

PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE

Vatican Revolution: yes to euthanasia and artificial insemination

ECCLESIA

18_03_2024



**Tommaso
Scandroglio**



La gioia della vita (The Joy of Life) is a text, published last month, and "the fruit of the common reflection of a qualified group of theologians who met on the initiative of the Pontifical Academy for Life", as the cover page states. A text born as a basis for the work

of the seminar of the Pontifical Academy for Life (Pav) in 2021 and now published to celebrate the upcoming 30th anniversary of *Evangelium vitae* (not the 25th as Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia, president of Pav, writes). The errors in this text are so numerous and grave that the volume *Joy of Life* certainly cannot be considered celebratory of John Paul II's work.

For reasons of space, we must focus on only a few issues, and even then only partially. The first: euthanasia. To prohibit or not to prohibit? The text states that it is good not to prohibit because "greater harm could result to the public good and civil coexistence, amplifying conflict or favouring clandestine forms of officially illegal practices" (p. 150). But Thomas Aquinas, often misquoted in this volume but not in this case, says: "[Those vices] harmful to others, without the prohibition of which human society cannot subsist, such as murder, theft and the like, are prohibited" (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 96, a. 2 c.).

Euthanasia is murder and therefore as such must always be prohibited even if, by hypothesis, such a prohibition would increase civil strife and foment clandestine euthanasia (as a side note: all murders are clandestine) because without the prohibition the common good would be destroyed. What happens if euthanasia is legitimised? "It has the disadvantage of 'endorsing' and to some extent justifying an ethically controversial or rejected practice. [...] The question arises, however, whether criminal and civil liability - for example in the case of assisting suicide - could not be nuanced, within clearly established limits and at the conclusion of a cultural and political-institutional debate" (p. 151). It is not permissible to question the legitimacy of assisted suicide: the only morally valid option is its prohibition.

The interruption of nutrition, hydration, and assisted ventilation is also favoured, because such interventions aim to 'focus on the maintenance of functions of the organism, considered in isolation. The wholeness of the person and their overall good are thus lost sight of' (p. 173). But, assisted nutrition, hydration and ventilation, except in rare cases where they are disproportionate treatments, are necessary and dutiful life supports to be provided. Taking them away means, as the authors of the text argues, is killing the person so that he or she no longer suffers. This means euthanasia.

With regard to respecting the principle of proportionality in treatments in order not to fall into **treatments beyond reason**, it is stated that the patient always has the final say in deciding on the proportion of treatment (cf. pp. 85, 148-149, 172). This may be true in some cases, e.g. with regard to analgic therapies, but it is not always true as the text tries to argue; because the patient, even if informed, may err in his assessment

of proportionality, for example by refraining from having a gangrenous arm amputated which would save his life because he himself considers the intervention disproportionate. Finally, absolute favour is expressed for advance treatment declarations, (see p. 149).

The positions in favour of euthanasia expressed here are obviously contrary to the content of *Evangelium vitae*, the text which is supposed to be celebrated by these pages.

In open contradiction with the writings of John Paul II and with the entire moral doctrine of the Catholic Church on the subject is also the unreserved openness to artificial fertilisation, even if homologous: 'In homologous assisted procreation in its various forms [...] generation is not artificially separated from sexual intercourse, because this "is in itself" infertile. On the contrary, the technique acts as a form of therapy that makes it possible to remedy sterility, not by substituting itself for intercourse, but by permitting generation' (p. 130).

First of all, it should be specified that in the sexual relationship between husband and wife where one or both are sterile or the woman infertile, the relationship by its very nature remains fertile: it is essentially fertile and accidentally infertile due to pathology or surgery or age. Therefore it is not 'per se' infertile, as Pav writes. Secondly, even assuming - a fanciful hypothesis - that the retrieval of the oocyte and sperm takes place after sexual intercourse and then in vitro conception takes place, the unitive moment is separated from the procreative one, because the latter does not take place following sexual intercourse, but rather following the intervention of the laboratory technician. Here, medicine does not help to accomplish what is accomplished by its own virtue (as happens in artificial insemination where conception - the topical moment of the passage between being and non-being - takes place in the woman's body thanks to the mobility of the spermatozoa and not thanks to the intervention of another), but, contrary to what is written in *La gioia della vita* (The Joy of Life), medicine replaces an act and its natural development, which it is not licit to replace. Moreover, in artificial insemination, conception does not take place in the only place consonant with the dignity of the person, that is, in the woman's body, but outside of it.

These aberrant and non-Catholic positions in bioethics stem from an equally aberrant anthropological view. The starting point is the following: it celebrates 'the primacy of the experience of life and the believing life' (p. 13). The primacy is not in God but in experience, not in transcendence but in immanence. But what does 'experience' mean in anthropology? It means the ego that decides to make choices, acts. Then at the

centre of anthropology we find the ego that becomes an act, self-referential freedom, the ego coincides with the act in relation to other ego-acts, thus overturning the Catholic and other perspectives that see the person as an individual substance of a rational nature: 'A hermeneutics of the person in terms of freedom-in-relation represents a definitive overcoming of the traditional notion of the person as *rationalis naturae individua sostantia*. The person is not to be understood in the light of substantialist categories, but rather in terms of a historical process. [...] The shift from an interpretation of person in terms of substance to one in terms of act entails an awareness that the understanding of person ultimately implies a practical and not theoretically objectivising valence. [...] Human identity is not given once and for all, but has an original historical and narrative form' (p. 94).

The person as such is not given once and for all, but is constructed by oneself in choices in relation to others: 'The human being exists in the difference of relationship' (Ib.).

Under this anti-metaphysical angle because it is historicist, there is no longer the *esse*, but the *agere*: praxis and therefore existence win out over being. And this is why pastoral wins over doctrine, process over norm, will over intellect, history over geography, time over space (cf. Pope Francis *Evangelium Gaudium*, no. 222).

This anthropological perspective of a Fichtian matrix where the ego posits itself and absolutises it, where the person is self-founding - that is, constitutively composed of its actions, ontologically being in action - is logically wrong because first there is being and then there is action. It is the person that enables the act and the relationship, it is not the act and the relationship that ground the person, this is prior to choices and relationships.

If at the centre of anthropology we find the I-act in relation, it follows that at the centre of morality we will find a consciousness that chooses the act in relation to other consciousnesses and contingencies, an ethical subjectivism in perpetual dialogue. This is called the 'phenomenology of moral consciousness' (p. 19). And more analytically: 'the ethical injunction [...] belongs to human consciousness and cannot be reduced to an abstract law separated from experience, personal and cultural' (p. 17); 'there is a phenomenological access to normative language, because that is how moral claims are addressed. [...] The moral language of rules and norms is constitutively referred to the reality of human interaction and communication of ethical experiences and the notion of the human good' (p. 90); 'the standards of moral action are acquired historically, through a process of verification within a community whose experience becomes one of the points of reference for the doctrinal articulation of the magisterium itself' (pp. 91-92); 'the law [...] is the fruit of the dialogue of consciences. The relationship between

conscience and [moral] law must be thought of dialectically' (p. 96).

The result is as follows: 'Knowledge itself exercises an active and constitutive function in relation to truth' (p. 91). Thus, the cognitive act does not recognise truth, but creates it. Truth, even moral truth, is therefore no longer *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, where reality is prior to knowledge, but truth is a product posterior to cognitive activity in constant confrontation with others and context. The objective is undermined by the subjective (cf. p. 84).

In this sense, the first principles of natural law evaporate (cf. p. 93) and with them the intrinsically evil actions - which are never mentioned throughout the text - and make way for the particular norms produced by the conscience in dialectical confrontation with other experiences (cf. pp. 96-97), a conscience that no longer has human nature as a value paradigm, nor even, as we shall see, the divine Commandments, but the ego itself in relation to other consciences and the specific situation. It is the infamous process of discernment that leads to situation ethics: 'by analysing [the act in the concrete circumstances], such an act that is 'objectively' outside the norm may turn out to be legitimate' (p. 102). Hence, for example, the veiledly pro-contraception interpretation of Paul VI's words, contained in a speech he gave on 31 July 1968 to explain the meaning of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* (cf. noa n. 28 p. 85), and the openings on euthanasia and artificial insemination.

This subjectivist and therefore relativist anthropology and moral theory not only necessarily stands in antithesis with the Magisterium of all time, but inevitably also with the Holy Scriptures and therefore with positive divine law, which can no longer affirm immutable truths, but only contingent ones. The historical consciousness of the subject in relation to other consciousnesses operating in a particular circumstance cannot but also historicise Revelation on moral issues. It is clearly stated in the text: 'it should be impossible for us today to treat the Scriptures as timeless propositions and norms, claiming to extract immutable truths from them. [...] It seems that the biblical message is elaborated, deepened through time, according to a path of rewritings and reformulations. Revealed truth is a truth that matures, that develops progressively, at the cost of being corrected from one moment to the next. This also applies to the words placed under the authority of Moses, which also convey the commandments of God' (pp. 22- 23).

This is heresy because Pav asserts that one can correct revealed truth - and one can only correct what is wrong - but in the Bible in matters of faith and morals there are no errors. It is heresy because it contradicts the dogma of biblical inerrancy: "Since,

therefore, everything that the inspired authors or hagiographers assert is to be held to have been asserted by the Holy Spirit, it must consequently be declared that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and without error teach the truth which God for our salvation willed to be delivered in the Sacred Letters" (Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution Dei Verbum, no. 11). And on the moral side, this means that, as explicitly stated by Pav, even the Ten Commandments can be overcome.