



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO MEMBERS OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE**

*Clementine Hall*

*Saturday, 13 February 2010*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,  
Distinguished Members of the Pontificia Academia Pro Vita,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am pleased to welcome you and to offer you a cordial greeting on the occasion of the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life. It is called to reflect on themes pertaining to the relationship between bioethics and the natural moral law which, because of the constant developments in this branch of science, appear ever more important in the context of our day. I address a special greeting to Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of this Academy, and I thank him for his courteous words on behalf of those present. I likewise wish to extend my personal thanks to each one of you for the invaluable and irreplaceable commitment you devote to life in your various fields.

The problems that gravitate around the theme of bioethics demonstrate the priority given to the *anthropological issue* in the questions put to you. As I said in my latest Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*: "A particularly crucial battleground in today's struggle between the supremacy of technology and human moral responsibility is the field of *bioethics*, where the very possibility of integral human development is radically called into question. In this most delicate and critical area, the fundamental question asserts itself forcefully: is man the product of his own labours or does he depend on God? "Scientific discoveries in this field and the possibilities of technological intervention seem so advanced as to force a choice between two types of reasoning: reason open to transcendence or reason closed within immanence" (n. 74). In the face of such questions that touch so decisively on human life in its perennial tension between immanence and transcendence and that have immense importance for the culture of the future generations, it is necessary to set up an integral pedagogical project that allows these topics to be treated in a positive, balanced

and constructive perspective, especially regarding the relationship between faith and reason.

Bioethical issues often bring to the fore the reference to the dignity of the person. This is a fundamental principle which faith in the Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ has always defended, especially when, in respect of the simplest and most defenceless people, it is disregarded. God loves each human being uniquely and profoundly. Bioethics moreover, like every discipline, needs a reference that can guarantee a consistent reading of ethical issues that inevitably emerge in the face of the disputes that may arise from their interpretation. In this sphere the normative reference to the natural moral law comes into its own. Indeed, the recognition of human dignity as an inalienable right is founded primarily on this law, which is not written by a human hand but is engraved in human hearts by God the Creator. Every juridical order is required to recognize this law as inviolable and every individual is called to respect and promote it (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1954-1960). Without the founding principle of human dignity the search for a source for the rights of the person would be arduous, and it would be impossible to reach an ethical judgement on the scientific breakthroughs that intervene directly in human life. It is necessary, therefore, to repeat firmly that there can be no understanding of human dignity as linked merely to external elements, such as scientific progress, graduality in the formation of human life or facile pietism in the face of limited situations. When respect for the dignity of the person is invoked, it is fundamental that it should be full, total and without restrictions other than those entailed in the recognition that it is always human life that is involved. Human life, of course, experiences its own development and the horizon of scientific and bioethical research is open; yet it is necessary to reassert that when it is a matter of contexts that concern the human being, scientists can never think that they are merely dealing with inanimate and manipulable matter. In fact, from the very first instant of the human being's life is characterized by the fact that it is *human life* and for this reason possesses its own dignity everywhere and in spite of all (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Personae* on Certain Bioethical Questions, n. 5). Otherwise, we should always be threatened by the risk of an exploitative use of science, with the inevitable consequence of slipping into arbitrary decisions, discrimination and the financial interest of the strongest.

Combining bioethics and the natural moral law makes it possible to ensure as best we can the necessary and unavoidable reference to that dignity which human life intrinsically possesses from its first moment until its natural end. On the contrary, in today's context, despite the increasing reference to the rights that guarantee the person's dignity, it is clear that recognition of these rights is not always applied to human life in its natural development or in its weakest stages. A similar contradiction demands that a commitment be assumed in the various social and cultural contexts to see that human life is recognized everywhere as an inalienable subject of law, and never as an object subjected to the arbitrary will of the strongest. History has shown how dangerous and harmful a State can be that proceeds to legislate on issues which affect the person and society, even claiming to be the source and principle of ethics. Without the universal principles that permit the verification of a common denominator for all humanity, the risk of drifting into relativism in the

area of legislation should not be underestimated (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1959). The natural moral law, strong in its universal character, makes it possible to ward off this danger and, above all, offers the legislator a guarantee for the authentic respect of both the person and the entire order of creatures. It is, as it were, a catalyzing source of consensus between people of different cultures and religions and permits them to overcome differences. This is because it asserts the existence of an order impressed within nature by the Creator and recognized as an instance of true rational ethical judgement in order to pursue good and avoid evil. Natural moral law "belongs to the great heritage of human wisdom. Revelation, with its light, has contributed to further purifying and developing it" (Pope John Paul II, *Address to participants in the Bi-Annual Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 6 February 2004).

Distinguished Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, in the contemporary context your commitment appears to be ever more delicate and difficult, but the increasing sensitivity to human life is an encouragement to continue with ever greater dynamism and courage in this important service to life and to teaching the future generations the Gospel values. I hope you will all persevere in your study and research, so that the work of promoting and defending life may be more and more effective and fruitful. I accompany you with the Apostolic Blessing, which I gladly extend to all who share with you in this daily commitment.

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