

Conference launches new emphasis on bioethics

STEUBENVILLE, Ohio - The beginning and end of human life were the focus of Franciscan University of Steubenville's first bioethics conference, marking the rollout of a new emphasis on Catholic bioethics education at the school.

The Oct. 25-27 gathering featured programs by some of the nation's leading Catholic bioethicists, including three members of the President's Council on Bioethics, which advises the U.S. president.

Sponsored by Franciscan University's new Institute of Bioethics, the conference, "Human Life: Its Beginning and End," was geared toward health care professionals who on a daily basis grapple with complex medical issues, particularly those engaged in human fertility and end-of-life challenges, according to Patrick Lee, director of the institute.

Robert P. George, the McCormick professor of jurisprudence at Princeton University in New Jersey and a frequent collaborator on life issues with Lee, gave the first Paul and Barbara Henkels lecture, which is to be an annual lecture.

George, a member of the President's Council on Bioethics, spoke about embryonic human beings, defending his position - and the church's directive - that human embryos are indeed people and that research that destroys embryos is morally wrong.

Also giving major presentations at the conference were two other members of the President's Council: Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, from the Center for Clinical Bioethics at Georgetown University in Washington, and Dr. William B. Hurlbut from Stanford University Medical Center's Neuroscience Institute in California.

Throughout the three-day conference, panel members examined basic scientific and ethical arguments associated with beginning- and end-of-life concerns, zeroing in on embryonic stem-cell research and the plethora of new arguments that have split society in the debate over euthanasia, abortion and the administration of lifesaving

or life-prolonging therapies.

“Aside from war, which is an extremely complicated issue on its own, the most controversial issues in mainstream society today are those having to do with the beginning of life, the end of life – and health care associated with it – reproductive ethics and sexual ethics,” Lee said.

“These are the big issues, and we wanted to tackle them head-on,” he added.

Lee said the creation of the university’s Bioethics Institute has been under way for a couple years. Over that period, funding has been raised to create the new bioethics chair, now held by Lee; details for the October kickoff event were in the works for about a year, he added.

“(Pope) John Paul II talked about the culture of life versus the culture of death,” Lee said. “In that we see this struggle going on to uphold what we consider to be traditional, common-sense morality.

“We’re getting beat up by the media and the elites in secular universities, cultures that do not recognize the intrinsic value of the human person,” he continued.

“It is ironic that our culture seems to be dualistic in some ways, where arguments put forward to justify abortion, euthanasia, sex outside marriage and same-sex unions rely on an implicit dualism, treating the body outside itself,” he said.

So, Lee noted, Franciscan University identified the need for a program that offers training in logic, the natural sciences, clinical experiences and basic ethics.

Ultimately, he said, a certificate in bioethics will be available to students at the university, and down the road he said he envisions an academic concentration that would meld all these fields into one discipline of study.

“So, one of our goals with the program is to train students and other professionals so they can articulate (the Catholic position) on these bioethics issues,” Lee said.

He said that one of his short-term goals is to have 25-30 students, doing a concentration in bioethics, who are able to go out and make presentations at other

universities or forums across the country to present the Catholic perspective on these issues.

“I don’t want to give the impression that we have all the answers,” Lee said. “Because we don’t. There are lots of individual questions and situations that are extremely difficult to sort out. That is the intrinsic value of this kind of conference, where we can exchange ideas with professionals who are dealing with these kinds of life-and-death concerns every day.”