

INTERVIEW / AUDE DUGAST

Lejeune's lesson, abortion is the defeat of medicine

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Two days after Holy Easter, 3 April, marks the 30th anniversary of the death of Jérôme Lejeune (1926-1994). The heroic virtues of this great French geneticist and paediatrician have already been recognised by the Church. In celebration of this anniversary, a two-

day international conference entitled 'Jérôme Lejeune and the Challenges of Bioethics in the 21st Century' will be held in Rome on 17 and 18 May. Starting from Lejeune's thought, the conference will discuss some of the achievements (for better and for worse) of modern medicine, the main ethical aspects of genetics, biotechnology and neuroscience, from prenatal diagnosis to embryos with 'three parents', from hormone treatments for gender dysphoria to transhumanism.

The range of speakers is wide and of elevated status, including bioethicists, university lecturers, philosophers, jurists, doctors and researchers. A multidisciplinary discussion, but one 'united' by Lejeune's scientific and moral legacy. The *Daily Compass* interviewed philosopher Aude Dugast, postulator of Lejeune's cause for canonisation and one of the organisers of the congress.

Professor Dugast, let's start with the general theme of the conference: why is it important to rediscover the thought of Jérôme Lejeune in order to face the challenges of bioethics in the 21st century?

Because Lejeune was a great scientist, a Catholic, with a truly prophetic look at science and medicine. This prophetic outlook came to him from the highest level of science, from an academic excellence that was recognised throughout the world, and from a great love for patients and their families. When we read his lectures, his articles, you can see that he seems to be talking about today. For example, when he spoke about euthanasia 40 years ago, he seems to be describing what is happening today in France and in the world, in the media, in politics, in medicine. He understood, before anyone else, the collapse of medicine and society. He said: 'Abortion is the interruption of a life that is disturbing. Age has nothing to do with it. The elderly are just as much at risk as the young'. He started from a discourse of reason, comprehensible to all: he started from the Hippocratic Oath, thus 400 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, arguing that all doctors, believers and non-believers alike, are bound by this Oath, which prevents delivering death.

Recently, the French Parliament enshrined the right to abortion in the Constitution and there is a risk that other countries will follow suit. Lejeune was a staunch opponent of abortion. How much does it hurt a figure like him missing France and the world?

After the Veil Law vote, a journalist asked Lejeune if this was his defeat. He replied: 'It is not my defeat, it is the defeat of the children of France. He was deeply saddened because it was a very concrete thing, which would lead to the death of millions of children. It was a very embodied and concrete pain. But he did not give up, he called for

action. And he said: 'The right to life is not given by governments. Government's therefore do not have the power to take this right away from anyone. For civilisation to continue to exist, politics will necessarily have to conform to morality: to the morality that transcends all ideologies because it is written within us by the impenetrable decree that governs both the laws of the universe and the nature of human beings'.

Lejeune discovered the cause of Down syndrome. What did this man and paediatrician signify for children with this syndrome and their parents?

This discovery was revolutionary: the world's first discovery of a disease with a chromosomal cause, a giant step forward for genetics. In fact, Lejeune has been called 'the father of modern genetics'. But the most important revolution was human: a total change for families. Lejeune wanted to change the name of this disease, he called it Trisomy 21, to leave behind the stigma and false ideas that accompanied Mongolism, as it was called before. It was thought to be contagious or 'God's revenge' for the sins of the parents. Thus, families not only had a child with a disability, but the added pressure of society which looked down on them. Thanks to Lejeune, the way many parents looked at their children totally changed, and also that of society. I had so many testimonies from parents, from brothers and sisters who lived through this and who told me that it changed everything, that they went from a sense of shame to hope, thanks to Professor Lejeune who loved their children with Down Syndrome immensely. They were struck by the way he looked at their child, with unconditional love. With his approach, he also enabled the parents to learn to love their children. So much so that on the day of his funeral at Notre-Dame, a young man with Down's Syndrome, Bruno, walked through Paris Cathedral to take the microphone and tell the 2,000 people present: 'Thank you, Professor Lejeune, for what you have done for me. Thanks to you, I am proud of myself'.

What progress have been made in treatments thanks to Lejeune's studies?

The Jérôme Lejeune Foundation was created exactly to collect his scientific and cultural legacy. In Paris alone we now have an outpatient clinic with 12,000 patients, the largest clinic in Europe for these patients. We also opened one in Spain and another in Argentina. And to follow in Lejeune's footsteps, we also do research: clinical research with patients and fundamental research, so we work with many laboratories around the world, which, thanks to our help financially, have started working on Trisomy 21 again.

Genetics is progressing rapidly, but not always in a truly human sense. What did Lejeune think of prenatal tests performed with the aim of eliminating 'imperfect' children?

This elimination of imperfect children was heartbreaking for him, because his discovery and research was meant to be at the service of children, to try to cure them; instead there were those who used it against them. He used to say that 'chromosomal racism is as horrible as all forms of racism' and again that 'medicine for abortion, is abortion of medicine'. When some people asked him "but why don't you do prenatal tests?", he would say that a prenatal test to help the family welcome a different child is all very well, but he knew that unfortunately in most cases this welcome did not take place. And it does not happen.

Regarding the link Lejeune made between science and faith, you spoke of the 'sanctity of intelligence'. Why?

In studying Lejeune's cause for canonisation, I was struck by this sanctity of intelligence. Faith is the virtue of intelligence that is attached to truth. And we really see this in Lejeune because he always remained faithful to the truth. He always understood that there is no contradiction between faith and science, because faith gives us revealed truth and science makes us understand how the world works: the world created by the Creator; true science cannot give us different conclusions about what God has done. When there seems to be a difference between the conclusions of science and those of faith, he would say that then we have to look more scientifically because surely there is something we are missing, that we have not understood well. And when his intelligence showed him the road to follow, even if it was a steep one, how to publicly defend the lives of his patients and risk violent attacks, he was not afraid: he followed it. He heroically defended the truth of medicine. Truth, combined with charity, was his compass. And his example worked miracles.

What do you mean by miracles?

Yes, in the sense of conversions. I know of at least two examples of doctors who, after hearing one of his speeches, converted and changed their lives, leaving behind practices such as abortion and artificial insemination.

The link between St John Paul II and Lejeune will also be discussed at the conference. Pope Wojtyła held Lejeune in high esteem. If you had to recall one aspect of this esteem, which one would you emphasise?

There was a very deep friendship and spiritual communion. Lejeune did not call himself a friend of the Holy Father because he was too humble. Instead, John Paul II said that he considered Lejeune a great friend. In fact, every time Lejeune went to Rome, John Paul II invited him to go to a private Mass at the Vatican. The Holy Father also asked him to establish the Pontifical Academy for Life, for which Lejeune wrote the statutes and the

Declaration of the 'Servants of Life', which bound every new member. And then, in 1994, the Pope appointed him the first president of the Academy, which Lejeune could only lead for 33 days, because on Easter morning of that year, it was 3 April, he rendered his soul to God.

To whom is your conference ideally addressed?

It is open to everyone: researchers, doctors, scientists, philosophers, jurists, teachers and in general to all those, such as young people, who seek to have clear ideas about all the challenges of bioethics today.

To download the full conference programme, [click here](#). For registration, please register at <https://internationalbioethicscongress.org/it/>