

GUIDING PARENTS WITH THE CHURCH TRADITION ON AN AGE OF BIOENGINEERING

Emerging technological advances tap into the inherent and natural desire parents have for perfect children; at the same time, biomedicine and behavioral science offer solutions for many problems or conditions that cause pain in individuals and families. However, these technologies could be tools to harm the most vulnerable in our midst. The first part of this essay elaborates mainly on two specific technologies aimed to “improve children” according to a report of the President’s Council on Bioethics called *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness* (“Report on Bioethics”). One is technology used to design babies, the other one is used to improve children. The challenges posed by these new technologies are of great moral and human significance, hence it is opportune to bring to the front and center the plans God revealed for men and women created in his image. Therefore, this essay also presents the Church’s vision for human beings as outlined in *Gadium Et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World and other church documents.

Parents must be aware that with current technology they can have the perfect child at the expense of killing the ones that do not meet their desired criteria. Past technologies were limited to protect or maintain children’s health, but now it is possible to “design” babies and drug-enhance children. These new technologies raise new issues, “especially about the significance of procreation, the nature of parental responsibility, and the meaning of childhood.”¹ The Report on Bioethics uses the term “designer babies” for children born with improved genetic endowments because of the selection of embryos with the desirable genes or the engineering of the gametes or embryos. New technologies make it possible to detect genetic markers of traits in the embryos. Some of the

¹ Ibid, 28.

markers that now can be identified in embryos include appearance, leanness, perfect pitch, longevity, temperament, intelligence, musicality, etc.² For some researches or business people in the field of genetics, a selection between embryos seems to be like a selection of clothing, attire, jewelry or accessories. Selecting embryos with the desired traits or genes means discarding those who do not meet the desired criteria. The technique that makes possible for parents to choose the characteristics of their babies is Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis (or PGD). It was quite new and only less than ten thousand children had been born with its aid³ at the time of the Report on Bioethics. In embryo selection, it is not objects that are discarded but human beings who are in the most vulnerable stage of development. Embryo selection reflects the throwaway culture of our time repeatedly denounced by Pope Francis as common in more affluent societies.⁴ Embryo selection is contrary to the view of the human person in *Gaudium Et Spes*, “for the human person deserves to be preserved, proclaiming the noble destiny of man [and woman] and championing the Godlike seed which has been sown in him,” GS, 3. Technically, discarding embryos is not abortion because the embryos are not yet implanted in their mother’s womb; nevertheless, it is still the killing of a tiny human being because we believe human life starts at conception.⁵ If embryos were not human beings, they would not be implanted on women’s wombs. Later on the fetal period, other technologies are available for prenatal diagnosis. Before birth, it is possible to know if a baby in the womb has severe genetic and/or chromosomal disorders. Available technologies offer parents the possibility of not having malformed children not thru prevention but elimination; with the promise of saving parents of the misery of having to rear children with serious disabilities, babies are killed before they are born.

² Ibid, 33.

³ Ibid, 40.

⁴ Pope Francis, Angelus. St. Peter’s Square Sunday January 29, 2023.

⁵ <https://www.princeton.edu/~prolife/articles/embryoquotes2.html>

Families form character; in fact, a key task of the family is to form persons in love.⁶ The Report on Bioethics acknowledges that “the wish of parents for ‘better children’ most often takes the form of a desire for children who are more well-adjusted, well-behaved, sociable, attentive, high performing, and academically adept.”⁷ For children with undesirable behaviors the use of psychotropic drugs helps them to function adequately in society. Psychotropic drugs were originally developed to treat blood pressure.⁸ Nevertheless, discovered later as able to modify behavior in humans. Under the pressure of schools, pharmaceutical companies and society, parents now must choose to have their children medicated to solve behavioral problems or to forego the advantages such medication might provide but suffer with their children behavior.⁹ Thus, many parents have chosen medication. The latest available data from the Center for Disease Control estimates that the number of children diagnosed with ADHD is 6.1 million (9.4%).¹⁰ The use of stimulants brings the performance of ADHD patients up to normal or near-normal levels.¹¹ However, the power to mold better children through biotechnical interventions raises serious concerns, such as damage to the body or brain.¹² In addition, there is not yet sufficient data regarding long-term and late onset of effects of having been on stimulants for several years during childhood.¹³ It is becoming more common to treat difficult or non-conforming children as problems. The Report on Bioethics states “[w]e fail to consider that their spiritedness might be part of a more ambitious nature, their lack of attention part of an artistic temperament, or their restlessness a fitting response of genuinely eager students to uninteresting or poorly taught classes.”¹⁴ The authors of the Report on Bioethics affirm that pills do not form

⁶ Pope John Paul II. Apostolic Exhortation *Familiales Consortio*, 1981.

⁷ *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, p. 71.

⁸ *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, p. 76.

⁹ *Ibid*, 73.

¹⁰ <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/data.html>

¹¹ *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 81.

¹² *Ibid*, 83.

¹³ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 88.

character, and they uphold that children will learn to behave better with instruction and example;¹⁵ a position upheld by the Church. Parents have the first responsibility for raising virtuous children creating for them a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity and disinterested service are the rule.¹⁶ Aware of the consequences of sin, there are illness, sickness and other human conditions in our children that make parenthood difficult. Parents experience powerlessness, limitations and finitude. However, parenting should not be done alone. The Church and God accompany parents. God can lead parents to conversion through the illness of children and in Christ transform their suffering in redemption of others.¹⁷

Recognizing that “today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history,” in *Gadium Et Spes* (4) the Church draws a picture of the human being in relationship with God. This picture embraces seven qualities: dignity, image of God, relational, truth seeker, free, spiritual and immortal.

Examining each quality may help us understand the need we have for perfection in our children that technological advances try to meet and the ways in which we can respond to such pressures.

Dignity: All technologies that uphold each human being’s dignity are worth studying and developing. In *Gadium Et Spes*, the Church states, “all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown.” (GS, 12) Because parents feel that the eyes of the whole world are on their children, they want to have the best children they can afford. In the past, to achieve that, parents invested in their children’s education, teaching them good manners, and developing their musical and athletic abilities. Now, new technologies make it possible what before was impossible: to alter genetics to specific wants, For example, with the use of growth hormones, children can meet requirements of height for a specific sport. The Church proclaims that no matter the appearance of any human being all possess the same dignity. As a community, we have an obligation to ensure

¹⁵ Ibid, 90.

¹⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church #2222-224

¹⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church #1500-1505.

that every person lives with dignity. Each person's dignity is to be respected in all circumstances¹⁸ because dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the persons they are.¹⁹

Image of God: Citing Scripture, *Gadium Et Spes* (12) recalls that man was created "to the image of God," capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by Him as master of all earthly creatures." What is man that you should care for him? You have made him little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him rule over the works of your hands, putting all things under his feet" (Ps. 8:5-7). Technologies that do not take into account the image of God on each person pose a challenge. Another challenge comes from science advancements that leave no room for religious values; when we deal with technologies and with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred; for that is what humans are: we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).²⁰

Relational: Human beings are social by nature. Since the beginning, they received the call to multiply (Gen. 1:27). The Church tells us that unless we relate ourselves to others we can neither live nor develop our potential (GS, 12). When there is something "wrong" with their children, some parents withdraw from social interactions; parents may be embarrassed of their children's appearance or simply they would not know how to care for their children in public. Consequently, the urge to find the quickest and easiest way to make their children look normal is a niche for drug developers. Because for some children it will take longer and more effort to adjust to social life, the Church calls us to practice works of mercy with each other. In bearing our wrongs patiently, God teaches us this dimension of faith. It is also a call for conversion²¹ to examine our conscience before judging someone else's children behavior or appearance. At the same, with other work of mercy,

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Brothers and Sisters to Us* [Fratelli Tutti], no. 118, 213.

¹⁹ St. John Paul II, *On the Hundredth Year* [Centesimus annus], no. 11.

²⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 28

²¹ Pope Francis. General Audience. Saint Peter's Square. Wednesday, November 16, 2016.

Admonish the Sinner, the Church invites us with prudence and love to accompany and support parents in their child-rearing journey. Pope Francis calls it “accompaniment in the search for the essential” warning us to be careful when we counsel, admonish or teach so we do not feel superior to others.²²

Truth Seeker: God created human beings with a conscience that moves us to love good and avoid evil. We are called to “search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.” However, conscience “by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.” (GS, 16) Traditionally Christian families formed their members’ consciences according to the Gospel. Now many families are not aware of the Truth revealed by Christ thus the formation of their members is deeply influenced by worldly trends, which frequently are against Gospel values. Moreover, most grade schools do not offer classes in religion, moral or ethics anymore. The Bishops of the United States suggest four practices to form, inform, and strengthen our consciences with God’s truth: prayer, learn, reflect and nurture friendships.²³

Free: *Gadium Et Spes* points out that “only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness. For God has willed that man remain “under the control of his own decisions”(12). Since man's freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God's grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower.” (GS, 17) In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II warns a challenge of our time is “a corruption of the idea and experience of freedom, conceived not as a capacity for realizing the truth of God's plan for marriage and the family, but as an autonomous power of self-affirmation, often against others, for one's own selfish well-being” (FC,6). The

²² Ibid.

²³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Understanding Conscience. URL: <https://www.usccb.org/committees/pro-life-activities/understanding-conscience>

society, especially families, face huge pressure from peers, co-workers, teachers, mass media and social media's influencers. They try to conform our lives to certain models that are not always expressions of true freedom. Unfortunately, under such influence, many families and individuals adopt dangerous lifestyles unaware of the freedom they are losing. The Church calls us "to discover what the Lord wants from us and how we can correspond means setting out on the path to grow in our own vocation, the path of true joy."²⁴

Spiritual: *Gadium Et Spes* invites us to consider our spiritual nature contemplating our physical bodies. We will encounter God in that reflection. "He plunges into the depths of reality whenever he enters into his own heart; God, Who probes the heart,(7) awaits him there; there he discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God. Thus, when he recognizes in himself a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being mocked by a fantasy born only of physical or social influences, but is rather laying hold of the proper truth of the matter." (GS, 14) Many in the current culture ignore the spiritual dimension of the men and women of our time or have a distorted concept of spirituality. A life of prayer will makes us aware of our spiritual dimension.

Immortal: God created humanity with a purpose beyond the life on earth. "For God has called man and still calls him so that with his entire being he might be joined to Him in an endless sharing of a divine life beyond all corruption. Christ won this victory when He rose to life, for by His death He freed man from death. Hence, to every thoughtful man a solidly established faith provides the answer to his anxiety about what the future holds for him. At the same time faith gives him the power to be united in Christ with his loved ones who have already been snatched away by death; faith arouses the hope that they have found true life with God." (GS, 18) In the other hand, the culture around us, focus in the here and now. Thus, technologies that offer the cure of an illness, restore infirm conditions, or extend life, are warmly received, without much consideration of the

²⁴ Pope Francis. General Audience. Saint Peter's Square. Wednesday, November 16, 2016.

consequences. Frequent meditation in the life, passion death and resurrection of Jesus Christ will help us to ground our feet in this life with our hearts longing for eternal life.

The Report on Bioethics highlights the urgent need of a moral education in light of children's behavior problems. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis inspires Christians to imbue the culture with the gospel, to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization. Therefore, faith and prayer are two beacons of light for families facing technological dilemmas. I recall two significant occasions when my family prayed for guidance. Years ago, after reviewing some lab work, the doctor informed us our baby could be born with Down syndrome. In a leap of faith, I thought to myself, "this is not a time of bad news; this baby is not bad news, no matter how he is, I will not kill him. I will call him Gabriel as the name of the angel who gave Mary the Good News of the incarnation of the Messiah." The second time was at the time of the birth of Gabriel. Due to a previous C-section, the doctor wanted me to have another C-section to bring Gabriel into the world. I refused. I gave birth to Gabriel without any surgery. Thanks to that decision, three more perfectly healthy children were born. I am not against C-sections. My first and my fifth babies were born that way, it saved our lives, but faith and prayer brought comfort, confidence and let us have the family God wanted for us. My recommendation is for families not to make decisions based solely on what technology offers but let faith and prayer guide their lives. In addition, certain attitudes will help us navigate these times. First, an attitude of gratitude and awe for the great technological advances of our age and all the scientists and workers devoted to create and improve technologies. Second, an attitude of forgiveness and reconciliation for the people that harm others using technology. Thirdly, as God's image-bearers, an attitude of love in our use of technologies in particular with our children, a blessing and a gift from God. ♥