

René Balák

## **Theological-moral Justification for the Respect of Life in the Context of *Tertio Millennio***

### Introduction

The present situation in the sphere of respect for human life is a consequence of spiritual, moral and cultural changes, which began approximately two centuries ago. Even in theology it is possible to reflect statements that emphasize the presence of dangerous phenomenon in the sphere of bio-ethics, which deals with ethical responsibility of certain subjects' action in this field. As well, it deals with introducing and upholding the necessity for respect of ethical norms and medicine. Both are considered to be a sphere of treatment of and care for human health and life. It is also possible to discover the each time more intensive divergence between ethics and medicine.

### Culture of Death in the Context of *Signum Temporis*

Kairological looking upon *status quo* in the spirit of *signum temporis* in today's society points out to the fact that human life today is confronted with culture of death, which denies respect for the human person. This culture is not wholly identical with the material and spiritual indigence of many nations, with hunger, endemic diseases or with violence of miscellaneous kinds.

Moral theology stands face to face to diverse, mutually opposite proposals dealing with the relation between ethical reflection and bio-ethical sciences or amongst assorted answer to the question why and how moral theology is obliged to interfere with medicine. The intrinsic arrangement of the problem points out to the question of the science's autonomy as well as to the impossibility to resign from the ethical level of this issue.

Ethical evaluation of specific *signum temporis* and particular interventions depends on the understanding of this relationship. The subject of dispute is normally defined on two levels: on the level of epistemological justification and on the level of methodology of bio-ethical reflection in the realm of bio-medicinal sciences.<sup>1</sup> In the context of *signum temporis*, it is inevitable to rationalize why moral theology may and is indispensably supposed to be present in the field of bio-ethics and give reasons for their interdisciplinary relation. Above all, it is vital to draw attention to the theological-moral justification for the respect of life.

Referring to the teaching of Vatican Council II, which truthfully and concisely named anti-life reality and mentality of modern world<sup>2</sup>, moral theology takes up a standpoint towards new forms of menaces of life. These have a threatening extension. At the same time, moral theology gives reasons for its standpoint while referring to arguments of natural scientific character (collaborating with other scientific disciplines) as well as to the transcendent justification of its standpoint.

It is crucial to point out to the frightening reality that old forms of attacking life acquire unknown and each time more dishonorable aspect<sup>3</sup>, for diverse ideological and manipulative practices are being applied. These darken the sane and truthful reasoning of man, whose standpoint towards life is being internally changed under the influence of the existing moral crisis. This crisis is caused by rejecting the transcendent personal God who bestows life.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. E. Sgreccia. *Manuale di Bioetica*. Vol I. Milano 1996 pp. 65-101

<sup>2</sup> It is possible to add new, at that time unknown or less spread out forms of menaces of human life to the given calculation, while all of them are a serious offense against the Creator. Cf. GS 27

<sup>3</sup> Cf. EV 4

Considering the development of general medicine, bio-technology, molecular medicine, genetics, transplantology (and xeno-transplantations) and the each time more influential eugenic looking upon human life, the question of moral viewpoint of inevitable respect for human life becomes more and more urgent at the beginning of *tertio millennio*.

The unconditional respect for life, inspired by the Christian concept of dignity of the human person, stands face to face to the remarkable unification of medicine and technologization and depersonalization of procreation. Man has arbitrarily usurped the right to decide about the existence of other human being in the domain of medicinal genetic and transplantation interference of manifold types.

It is indispensable to give an answer to the insistent question if *tertio millennio* will be marked by the prevailing influence of culture of death, which has numerous manifestations. Spiritual rupture of a postmodern person who refuses the existence and universal legitimacy of natural objective moral law is, on the one hand, expressed by the obstinate preservation of life of a human being, who is in the state of final care. On the other hand, it is demonstrated by the desire of man to escape suffering at the cost of legalization of euthanasia, arbitrarily justified by the right of man for a pleasant and painless death.

An appearance is being formed that everything can be agreed upon by debate and concord. This idea follows from a perverted and shameful perception of human freedom as well as from absolute power over others and against others. Indispensably, this leads to the loss of sensibility for God as well as for man.<sup>4</sup> The extant features of culture of death are, therefore, the consequence of profound inner changes inside the human person, who denying God in the spirit of false humanism sees only himself/herself, paradoxically turns against himself/herself.

Despite these dangerous *signum temporis* of today's culture of death the sounding<sup>5</sup> that was performed several years ago, in the realm of ethical limitation and from the theological-moral standpoint of scientific research, brought terrifying results. These put stress on the importance of particular interconnection: within the spectrum of manifold points of view in the context of their dominance: autonomy of science – 90%, questions of knowledge – 80%, office and responsibility of a scientist – 50%, regulation of scientific research and political interests – 40%, ethical issues – 5%, science and religion – 5%. From the theological-moral standpoint, taking into account tendencies that consider a dialog between ethics, medicine, religion and science as something that takes place at the very end of interests of so called democratic majority is essential, while these tendencies are one of the characteristics of contemporary culture of death.

In the realm of the relationship between ethics and medicine, numerous groups with diverse standpoints exist. These may be considered as *signum temporis* in the perspective of *tertio millennio* as well as an accompanying characteristic of culture of death. Often, it is being claimed that experimental researches are neutral in and of themselves, but their application requires ethical reflection concerning the consequences of a possible risk.<sup>6</sup> Some consider scientific research and interference in the spirit of economical interests as private, local and authoritative domain, which does not include ethical rules and principles. Despite the fact that others acknowledge the place of ethics in the realm of scientific research and interference, they conceive ethics merely as faithfulness to scientific criteria. Nonetheless, it is crucial to point out to the primacy of ethics before scientific research or before interference in medicine in the context of ethical evaluation of the action in the spirit of respect for human life and dignity of the human person.

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. EV 20-21

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A. Ardigo, F. Garelli. *Valori, scienza e trascendenza*. Torino 1989, p. 33

<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. Mitcham. *Philosophy of Technology*. In: *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*. Ed. W.T.Reich. Vol. 5 New York 1995, pp. 2477-2483. Cf. also S.J. Reiser. *History of Medical Technology*. In: pp. 2472-2476

Reflecting the wide range of the problem, culture of death and *signum temporis* are not merely forms of threat and disrespect for life. Above all, it is a relationship between ethics and the world of medicine conceived in a reductionist and utilitarian way. Wrong or utilitarian intentions or methods, hidden strategic and economical purposes that require manipulation of biological processes or experiments with procreation of interspecies or the change of genetic patrimony of the human subject are present here.

As a result, the sole ethics of aims is not sufficient, for it is indispensable to follow from the ethics of means and methods as well. To follow this process is essential even when the aims being sought are morally good, i.e. it deals with respect for the well-known rule of *non sunt faciendamala ut eveniant bona*. The so called inexorable separation between personal moral conviction and law that is defined by public authorities is not acceptable. Neither the majority's opinion that becomes the supreme criteria for the truth or the individualist conception of freedom, where the subjective conscience is observed as the definite criteria for an action, are acceptable.<sup>7</sup>

### Biblical-theological Conception of Human Life in Moral Theology As a Proposition for *Tertio Millennio*

Following from the contemporary *signum temporis* that are considered *loci theologici*, it is inevitable to give reasons for theological-moral argumentation in the spirit of *pro-life*. It is clear that this way of reasoning has, primarily, a transcendent character. However, the light of natural human reason is not denied, on the contrary, it is confirmed in its fullness.

“Let us make man in our image<sup>8</sup>, after our likeness...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Cf. Gen 1:26-27). These words are the starting point for biblical-theological conception of life, which needs to be known, affirmed and applied with responsibility and freedom in the context of new evangelization.

In its justification of respect for human life, moral theology follows from the Old Testament theology of creation, whose fundamental substance is the message that begins in the Book of Genesis (Gen 1:26), that God is the only source of human life and commands man to respect Him (Cf. Ps 36:10, Ps 104:29-32, Wis 11:24-25). God is the protector of life and commands man to respect Him (Cf. Gen 4:10-12, Ex 20:13) giving the reason that He alone is the Master of Life. This biblical starting point witnesses to the importance of respect for the supreme authority of a transcendent character in the spirit of authentic humility and atonement to the law of life. Human life appears as a great goodness, which is a witness and revelation of God in man, a sign of God's glory and presence<sup>9</sup>, while man is called to respect and honor this life. Therefore, in the context of responsible differentiation and humble search for the truth as well as in the light of natural human reason, it is possible to ascertain that human life is distinct from the rest of creation.

The perspective of life, conceived and accepted as a gift from the Creator, is reflected in the statement that God is not merely the donator of life, rather, He himself is a living God. This can be seen in the Old Testament (Cf. e.g. Deut 5:23, 1Sam 17:26, Ps 42:3, Jer 23:36) as well as in the New Testament (Cf. e.g. Mt 16:16, Acts 14:15, Rom 9:26) where God is presented as having life in himself (Cf. Jn 5:16). The distinct union between God and man is

<sup>7</sup> Cf. W. Gubala. *Kosciol wobec aktualnych zagrozen zycia ludzkiego*. In: *Chronic i wspomagac ludzkie zycie*. Red. K. Kaczmarczyk. Krakow 2000, pp. 15-17

<sup>8</sup> Today's understanding of the term “image” as a certain form or a particular way of knowing, a particular means of knowing the reality is distinct from the biblical meaning of this concept. The biblical term “image” is something that follows from the deep reality of the subject, it is its renaming, its appearance in its essence. It is not an intention according to a sample, rather, it is the very reality that is manifested outwardly.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. EV 34

evident precisely through the gift of life that points out to man being granted the highest dignity by God, springing from the Creator and Giver of life himself. “The heart and completion of human dignity is in God its Creator and in that is its uniqueness. The truth about the creation of man in the image of God and the truth about the call of man to share life with him is mostly attacked and this has immense consequences for human life.”<sup>10</sup> Discontinuation of this personal union with man is the primary reason for diverse forms of the menaces of life.

Life of man reflects the splendor of reality of God alone, who in his work of creation bestows something of himself upon creation – man. Living personal God acts for the benefit of man throughout the whole salvation history. He acts as a God who has real power to call to life the whole creation (Cf. Deut 5:26, Jer 10:10), while he also grants his power to man (Sir 17:13). Man is obliged to freely and reasonably use this might in relation to the whole creation as well as to himself. This call to responsibility of moral character has universal validity which is not eliminated by the results of human reason’s activity in the domain of medicine, on the contrary, man empirically experiences that this demand given by God is there for the good of man.

Man, looking for the purpose of his existence and final fulfillment has to freely affirm the fact of creation and mainly the fact that God is the subject of human desire, his hope for liberation, support and care, his longing and awaiting in prayer (Cf. 2 Kings 19:4, Ps 18:47, Ps 42:3, Ps 84:3).<sup>11</sup> A man given life is able to know the truth and to freely follow it. His temporary life is aiming at life that crosses the limits of time, he is focused on the Donator of all life, for God created man to incorruption and He made him in his own image (Cf. Wis 2:23). For that reason the description of the act of creation (Cf. Gen 2:7) may be understood as a certain anthropomorphism that expresses the same content and the same description of the act of creation (Cf. Gen 1:26) with the formula of creation of man “in the image and likeness of God”.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that some other being is called to the form of a human life in an analogical way, conversely, it is a confirmation of the uniqueness, peculiarity and nobility of human life.

Theological-moral justification of respect for human life follows from the conception of a man being made a present of the supreme dignity by God. This dignity is rooted in the internal union with the Creator<sup>13</sup> and points out to the primacy of human life in the context of the whole creation. Human life is a witness to the indescribable glory of God (Cf. Ps 8:6), which morally binds man to respect and an attitude of veneration towards human life. Biblical message thus becomes a confirmation of the exclusiveness of the gift of life, which is focused not only on a temporary dimension of its existence but also on an overtime dimension, to which every person is invited.

This invitation was in the course of salvation history fully realized in theology of the incarnation that appears in the New Testament section on the biblical message on human life. In the Gospel message, focus on the gift of life gradates from the moment of the incarnation. Precisely in the New Testament, the whole truth about respect for human life finds its clarification, since the Gospel of life is in the very heart of Jesus Christ’s message<sup>14</sup>, he is the Son who perpetually receives life from the Father since eternity (Cf. Jn 5:26). Theology of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. R. Balák. *Teologickomorálna reflexia o súčasných ohrozeniach osoby človeka v kontexte integrálneho rozvoja a formácie*. In: *Personálna hodnota humanity*. J. Michalkov a kolektív. Nitra 2000, p. 107

<sup>11</sup> Cf. H. Seebaß. *Leben II. (Altes Testament)*. In: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*. Red. G. Krause, G. Müller. Vol 20. Berlin 1990, p. 523

<sup>12</sup> Cf. G.C. Berkouwer. *Man: The Image of God*. Grand Rapids 1962, p. 215

<sup>13</sup> Cf. EV 34

<sup>14</sup> Cf. EV 1

incarnation brings the fullness of truth about the noble gift of human life that Christ brings to man so that he may have it abundantly (Cf. Jn 10:10). This draws attention to an incomparable value, dignity and irreducibility of human life and thus implicitly to its meaning. In light of the New Testament understanding, life is presented not only in a temporary dimension (Cf. Lk 1:75, Acts 17:28, Rom 7:1-3) but also in an overtime dimension, which resides in the realization of the fullness of this life in God's presence, i.e. in the interpersonal relationship of God the Creator, the Redeemer and the Savior and man.<sup>15</sup> Where there God is not present, there, decisively, death reigns (Cf. Lk 15:25). From the theological-moral standpoint of looking upon the forms as well as in the perspective of the coming *tertio millennio*, this is a logical reasoning for all the menaces of life.

Drawing from the biblical message, which is an integral part of the Church's *depositum fidei morale*, it is indispensable to present the New Testament concept of life that resides in the Word of God (Cf. Mt 4:4, Jn 5:24)., this is its primary source. Human life in its fullness is accomplished in *communio personarum* with God (Cf. Mt 10:39, Lk 9:24, Mk 8:35), where it encounters its most vigorous fulfillment when taking part in the life and kingdom of God.

The way to achieve this communion with God is by being freely obedient to God and doing his will (Cf. Mt 19:16, Mk 10:17-22). In this manner, man gives satisfaction to the spirit of the New Testament law of love, to the life to which he is called. The Gospel message is focused on unification of man with Jesus Christ, who by his incarnation united himself with every person in a special way<sup>16</sup> and thus confirmed the sanctity and dignity of each human life in the perspective of its non-disintegration.

This theological-moral justification of the necessity to respect human life deals with the confirmation of the incomparable value of each human person<sup>17</sup> that was granted life. However, Christ goes farther in his demands and invites everyone to unification with him in the spirit of faith (Cf. e.g. Jn 1:4, 3:36, 10:28, 14:6), which for the upcoming *tertio millennio* means that a living person is the first fundamental way of the Church.<sup>18</sup> It is the question of presentation of the spirit of life, which is the answer of moral theology to the current culture of death. It is inevitable to conceive this reality not only as a challenge and a call of concrete people in the domain of serving to human life but also as a moral duty of a responsible attitude towards life in every dimension of human life.

The New Testament concept of life springs from the presentation of God as a Living God (Cf. Mt 16:16, Rom 9:26), who does not only have life in himself but he is the only one to own the fullness of life as an immortal and ever-living God (Cf. 1Tim 6:16). As a result, the Personal God is the only unlimited Lord of life and death (Cf. Lk 12:20, 2Cor 1:9), who is apt to give life and take it away (Cf. e.g. Jn 5:21, 6:57, Rom 4:17) in the full meaning of life, i.e. man cannot arbitrarily usurp that which exclusively belongs to the competence of God. The tragedy of disdain for human life is fully revealed at the threshold of *tertio millennio*, when man rejecting God wants to elevate himself to the position of a sovereign over human life.

Moral theology draws from the fact that Gospel message is the gospel of love and dignity of human person as well as the gospel of life which is impossible to separate<sup>19</sup> according to voluntaristic, individualistic, utilitarian and reductionist conceptions of this age. Words of the Holy Scripture "The Word became Flesh" (Cf. Jn 1:14), indicating the moment of the Savior's coming (Cf. Lk 2:10-11) are not a mere accomplishment of the incarnation of

---

<sup>15</sup> It is a man who is the culmination of creation, the reason for the Incarnation and the center of the death of the Redeemer and of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, who himself is life.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. GS 22

<sup>17</sup> Cf. RH 10

<sup>18</sup> Cf. RH 14

<sup>19</sup> Cf. EV 2

the Son of God but also hope for human life, for the whole salvation history in the perspective of saving man, who by his own power cannot conquer the consequences of rejecting God.

The whole New Testament message has a Christological character and focus on the Person of Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. It is in the person of Jesus Christ, who by the way of the cross granted the fullness of life to man (Cf. Jn 12:32), that the value of man was revealed in the most intense mode. There, the paschal mystery achieves its *apogeeum*. Christ, the perfect image of the invisible God, by his life, death and resurrection lifted up and sanctified life of man to its fullness and gave him new eschatological hope. The essential role of the cross is in this connection widely expounded by the Pope John Paul II.<sup>20</sup> In this manner, the meaning of Christocentric character of a New Testament conception of human life as well as the purport of the paschal mystery, which a Christian is supposed to follow and actualize in his/her life, are being confirmed.

Making himself/herself like Christ, the Christian becomes a new creature (Cf. Col 3:10, Rom 13:14) that is to be actualized in the form of baptism as well as in an attitude of honor and respect for human life and in diverse responsible action in favor of life. The mystery of personal living human being achieves final end and significance, while the biological-theological conception of man does not negate but rather surpasses and completes the “empirical-psychological or purely ontological conception of a human being.”<sup>21</sup>

In terms of theology of the incarnation, the New Testament unambiguously points out to the role of the Holy Spirit whose effect was actualized in the incarnation of the Son – the Word.<sup>22</sup> The spiritual dimension of the theological-moral justification of respect for life is filled with the influence of the Holy Spirit who gives life. Christ himself was conceived by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life, two thousand years ago. In this manner, the Trinitarian dimension of respect for human life is being accentuated.

In the spirit of Christian personalism and in the perspective of the Great Jubilee 2000 and *tertio millennio*, it is indispensable to emphasize the urgency of truthful and integral vision of the human person, who forms a spiritual and physical unity<sup>23</sup> and who is conceived as a gift and vocation. Justifying the respect for life, moral theology draws from the anthropologic concept, which in the spirit of biblical personalism clarifies the mystery of created man in the mystery of the Incarnated Word<sup>24</sup> to its fullness. This incarnation was actualized by the power of the Holy Spirit. Dynamics of the spiritual dimension of respect for human life is expressed in the moral imperative, “If we live by the Holy Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Cf. Gal 5:25). Therefore, a Christian engaged in favor of life is to act under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

At the threshold of *tertio millennio*, moral theology as the theology of life, standing face to face to an objective conspiracy against life,<sup>25</sup> presents the utmost importance of respect for human life. Thus, moral theology refers to the theology of creation, incarnation and salvation that contains the Christian truth about life of the human person. Accordingly, in every moment of its existence, regardless the length of its duration, quality, localization, its affirmation or rejection by other living human beings, human life must be venerated. It is to be esteemed regardless the wants of other living human beings who may choose to refuse its

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Nagórny. *Wartosc zycia ludzkiego z perspektywy encykliki Evangelium vitae*. In: *Roczniki teologiczne*. Lublin. 45: 1998, pp. 32-33. Cf. also EV 50

<sup>21</sup> Cf. R. Otowicz. *Etyka zycia*. Krakow 1998, p. 122

<sup>22</sup> Cf. DeV 49

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Kongregacja pre nauku wiery. Instrukcja *Donum Vitae*. (Úvod) 3.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. KKC359. Cf. also RH 11

<sup>25</sup> Cf. EV 17

existence, disregarding if juridical positivism renders its legal and non-sanctioned elimination possible.

Engaging oneself in favor of respect for life, integral truth about man must be observed. Man received a gift of life and in the spirit of reviving love he may fully develop himself/herself in a vertical relationship to God and at the same time in the horizontal relationship to another living human being, for the gift of life is the reason for love and love is the reason for life.

List of Abbreviations Used by the Magisterium

Dev – John Paul II.: Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*.

EV – John Paul II.: Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*.

GS – Apostolic Constitution of Vatican Council II *Gaudium et Spes*

KKC – *Katechismus katolickej cirkvi* (Catechism of the Catholic Church)

RH – John Paul II.: Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*

**IN: JOURNAL of HEALTH MANAGEMENT AND public HEALTH Vol 5 No 3-4/2001 s.7 – 14.**

**ISBN 80-7165-393-4**