

The Unity of Bioethics and Faith
ReCatechism 6
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The term *Bioethics* consists of two Greek words, **Βίος** meaning life and **ἦθος**, meaning behavior. **Bioethics** therefore, is the **study of controversial behavior brought about by advances in biology and medicine.**

It is controversial because, although biology and medicine is supposed to help people achieving a better life, sometimes is not ethical. One example to understand it better. It is nothing wrong, for that matter is a blessing, to donate an organ, let's say a kidney, to save some one's life. It is wrong however to kill someone else in order to get his kidney.

We called today's study Bioethics and Faith for the simple fact that it might be OK to use medication to help someone to live a better life, but it might not be accepted by our faith as Orthodox Christians .

Before I continue I want to make clear that I do not hold a degree in Theology or in any medical field. The answers therefore are based on researches and opinions of individuals well known on their field of expertise.

In general, our faith is not against technology as long as it is not interfering with our basic believes. The example I just gave above killing someone to get his kidney and save someone else's life it will not be acceptable. Unfortunately, not all bioethics are straight forward as this example. Some might look OK in the surface but they are not acceptable in the Orthodox faith. For that reason, we will try to address some of them today to see which ones are acceptable and which ones are not.

Here are some examples:

- Researches involving animals.
- Human experimentation.
- Organ donation
- Euthanasia
- Surrogacy
- Artificial insemination
- Assistant Suicide
- Blood transfusion
- Human Cloning
- Contraception/Birth control
- Life Support
- Cremation

And the list goes on.

Due to the lack of time, we will not go into details on all of them. I have picked the following to discuss tonight:

- Organ donation
- Cremation
- Euthanasia
- Assistant suicide
- Artificial insemination
- Surrogacy

I believe these are the most common and more than enough to discuss in the short time we have. Before we start I want to mention that, in some of these practices the Orthodox Church as a whole does not have a unified answer. The reason is that we should have a gathering of all Orthodox, like a synod and decide. Unfortunately this is not an easy thing to do and we did not have one for a long time. Due to the drastic advance in medical field, most of these issues are fairly new in our society. From time to time however local heads of the church or Theologians have expressed their opinions on these topics.

Let's start with the first one.

- **Organ Donation**

Organ donation is the act of donating one or more organs to another person with a purpose to survive or live a better quality life. In fact there is a blessing and expression of great love for someone to donate part of his body to reduce the pain and suffering and sometimes to extend life itself for someone in need. Here are some basic ethical rules on how it can be done:

- Before we go ahead with the transplant, we must first use all other medical procedures..
- The purpose of the transplant should be strictly to help our fellow men and not to have a financial gain.
- There should not be any serious health risk on the part of the donor.
- Donations of cells or tissues from an embryo are unacceptable since the embryo cannot consent to such a donation.
- Needless to say that purchase of organs in the black market is strictly forbidden.
 - There is a difference of opinion among the Orthodox churches as to life ending organ donations.

By that I mean donating organs that are essential to the donor's life. The Rumanian Orthodox church for example considers unethical to donate a part of your body, such as your heart, that it is essential to your own life, even for brain dead people. To them that would be murder if the donor has not expressed the willingness to donate while he or she was still alive, or suicide, if the person has given the OK to do so while they were alive. The church of Greece however describes such giving as the self sacrificing love that Christ shows in the Bible: **“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13).**

The transplantation of animal organs, such as pig heart valves, is also controversial amongst the Orthodox churches. The Rumanian Orthodox Church as well as the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America are against it, where the Church of Greece says that more research must be done in order to express an opinion on this subject. I am told that, as we speak, there is a team in the Church of Greece who studies all the ethical issues but they have not as yet come with any recommendations.

The ethical problem arises on how the organ is taken from one person and transplanted to another one.

In some cases the donor is a relative or friend in good health and their health is not placed in jeopardy by becoming a donor. To give blood for example or bone marrow or even a kidney has no basic effect on the donor’s health. The problem arises when there is not a willing donor and they need to obtain the organ from a deceased person. However, not everyone agrees on the definition of death.

For long time, most people thought that a person was dead when his heart has stopped beating. For that matter, some still do. However, according to Dr. Dimitrios Oreopoulos, Professor of Medicine at the University of Toronto, **"until recently we would not retrieve an organ from a person whose heart has stopped beating because decomposition would start immediately after that. Therefore we (meaning the medical professionals) have changed the definition of death to that of a person whose brain has stopped functioning"**.

That person might be still breathing with the help of the use of respirator, at which point they can take the organ and use it. Recently, however, a lady in Winnipeg which had been declared brain dead, kept breathing even after they had pulled the respirator.

The problem I have here is that it looks like we have changed the definition of death in order to obtain the organs for transplants. Time and time again we have scenarios of people declared brain dead only to recover days weeks or even years later. That means that taking any organs of these people is actually killing them, particularly if the organ taken is essential to donor's life. I am talking of people that had not given any indication that they were willing to be organ donors while they were alive.

Lately, there is a proposal both by the governments of Canada and Greece that, in the absence of a negative statement of the potential donor, it should be taken as a positive one and doctors can proceed to obtain the organs, with the agreement of the family. Father **Stanley Harakas** however, a retired Doctor of Theology, in his book "**Contemporary Moral Issues**" by Light and Life Publication Company, states:

"Vital organs should not be taken from the corpse of any person who has expressed no opinion on the matter if his surviving relatives find the trauma of partial dismemberment too much to bear in their grief. On the other hand, if a person believes his organs ought to be donated for the benefit of others and expresses his desire either in his will or through provision of the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act, or lacking explicit direction, his surviving loved ones find such a donation consonant with the major thrust of his life, then the Orthodox Church in all likelihood would offer no objection to the act".

I believe organ donations are important and it should be considered by everyone and make known to the families members while they are still alive. I also believe that, since no one is obligated to donate any organs, it should be left to the individual to make freely his or her decision. Finally donating an organ while we are still alive or otherwise, should be done with the respect of the life and well being of the donor as well as the recipient.

- **Cremations**

Cremation is the process of burning the corps to the point of ashes. The corps is placed in special furnaces capable to generate temperatures as high as 980 degrees Celsius. The body is placed in those furnaces until is totally burned and the ashes are collected and usually given to relatives in an urn to keep them or scatter them in the sea, river, or whatever place was the wish of the deceased.

There are different reasons/excuses why someone will choose cremation over regular burial.

- Some say that they cannot stand the idea of the slowly decomposition of the body.
- Others claim that the cost of funeral is high,
- and yet others claim that the use of land as cemeteries is a waste.

Some religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, practice cremation on regular basis. Within Christians there is a difference of opinion. Protestants in general permit cremation. Catholics discourage it but permit it in special circumstances. Eastern Orthodox Church, on the other hand, forbids it to the point that if someone decides on their own to be cremated, the church will not provide any funeral services. There are some exemption which we discuss later on.

Here are the reasons on which the Orthodox Church bases its decision.

Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians writes:

Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you

(A Corinthians 6:19)?

Cremation of the corps therefore is considered to be dishonoring the body which at one time was the temple of the Holy Spirit. Also Christ himself states:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain (John 12:24).

Both verses indicate that the body is to be buried and not cremated. Orthodox Christians also see the cremation as a denial of the resurrection of the bodies at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Without resurrection, our faith is just a theory without any substance. Christ has promised that the

same way He was resurrected, so will everyone else. In the same letter of the Corinthians Paul also states:

**If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty
(A Corinthians 15:14).**

Historically, in the Orthodox Church, we see burials and not cremation.

Orthodox Christians use relics of the Saints at the base of the Altar when they consecrate the churches. The meaning behind this is that the church is built on the blood of the Saints of the Church. If the bodies were to be cremated, we will not have such relics. Also, the bodies of some of the saints of our church, like Saint Spyridon, Saint Gerasimos, Saint Patapios, remained unattached for centuries now. Cremation would deprive us of the incorrupt bodies of the holy saints of God.

One more reason, and probably one of the main reasons, that we bury our dead is the fact that it is a command by God. Right after Adam and Eve disobeyed God, He said to them:

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground for out of it you were taken; For dust you are, and to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:19). The English funeral service is translating this verse as: **“ashes to ashes and dust to dust”**. That creates confusion to some people because they believe the Bible is actually talking about cremation. The Orthodox translation of the 70 elders however clearly states: **“...ὅτι γη εἶ και εις γῆν ἀπελεύση”** which literally means, you were earth, mud, dust, and to the same you shall return.

The Orthodox funeral hymns indicate grave and bones. One of them states:

“...and I saw the bones of the ones fallen asleep and I asked myself. I wandered who was he, a king or a soldier, rich or poor, righteous or sinner”.

In the case of cremation, there are not bones to see.

In the Gospel of John we read:

“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice” (John 5:28).

When we cremate the dead there are no graves to talk about.

I read in the internet the other day that on March of 2006 the Greek government has passed a law permitting the cremation of the people as long as they have stated in writing their wishes while they were still alive or their immediate relatives wish it.

The Greek Orthodox Church however does not agree with this decision, although they will not challenge the law for people of other religions or other Christian denominations.

Having said that, the only time the Greek Orthodox Church will allow cremation, is on very special circumstances like an epidemic or where the civil authorities **demand** i.e. Japan. In all other case, particularly if the person willfully chooses to be cremated, the Church will not provide funeral services and their names might be permanently excluded from liturgical services for the departed.

- **Euthanasia.**

The word Euthanasia consist of two Greek words combined in one. The word **Eu** meaning good and the word **Θάνατος**, meaning death. Euthanasia therefore is the act of having someone having a **“good death”** meaning without suffering or pain.

In the eyes of some people, since we all will die, it makes sense to have a peaceful death, even if that means to actually kill someone, providing there is a lot of pain and suffering and there is no hope for recovery.

In the eyes of the Orthodox Church however, God is the giver of life and He is the only one that has the right to take it away. If anyone else contributes to the death of someone, that is considered murder. If the individual decides to end his life because of suffering, or, any other reason for that matter, that is considered suicide

It is true that in the Divine Liturgy we pray:

“for a Christian end to our lives, peaceful, without shame and suffering”.

It doesn't however mean that we should take it upon ourselves to decide who has the right to live and who has the right to die.

Life is a gift from God and we are all called to preserve it, not to end it.

It is also true that a lot, if not most, people do not have a painless and peaceful death. In fact some die in great and prolong pain. The question again is who decides the time of death. Is it the individual that suffers, is it a close relative or friend, is it the government officials, the doctors, or, God who gave us life in the first place?

Some people say that they would prefer to die in their sleep or from a massive heart attack. This way, they claim, there is no suffering at all. Our Church however in the services of the blessing of the water prays as following:

“We also pray to protect this city and every city from famine, plaque, earthquake, fire and sudden death”.

As Christians we believe that we are all sinners. It makes no difference how we start life but how we end it. We should see the last days or moments of our lives as an opportunity to ask, once again, for forgiveness from God. A sudden death is taking that chance away.

A true Christian should accept death because through death we will meet our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Suffering is considered to be cleansing of the soul. We are called to have **“remembrance of death”**, μνήμη θανάτου, remembering that our home is not on this earth but in heaven. However, it doesn't mean that we should shorten our life span here on earth even if that is not what some consider quality of life. Having said that, the Church does not object the use of medication, sometimes even drugs to lessen the suffering. What the Orthodox Church opposes is the use of any means to end the life of the person even if they are suffering.

The Hippocrates oath states:

" I will not give a lethal drug to anyone if I am asked, nor will I advise such a plan".

If a doctor or a medical professional, therefore, assists someone to die, that is considered a murder and it is against our believes, **"You shall not murder" (Genesis 20:13).**

By the way, I understand that some doctors do not take the Hippocrates oath which states that they will do everything under their power to heal the sick and the suffering. Frankly, I wouldn't want to have such a physician as my personal doctor.

There are two types of Euthanasia. The active when someone is actually administers the lethal drug, or passive, when someone assist another person to commit suicide. Any way you look at it, it comes down to either murder or suicide.

The first time Euthanasia was used was in the Nazi years in Germany where it is estimated that approximately seventy thousand people were Euthanized with the excuse that they did not have "quality life". The question is, who decides what is quality life. If that was an excuse then, who is to say that it cannot be used today for certain individuals that the medical professionals, or anyone else for that matter, considers to fall into this category?

Even if we consider Euthanasia as helping someone to die with dignity (which I repeat we have no right to do), where do we draw the line? Should we consider an hour before death comes naturally? How about a day, or, a week, or, a few months or maybe a year?

What about the cost of treating someone to recover. A lot of people consider this as a good excuse. Since they have no chance of surviving, why spend all sorts of money to keep them alive? Why not end it and be done with it. Again, how much would you consider as being too much. A thousand dollars? ten thousand, one hundred thousand? Where do you draw the line?

How about the excuse of using the bed for someone that has a better survival chance?

If that is the case, I ask you, who decides which of the two has a better chance to survive? We have cases upon cases of people that came back from a comma after days, months and even years.

How would you like to be the one who decided to exercise Euthanasia which did not go through for one reason or another, only to find out that the person has completely recovered?

Then we have another scenario. Relatives that would gladly use Euthanasia because they want to inherit whatever money the individual has instead of spending it to actually heal the person.

It is true that the Orthodox church includes in the prayers a special prayer for people that are straggling to die. Again father **Stanley Harakas** states:

It is of interest that the Prayer book of the Eastern Orthodox Church includes a whole service devoted to those in the process of dying. In the case of the individual whose death is prolonged and attended by much "struggling to die," the key sentence in the prayer calls upon God to separate the soul from the body, thus giving rest to the dying person. It asks God "to release your servant (name) from this unbearable suffering and this continuing bitter illness and grant rest to him" (*Mikron Euchologion*, p. 192). However, it must be emphasized that this is a prayer directed to God, who, for the Orthodox, has ultimate dominion over life and death. Consequently, the preceding discussion in no way supports the practice of euthanasia. Euthanasia is held by some to be morally justified and/or morally required to terminate the life of an incurably sick person. To permit a dying person to die, when there is no real expectation that life can sustain itself, and even to pray to the Author of Life to take the life of one "struggling to die" is one thing; euthanasia is another.

Father Harakas continues to say that for Eastern Orthodox Christians, suffering could be **" a spiritual growth that may take place through suffering"** and he quotes Paul's letter to **Romans 8:17** which states:

"...(we are) heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together". And Father Harakas concludes:**"Orthodox Christian ethics rejects the alternative of the willful termination of dying patients, regarding it as a special case of murder if done without the knowledge and consent of the patient, and suicide if it is permitted by the patient."**

- **Assistant Suicide**

Assistant Suicide is another form of Euthanasia. The only difference is that instead of someone administer the fatal medication they help the individual to do it themselves. The Orthodox Church however does not accept either one.

As far as I know there are only three countries in the world that allow Euthanasia. They are Belgium, Netherlands and Australia.

In Canada it is against the law and in fact we have the case of **Robert William** who killed his daughter Tracy and received a sentence of 10 years in prison.

We also have the case of **Sue Rodriguez** who eventually committed suicide with the help of an unknown doctor.

Although it is still illegal, public opinion in Canada supports Euthanasia and assistant suicide. Regardless of what the public opinion is however, it is considered unethical in the Orthodox faith.

I repeat what I have said before:

God is the giver of life and He is the only one to take it away. That includes our own lives as well as someone else's.

- **Artificial insemination-In Vitro Fertilization**

Artificial insemination is the process at which a female becomes pregnant by means other than physical intercourse. It is widely used for livestock breeding, like dairy cattle but lately is used for humans as well.

When it come to humans it was originally used for couples that they had physical or psychological problems. Today it is also used for single women, surrogate mothers and lesbians.

There is no need to go to details of how it is done. I will discuss, however, the ethical issues behind it, in particular in the Orthodox faith.

At present the Orthodox Church does not have an official position when it comes to artificial insemination. Having said that, and due to the fact that a lot of Christians are practicing it, some theologians have express opinions in the subject based on church traditions.

One of the purposes of marriage is procreation. **Genesis 1:28 "be fruitful and multiply"**

Based on this verse, some will argue that, if married couple have some kind of a physical or psychological problem, then they can use other methods than regular relations between husband and wife, to have children.

Meaning, it is OK to use artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization being one of them. Having said that, we have to make clear that there are some ethical limitations behind it. According to father Stanley Harakas:

The Church holds it morally wrong for the egg of another woman to be impregnated by the sperm of the husband artificially and implanted in the wife's womb. The obligation to preserve the bond of marital fidelity thus prohibits Orthodox Christians from the practice of artificial insemination by a donor in which the wife of a sterile husband is impregnated through a medical procedure with the sperm of an anonymous male donor. However, the Orthodox Church, recognizing as it does the importance of the procreative function, ought not to offer direct opposition to the procedure of artificial insemination where the procedure respects the bounds of marital fidelity. This means the egg must come from the wife's own ovaries, and that the sperm must be the husband's own.

Again the emphasis is that it should applies to spouses only. Surrogate mothers, lesbians, single women is considered to be unethical.

Another issue with in vitro fertilization is the fact that, because of the high cost, the couple might keep fertilized ovum left to be used later on, in case the first one did not work properly, and destroy them if it did work. Destroying a fertilized ovum will be consider unethical in Orthodox faith since we consider life as a gift from God and we believe that life begins at conception.

In conclusion, since the Orthodox Church has not as yet come up with an official position on all the ethical or unethical predicaments, and because each individual circumstances could be different from one person to another, I would strongly recommend that before you go ahead with any questionable decision to consults your own spiritual father for advice.

This concludes our session for tonight on Bioethics. I hope I have giving you some information based on our Orthodox faith at least to think it over before you make a decision on these moral and controversial issues.

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