

Dear rector, dear dean, dear professors and students, dear guests and friends of the ITI!

This academic lecture has the title:

## Challenges in postmodern bioethics for Christian faith and morality

I will try to address some problems and give answers in the perspective of Christian faith and morality. At the beginning, we look at the present situation in Church, society and bioethics in general. Secondly, I will analyse the connection of ecological awareness and sexual identity. In the third part, I try to give a moral assessment of special questions in sexual identity, and in a fourth part, in the way of a conclusion and encouragement, we might ask for perspectives of renewal regarding human dignity in its divine origin and relation.

### *1. The present situation in Church, society and bioethics in general*

Today's world is characterized by a pluralism of attitudes regarding faith and morality, and even within the Christian community and in some way also within the Catholic Church there is much of diversity and even confusion, regarding not only some singular problems and challenges but even the fundamentals. As John Paul II whose 100<sup>th</sup> birthday we celebrate this year has formulated it in his encyclical "Veritatis splendor" of August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1993:

*"It is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions. At the root of these presuppositions is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and*

*constitutive relationship to truth.* Thus the traditional doctrine regarding the *natural law*, and the universality and the permanent validity of *its precepts*, is rejected; certain of the *Church's moral teachings* are found simply unacceptable; and the *Magisterium itself* is considered capable of intervening in matters of morality only in order to 'exhort consciences' and to 'propose values', in the light of which each individual will independently make his or her decisions and life choices." (no. 4)

In the field of biology and ecology, there are special challenges in the present time: Man has become enormous powerful in the way that he can apply empirical knowledge which affects the very roots of life, including plants, animals and human beings. There are possibilities of genetic analysis and reconstruction which seem to equip the genetic engineers, as we might call them, with all the elements needed for a new form of creating not only things but living beings including man himself, if possible. Man seems to become his own creator!

A new technology, called CRISPR gene editing, allows at the present stage of development even substantial modifications and manipulations in the genetic structure of living beings. Of course, there are both hopes and fears which are related to this method, and as an example of a very affirmative attitude towards these new inventions and biotechnologies, a famous female scientist of Austro-Braslian origin named Renée Schroeder has published a book titled "The Fabrication of Man. How we might outwit evolution".<sup>1</sup> Her main statements in this context are as following:

Human beings are the product of evolution based on chance which has no place for God and any form of teleology. Now man has come to a point in history on which he himself has to organize his own evolution and that of other living beings. In this way, man could possibly improve the quality and form of his existence, not only in external affairs but including the genetic structure and disposition.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Renée Schroeder mit Ursel Nendzig, Die Erfindung des Menschen. Wie wir die Evolution überlisten, Salzburg – Wien 2016 (Residenz Verlag). See my critical review: „Können wir uns als Menschen völlig neu erfinden?“ [https://www.stjosef.at/artikel/rezension\\_schroeder.htm](https://www.stjosef.at/artikel/rezension_schroeder.htm) .

This female scientist denies any authentic and original freedom and responsibility of man; moral norms are only a sociological reality and are relative, and moral normativity is subject to changes in time and history, according to the circumstances. New forms of sexual identity should be developed, and in the future, there might be a stage of human self-evolution in which man could organize his consciousness in a new way, independently from organic functions and from his body which is seen merely instrumental and accidental.

All this points to theories of so-called trans-humanism in which the goodness of being human in the unity of body and soul is fundamentally denied. A new form of life is desired which is free from any bonds, and we might add that here the concept of creation is shattered in its very fundamentals. There is no longer a place for an inalienable human dignity and for human rights and duties which are inscribed into the nature of man. Could we truly desire such a “brave new world”? That’s the question.

## *2. The connection of ecological awareness and sexual identity*

In the last years, up to the present time, public awareness and political programs and discussions have been focused to the ecological crisis. What are the roots of such actions of dominion and destruction which have led to this crisis instead of responsible forms of stewardship over God’s good creation? As an effect not of genuine and authentic Christian culture, but of atheistic rationalism, man has made use of scientific knowledge in a manipulative and even disastrous way. Man thinks that everything is subject to his power. He no longer accepts innate laws of nature. The bond between freedom and truth has been declared obsolete. The consequences of this technocratic mentality are that man must fear to destroy even the basis of natural life, including plants, animals and human beings. Who can protect nature from this disastrous influence of man? Who can protect man from destruction and annihilation by man himself?

The Catholic Church takes part in the fears and hopes of man<sup>2</sup>, and in this context, the Popes of the last decades have repeatedly expressed the view of the Church regarding the Divine origin of creation as a whole and of man's special responsibility to be a protector of this visible world and not her final destructor. Already John Paul II and then Benedict XVI and, of course, also Francis spoke of the necessity of a human ecology<sup>3</sup>, for we cannot effectively protect the nature around us if we do not respect human dignity and human rights:

“The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a natural law which is inscribed into the heart of every human person<sup>5</sup>, and man should not behave as if he were his own creator and a master of the universe independently from God. The consequences of such a view might be disastrous.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 1: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, no. 38; Benedict XVI, *The Garden of God. Toward a Human Ecology*, Washington 2014 (The Catholic University of America Press).

<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rom 2:14-16: “For when the Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus.” – Rom 2:14-16.

„In all cultures there are examples of ethical convergence, some isolated, some interrelated, as an expression of the one human nature, willed by the Creator; the tradition of ethical wisdom knows this as the natural law. This universal moral law provides a sound basis for all cultural, religious and political dialogue, and it ensures that the multi-faceted pluralism of cultural diversity does not detach itself from the common quest for truth, goodness and God.” – Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 59.

In this context, the sexual identity of man is questioned by various forms of gender theory. In an extreme view, man himself wishes to determine sexual identity, and the body is no more relevant. If the body doesn't correspond to one's own wishes, then it will be manipulated surgically or with hormonal treatments. The consequences of these views show their influence and relevance even in legislation and in public life. For example, the University of Vienna in December 2019 proposed new guidelines for a gender-sensitive language<sup>6</sup> including not only male and female persons but also a so-called third option of gender identity. No longer persons should be addressed in official language and documents with "Herr" and "Frau", and the gender-sensitivity should be expressed with using little stars avoiding typically male and female formulations. The Austrian constitutional court in June 2018 had decided that in official personal registers there must be a third option besides male and female.<sup>7</sup>

I find here is much of ideology and little sensitivity for persons truly suffering from deficits in sexual identity. There are of course persons who are not clear about their sexual identity and who might express wishes for bodily transformation. Nevertheless, these persons are instrumentalized by such an ideology as described.

Therefore, I now turn in part three to a

### *3. Moral assessment of special questions in sexual identity*

From the view of Christian ethics and moral theology, I will try to answer the following question: What would be the right way in dealing with persons who suffer from problems in sexual identity? One thing should be clear from the beginning: In the genetic code

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Geschlechterinklusive Sprachgebrauch in der Administration der Universität Wien: Leitlinie und Empfehlungen zur Umsetzung, [https://personalwesen.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/d\\_personalwesen/Gleichstellung/Dokumente/Geschlechterinklusive\\_Sprachgebrauch\\_in\\_der\\_Administration\\_der\\_Universitaet\\_Wien.pdf](https://personalwesen.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/d_personalwesen/Gleichstellung/Dokumente/Geschlechterinklusive_Sprachgebrauch_in_der_Administration_der_Universitaet_Wien.pdf) .

<sup>7</sup> VfGH-Erkenntnis, June 15th, 2018, <https://ris.bka.gv.at> , document no. JFR\_20180615\_18G00077\_01.

there may be aberrations, but in most cases, the so-called genotype informs us with certainty and decides about the question to which sex a person belongs. Biologically, persons are either male or female according to the structure of the chromosomes.<sup>8</sup> And if in a rare and single case it seems difficult to decide, then this can justify neither the introduction of a third option for sexual identity in state registers nor the total restructuring of language and arbitrary decisions to invent and define new forms of sexual identity.

In concrete cases of problems in sexual identity, we have to distinguish the primary sexual determination (which has to do with the genetic disposition, i.e. with the genotype) from subsequent characteristics of sexual appearance (i.e. the phenotype). If the phenomenal characteristics of sexual identity are not well developed, a confusion might take place: The parents of such a child (and even nurses and medical doctors) might think of a baby boy, he is a girl and also the other way around. You may have heard of the life of the famous Austrian ski-runner Erika Schinegger. She – who is genetically a he – had famous results in skiing. But a series of personal experiences caused doubts in this alleged sportswoman. And a nearer investigation made it clear: Erika was in truth Erik! “She” ended „her“ career, and after surgical and medical treatment it was clear for everybody: This person had found his original and true sexual identity and could now live as a man. Since then Erik has married, and his wife bore him a daughter. Erik has never been in truth a woman, but he had wrongly been identified as a woman, and this error was corrected later. From the moral point of view, it was fully justified to apply medical help in treatment. All this was done with the informed consent of the patient. In this case, there was no manipulation but a true therapeutic intervention, and the result was that Erik could find his true sexual identity and live according to it as a man.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> There is XX in female and XY in male human persons.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the film: Erik(A) - Der Mann, der Weltmeisterin wurde (2005). Cf. National Catholic Bioethics Center, Brief Statement on Transgenderism, in: National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly 16.4 (Winter 2016): 599–603, [https://www.ncbcenter.org/files/5014/9641/4634/Q16.4\\_05\\_TransgenderStatement\\_REV.pdf](https://www.ncbcenter.org/files/5014/9641/4634/Q16.4_05_TransgenderStatement_REV.pdf)

Another situation is given when a person decides to make an arbitrary change of sexual appearance by surgical and/or hormonal measures. The genetic identity cannot be changed, and by such actions, an objective contradiction is established between the genotype and the phenotype. A mere subjective feeling and consciousness of a person who thinks to live in the wrong sex or body cannot be sufficient for an objective justification of medical interventions which do not follow the truth of genetic constitution. If a person suffers from a disturbance of sexual identity, this could be a chance for him or her in moral maturation by integrating and accepting the own body. From the moral point of view we must state: Therapeutic measures are helpful and justified only, if the patient agrees and if such interventions correspond to the biological truth of the person.<sup>10</sup>

These are normative considerations. Another question is if in a single case a person is so disoriented that he or she is not aware of the objective norms of morality and only follows his or her subjective feelings and judgement, how far is this person responsible for what she or he does? According to the traditional doctrine of the Church, the case might be that this person acts in an objectively wrong way but due to internal and external factors which diminish her awareness for the objective truth and her subjective freedom, the imputability of this act is reduced which has consequences for the gravity of sin in the subjective sphere.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, this does not change the objective order of morality and the moral norms described.

I now come to a final statement and will formulate some conclusions.

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<sup>10</sup> „Es bleibt die Frage offen, ob die gewünschte Geschlechtsumwandlung bei einem Transsexuellen wirklich und in der Regel dem Wohl des individuellen Patienten dient. Psychoanalytische Erfahrungen sprechen für diese Zweifel.“ – Beck Lutwin / Heywinkel Elisabeth, Geschlechtsumwandlung, in: Lexikon der Bioethik, Bd 2, 104 f, here 105.

<sup>11</sup> “Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors.” – Catechism of the Catholic Church (= CCC), no. 1735; cf. Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 302.

#### 4. Perspectives of renewal: Human dignity in its divine origin

In a last reflection, let's get back to the very fundamentals of human dignity and ask for perspectives of moral renewal in our present time! There is a twofold way to strengthen the awareness of human dignity: by reason and by faith.

The first way is accessible to all human persons who can make use of their reason, independently from their social and cultural background and of their religious attitude. Here we might speak of the insights into the natural law of man according to a rightly formed conscience.<sup>12</sup>

As Christians, we should form coalitions with men and women of goodwill.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, everybody is welcome who affirms the inalienable human dignity and the basic rights and duties following from it, such as corporal integrity, right of life, freedom of conscience and religion.<sup>14</sup>

But our motives as Christians are even deeper. We do not only rely on rational insights but on divine revelation. God himself tells us in Holy Scripture that man and woman are of equal dignity and that they have been created to the image of God.<sup>15</sup> The basic vocation of man is a vocation of love<sup>16</sup> which is realized in a fundamental way in marriage and family and in a complementary and excellent way in

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. CCC 1780: „The dignity of the human person implies and requires uprightness of moral conscience. Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the prudent judgment of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment.”

<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the Church has addressed various documents explicitly “to all men of good will” (cf. John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, no 1).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), Dec. 10<sup>th</sup> 1948, preamble: „Whereas recognition of the *inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights* of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world ...” Art. 1: „All human beings are born free and *equal in dignity and rights*. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Gen 1:27.

<sup>16</sup> „Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” – John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 11.



virginity or celibacy. The perfection achieved by the love of Christ is our common goal, and this means holiness and is an expression of Christian dignity.<sup>17</sup>

The perspective of holiness is decisive for our Christian life. We have been sanctified in Holy Baptism, and sanctifying grace should be the basis for the actualization of all other vocations. Holiness is our common vocation, and only this is decisive. It is realized in different ways, according to the talents and charisms the Lord gives to every one of us.

Here the ITI has a special task to introduce all members, students and faculty, more deeply into these anthropological and theological truths. They are not abstract but form a part of our lives. By relating to the spiritual sources in philosophy and theology we gain important insights, and our motivation is strengthened to promote human dignity in the perspective of Divine love!

We have a task to improve the world in which we live. And we can do it on different levels according to the state and vocation of each of us. There is no room for pessimism since God himself is with us and he calls us to be in union with him and to do the good with the help of his grace. In this way, let us begin a new semester here at the ITI! Thank you for listening.

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<sup>17</sup> “Christian, recognize your dignity and, now that you share in God's own nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning. Remember who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Never forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of the Kingdom of God.” – CCC 1691, with a quotation from St. Leo the Great, Sermo 22 in nat. Dom., 3: PL 54,192C.