whole of section two.



### *Third Section*

The third and final section of the book (chapters X-XII) focuses on the themes of death, the fulfillment of life, caring for the dying and eschatology.

While the previous chapter deals with suffering and aging, chapter ten addresses end-of-life concerns, such as palliative care, prudent decision-making at this stage, as well as the topics of hydration and medically-assisted nourishment, assisted-suicide, and euthanasia. Discussants are Chris Gastmans (Centre for Biomedical Ethics and Law, KU Leuven) and Pablo Requena Meana (Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome). Carlo Casalone (Pontifical Academy for Life) offers responses to the two discussants. Gastmans presents cornerstones of a foundational ethical framework to assess end-of-life practices: lived experiences of vulnerability, interpretative dialogue, and normative standards. A crucial point for him is to consider end-of-life-care as dignity-enhancing care; its goal is “promotion of the wellbeing (the good) of the dying person by providing good care” in the broadest sense of the word. Since dying persons are very vulnerable, the reciprocal relationship between a team of caregivers and a unique patient is key for the quality of the end-of-life care. Within this relational context, care goals and proportional means with regard to pain management, withholding or withdrawing life sustaining treatment, are defined. A means is “adequate” “if is appropriate – i.e. if it is in harmony with the normative fundamental options of all those concerned with the caring process and with the generally accepted ultimate goal” (415).

Chapter eleven examines “Ethical Challenges and Themes Emerging in the Present Epoch”. These include new digital technologies, the collaboration between humans, machines, and robots, screening and perinatal diagnoses, vaccines for personal health and community protection, individualized medicine, public health, allocation of health resources, and the role of theologians in public debates. Laura Palazzani, Vice President of the National Italian Committee for Bioethics (Free University Maria Santissima Assunta, Rome), serves as the discussant.

The volume concludes with a reflection on eschatology, the horizon that gives meaning to human life and is indispensable for theological reflection on life (chapter twelve: “Eschatology and the Drama of Life”). The eschatological horizon, disclosed by revelation, is crucial for a proper understanding of human life and its meaning, and is in the opinion of Paglia unfortunately rarely present in Christian preaching today. It returns to the initial contemplation and attentiveness to the specific and universal, the present and historical, the finite and infinite. Two discussants offer their reflections on this eschatological perspective: Luis Antonio G. Cardinal Tagle (Dicastery for Evangelization) and Andrea Bozzolo (Pontifical Salesian University, Rome).

### *Some Concluding Remarks*

In any event, we believe it is justifiable to present this new interpretation with the *questiones disputatae* style, which pervades this collection, without necessarily endorsing its specific stances. Addressing emerging and contested topics is crucial to the advancement of theology, especially theological bioethics, which must constantly engage in dialogue with the evolving realities of human existence. The *questiones disputatae* approach does not aim to replace the authoritative magisterium but rather to explore new perspectives that are subject to the ultimate judgment of the shepherds, particularly the magisterium of the Roman Pontiff.

Overall, *Etica teologica della vita: Scrittura, tradizione, sfide pratiche*, is an outstanding volume that offers a rich and nuanced exploration of the theological ethics of life. Many essays are engaging and thought-provoking. The volume presents a significant contribution to the reinvigoration of theological bioethics, informed by the fruitful exchange with Pope Francis's teachings. Of particular importance is Francis's emphasis on the role of discernment and the formed conscience of the moral agent, alongside his vision of a synodal and dialoguing church as a kind of field hospital. The volume, in line with Francis's magisterium, proposes an intriguing attempt to envision a course that fosters a renewal of bioethics and centers on discernment and the educated conscience of the human person as a moral agent. These elements play a crucial role in contentious matters like those directly relevant to the morality of life. The intention is clear: moving beyond polarization.

The volume under discussion offers the valuable contribution of integrating multiple voices with different theological orientations, which is necessary in taking synodality seriously. Therefore, dialogue is an internal demand of theological reflection, an intellectual imperative rather than a mere concession to goodwill. *Etica teologica della vita* is a testament to the creativity and importance of intra-ecclesial dialogue, particularly on contentious issues that may overlook the essential dimensions required for their more thoughtful expression. However, there is a deficit regarding the lack of inclusion of the voices of theologians from the peripheries, which Pope Francis has emphasized as essential. *Theological Ethics of Life* is influenced by a European perspective, which mainly dialogues with the philosophical traditions of the continent. While the text undoubtedly has other limitations, some have been pointed out while others have been left unanswered. For instance, it would have been desirable to delve deeper into virtue ethics and to not address the issue of violence in a volume on bioethics.

This text of the Pontifical Academy of Life provides a starting point for further discussion and an exploration of a more consistent theological ethics of life. Its goal is to render a service to the Magisterium by opening up a space for dialogue that encourages further research. This is how Archbishop Paglia describes the role of the Academy. To remain relevant, the church's magisterium and moral theology must continually delve deeper into the gospel message and respond to the challenges of each historical moment, serving the people of God and the

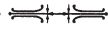
evangelizing missions of the church. Regional meetings could facilitate analysis and development of the ideas presented in this volume, taking into account the richness of tradition and other cultural contexts. These meetings could contribute to synodally preparing for a future magisterial intervention that would deepen the church's teaching on the ethics of life. In this regard, Pope Francis frequently refers to Vincent of Lérins who, under the pseudonym of Peregrinus in his *Commonitorium* (434), wrote: "What all men have at all times and everywhere believed must be regarded as true." The principle must be understood in a relative and disjunctive sense, and not absolutely. By uniting the three criteria in one: *ubique, semper, ab omnibus*, the pope sees doctrine as "consolidated over time, it expands and consolidates, and becomes always more solid, but always progressing. That is why the duty of theologians is research, theological reflection, you cannot do theology with a 'no' in front of it. Then it is up to the Magisterium to say no, you've gone too far, come back, but theological development must be open, that's what theologians are for."<sup>11</sup> In *Veritatis gaudium* (3) the pope describes the role of theologians: "The theologian who is satisfied with his complete and conclusive thought is mediocre. The good theologian has an open, that is, an incomplete thought, always open to the *maius* of God and of the truth, always in development, according to the law that Saint Vincent of Lérins described in these words: *annis consolidetur, dilatetur tempore, sublimetur aetate*."<sup>12</sup>

Saint John Paul II's *Evangelium vitae* was published over 25 years ago, and it remains to be seen if Pope Francis will leave us a new encyclical or an apostolic exhortation on bioethics, perhaps entitled *Gaudium vitae* (a suggestion of Jorge José Ferrer). So, the perspective of the Pontifical Academy of Life was to render a service to the Magisterium by opening up a space for dialogue that makes research possible and encourages it. Just like the medieval disputations, the intention is not to presume to supplant the authentic Magisterium but to open new horizons of reflection and research, as a service to its specific and authoritative discernment. This a process that reflects the synodal climate in which Pope Francis wishes the church to operate. This synodal process was strengthened during the workshop by Cardinals Mario Grech and Marcello Semeraro who presided at and preached during the Eucharistic celebrations. Their texts are also collected in the volume. *Etica teologica della vita* should be considered as an invitation to the wider theological community to participate in a collective discourse, and to collaborate in formulating an ethical and theological framework that is inspired by the gospel and imbued with the celebration of life.

JOHAN DE TAVERNIER

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Claire Giangrave (*Religion News Service*) on 30 June 2022 (during the pope's flight to Canada), available at [www.academyforlife.va/content/dam/pav/documenti%20pdf/2022/Etica%20Teologica/Papa%20aereo%2030%20luglio%202022/Papa\\_AEREO\\_ENG\\_30072022.pdf](http://www.academyforlife.va/content/dam/pav/documenti%20pdf/2022/Etica%20Teologica/Papa%20aereo%2030%20luglio%202022/Papa_AEREO_ENG_30072022.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> See also TB 6.



Johan De Tavernier (Roeselare, Belgium, 1957) is emeritus professor of theological ethics with formal duties in the Research Unit Theological and Comparative Ethics at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, where he co-holds the INTAMS Chair for the Study of Marriage & Spirituality. He was Dean of the Faculty from 2018 until 2022 and served many years as Vice-Dean for Education and International Affairs. His research interests are in Christian Ethics, Social Ethics, Environmental Ethics, Peace Ethics, and Global Development.