

To pope, humans more than just 'units' to be used, says ethicist

WASHINGTON - Pope Benedict XVI "has a vision of the human person that transcends seeing us as economic units or raw units to be used for biotechnical development," said John Haas, president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia.

"We don't have an understanding of a human being as truly human unless we see them as being open to the transcendent or the supernatural," he said in a July 20 phone interview with Catholic News Service.

He made the comments about the pope's stance on bioethics in the encyclical "Caritas in Veritate" ("Charity in Truth"), which was released July 7.

Haas said the pope's writing offers a profound philosophical anthropology.

While the pontiff dedicated a large portion of the recent encyclical to addressing the global economic crisis and issues of economic development, he also discussed bioethical concerns.

"A particularly crucial battleground in today's cultural 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," the pope said.

According to the pontiff, the fundamental bioethical question for humanity is whether man is a product of his own labors or if he owes his existence to God. Pope Benedict said scientific discoveries and advances in technology have forced a choice between two types of reasoning about humanity: reason open to transcendence and the spiritual or reason closed within "immanence," or, for example, not going beyond oneself.

The pope made the church's position on the issue clear. "It is no coincidence that closing the door to transcendence brings one up short against a difficulty," he said.

“How could being emerge from nothing, how could intelligence be born from chance?”

“Faced with these dramatic questions, reason and faith can come to each other’s assistance,” the pope stated. “Only together will they save man.”

Pope Benedict specifically criticized in vitro fertilization, embryo research, human cloning and research into human hybrids for ignoring the transcendent nature of the human being.

“All (of these practices are) now emerging and being promoted in today’s highly disillusioned culture, which believes it has mastered every mystery because the origin of life is now within our grasp,” the pontiff said.

In his encyclical he also denounced abortion and euthanasia as instruments of “the culture of death.”

Haas believes the pope’s message of belief in a transcendent human being will appeal to a broad audience both within and outside the church.

“There are two different versions of the human person that are radically different from each other,” he stated. “The (nontranscendent view) is frightfully reductionistic: If we’re nothing more than a chance development in a mindless universe, how do we have any significance? We would be able to justify using other human beings for our own ends and our own purposes.”

Haas said the pope’s view of the human person is far more appealing than the other and will inspire more people.

Father Tadeusz Pacholczyk, director of education for the bioethics center, said the pope’s positions form essential ethical foundations for scientific research.

“The pope is asking how we can promote real development in the realm of bioethics. He is saying that openness to life is at the center of true development,” Father Pacholczyk told CNS. “If you accept life for what it is, then it helps you establish a certain moral character.”

“Without that underlying morality, ethics just becomes a label,” he stated.

Father Pacholczyk said none of the bioethical positions outlined by the pope in his encyclical are new to the church.

“In this arena the message is a fairly simple one,” the priest said. “I think the pope is trying to trigger a deeper reflection on some very basic moral truths that are essentially slipping through the fingers of our culture today.”