Abstract. Addressing his fellow bishops, the author examines the vision for the exercise of the bishop’s munus docendi, or duty to teach, set forth in Gaudium et spes, and he proposes two fundamental bioethical criteria articulated in Dignitas personae—the dignity owed the human person and the intimately personal nature of the sexual act. Bishops are privileged in their teaching, especially in bioethics, to give voice to the voiceless and to promote medical research and therapeutic treatments that respect the dignity of the human person. The Church’s moral reflection is not simply a collection of teachings that are more or less related but rather a sustained reflection in faith on divine Revelation, the Word of God become flesh in Jesus Christ As a description of Catholic moral teaching, the famous image of the “seamless garment” shows that the coherence of the Church’s moral teaching can only be demonstrated and its truth apprehended when it is taught in its entirety and lived out integrally. National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly 13.2 (Summer 2013): 277–285.

The documents of the Second Vatican Council as well as the post-conciliar documents describe the three-fold ministry of the bishop—the munus docendi (the duty to teach), munus sanctificandi (the duty to sanctify), and munus regendi (the duty to govern)—as a fruitful expression of the presence of Christ who is priest, prophet, and king.

The commission “Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel” (Mark 16:15) is at the heart of the munus docendi of the apostles and their successors. When each bishop was ordained to the episcopate and “covered” with the book of the Gospels, he was asked to commit himself to promoting and safeguarding the deposit of faith.
Indeed, the celebrations of the Council and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which mark this Year of Faith give witness to the fulfillment of the apostolic vocation by others who have preceded us in apostolic succession within the order of bishops.

The complex medical and moral decisions which face our people require sensitivity and care on the part of the Church’s pastors. But we also teach with confidence, knowing that God stands at the center of that moral discernment, desiring our good, our salvation, and our communion with himself. In the Catechism, the third “pillar” of the presentation of the Church’s faith is the section on morality, rightly titled “Life in Christ.” The proclamation of the essential dignity of the human person at the heart of the Church’s moral teaching rests on the firm foundation of our creation in the image and likeness of God. In other words, moral discernment is a sustained reflection in faith on divine Revelation, since God himself is the source of life.

In light of this Year of Faith and in support of the bishops’ ministry as teachers of the faith, I would like to offer some brief comments on the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, which sets forth a vision for the exercise of the *munus docendi*. Secondly, I will propose the two fundamental bioethical criteria as they are articulated in the Instruction *Dignitas personae* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In conclusion, I would like to revisit the famous image of the “seamless garment” as a description of our moral teaching.

**The Vision of Gaudium et spes and the munus docendi of the Bishop**

The difficult social and political context in which bishops are called to exercise their teaching office, particularly with regard to biomedical issues, is apparent. A process of de-Christianization in Europe and North America has reached new fervor in the so-called “new atheism” of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. And yet the “new atheism” does not advance any philosophical arguments that were not already articulated in the “old” atheism of David Hume and other materialists of the last centuries. It is the same godless “scientism” that seeks to construct a worldview using the architecture of astrophysics and neurobiology, a worldview that not only discounts God but also displaces the human person from the center, assigning him to a mechanistic periphery.

This is our Areopagus! This context in which bishops exercise their *munus docendi*, difficult as it may be, is not so different from the context in which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council found themselves, addressing the Church and the world just twenty years after the conclusion of the Second World War. The National Socialist project in Germany and the Soviet attempts at exterminating the Church are clear examples of the inhuman and intolerant character of atheistic regimes new and old. Today’s so-called scientific atheism presents itself as a form of humanism but fails to be humane by excluding *a priori* all reference to the transcendent, to metaphysics, or to moral principles. In this sense, godless scientism is but the latest inheritor of a dark patrimony, always exposing the human family to the risk of new forms of political totalitarianism.

Then as now, man seeks his place in the world. The Council’s Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* frames the fundamental existential question of man in this
way: “But what is man? About himself he has expressed, and continues to express, many divergent and even contradictory opinions. In these he often exalts himself as the absolute measure of all things or debases himself to the point of despair. The result is doubt and anxiety” (n. 12). The utopian vision which historically has been the promise of the atheistic worldview is as illusory now as it was in the heyday of the Stalinist revolution. Rather, a sense of moral crisis has taken hold of human society, as evidenced by repeated failures in the attempt to construct a just global society, by the continued abuse of the environment and the depletion of natural resources, and by an unbridled financial system which has the Western world once again contemplating ruin. The Council, for its part, not only acknowledges the nihilistic crisis of meaning which ultimately results from godless socialism and scientism, it offers a telling and timely diagnosis: in refusing to acknowledge God as creator and source of all things, man obscures his own proper and ultimate goal as well as distorts his relationship with other persons and with all created things (n. 13).

But the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council did not content themselves with diagnosing the problem. Rather, they spoke directly to the problem by reminding the Church and the world that God is the only true measure of man and that the will of God, echoed in the voice of conscience, is the only sure source of moral obligation: “In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged” (n. 16). Ethical reflection is not primarily a religious pursuit but rather arises from the intellectual nature of man. The Council Fathers highlighted the necessity of a rationally based ethics because the natural law is grounded in human nature itself and therefore accessible to all.

The intellectual nature of the human person which grasps the law of God is perfected in faith, which gives him the power to be united to Christ, the fullness of divine Revelation. And so the Council teaches, “The root reason for human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin, man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God’s love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to his Creator” (n. 19). The fundamental questions of human existence and meaning have not changed—if anything, the problem we face in today’s media-saturated culture is a large-scale avoidance of philosophical questioning and rational argumentation. How could it be otherwise when so many people today are educated without a solid formation in the Christian faith or, more fundamentally, without a philosophical basis which enables rational argumentation and rigorous thinking? Such people seem to react instinctively against the idea that there are objective norms, and they live under a philosophically impoverished conception of “tolerance” which leads to the ultimately destructive idea that each person is able to decide for himself what is right, just, acceptable, and even moral. But let us not mistake this for an intellectual rejection of truth! It is rather the failure to engage the intellect in pursuit of truth. This is where the Church’s pastors come in. In their preaching and teaching they must capture the heart and so spur an engagement with the mind.
For this reason I recommend a rereading of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* in this Year of Faith. It is true that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in his recently published introduction to a new printing of *Gaudium et spes*, notes that the concept of “today’s world” as used in the Constitution remains vague largely due to a lack of a clear definition in the text of the essential features of the modern era. Still, I am convinced that this document offers a valid orientation for our *munus docendi* that is valuable today. The Constitution both articulates a diagnosis of the contemporary sociopolitical situation and proposes a remedy, namely, the proper presentation of the Church’s teaching accompanied and amplified by the integral life of the Church and her members. We must reject the characterization of our teaching as outdated and tired. The overarching message of *Gaudium et spes* is that the Church is thoroughly concerned and engaged with man at the most basic levels of identity, meaning, and moral discernment. We cannot allow our moral teaching to be frozen in the political categories of liberal or conservative, modern or outdated. Our categories are orthodox or heretical, the measure by which something corresponds to the Gospel and to the God-given nature of man or distorts it. The Church’s moral reflection is not simply a collection of teachings that are more or less related. Rather, ours is a sustained reflection in faith on divine Revelation, the Word of God become flesh in Jesus Christ who brings life and light. For this reason, the Council observed, “Above all the Church knows that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart when she champions the dignity of the human vocation, restoring hope to those who have already despaired of anything higher than their present lot. Far from diminishing man, her message brings to his development light, life and freedom” (n. 21).

We speak readily of the bishop’s *responsibility* to teach. Applying this perspective of *Gaudium et spes*, I wonder if it would be more fruitful to speak of the *privilege* of teaching the Church’s faith. Especially in the sphere of bioethics, bishops are privileged to give voice to the voiceless and promote medical research and therapeutic treatments which respect the dignity of the human person. Often enough, theirs is the *only* voice in contemporary society advancing a vision of the sanctity of human life and human sexuality, and this too is a privilege, because it is a public confession of faith in the goodness of God’s creation and the beauty of reciprocal spousal love as a reflection of God’s own intrapersonal love.

When Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger addressed the US bishops at their bioethics workshop in 1984, he observed that “morality requires not the specialist, but the witness. The position of the bishop as teacher rests on this: He teaches not what he himself has discovered. But he witnesses to the life wisdom of faith in which the primitive wisdom of humanity is cleansed, maintained, deepened. Through contact with God … human knowledge becomes a real vehicle of communication with truth by means of the communion it shares with the conscience of the saints and with the knowledge of Jesus Christ.”¹ It would be a shame to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary

of the Second Vatican Council and not be renewed in this vision of the “modernity” of the Church’s moral teaching, a unique witness in the world that has lost none of its freshness and power to capture the human heart and bring about conversion.

To capture hearts and engage minds, we must commit ourselves to claim, reclaim, and proclaim the universal dignity of the human person and of human rights. Indeed, the Catholic Church must demonstrate leadership in this proclamation, not allowing secular and atheistic groups to misuse the language of human rights to advance things which are contrary to the moral law! Let this commitment be the “Dallas Declaration” of the Catholic Church and the beginning of not only an engagement with secular culture but the transformation of culture toward a good and happy future for all.

The Instruction *Dignitas personae* and Fundamental Bioethical Criteria

With this view of *Gaudium et spes* as the background, let us now consider the bioethical teaching of the Church in more recent years, particularly as expressed in the Instruction *Dignitas personae*. In the twenty years since the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we have witnessed incredible advances in biomedical technology. On the one hand, research into the use of adult stem cells or the development of new treatments for infertility open new possibilities which would have been considered impossible just a few years ago. On the other hand, each new development in technology gives rise to new ethical questions, not only in terms of the application of the Church’s moral teaching but often in relation to the very nature of the human person. Think, for example, of the host of moral implications which arise from embryonic stem cell research, attempts at therapeutic cloning, and the practice of cryogenically freezing hundreds of thousands of embryos.

This is the context in which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decided that a new survey of the horizon of bioethics was necessary. The publication of the Instruction *Dignitas personae* in September 2008 was the fruit of several years of study and consultation with the theological and scientific communities. With this document, the Congregation intended to offer the pastors, theologians, and faithful of the Church an aid toward the correct formation of consciences and a measure to conduct biomedical research in a way that truly respects both the dignity of every human person and the dignity of human procreation.

I do not propose to review the entire document here. But there are riches to be drawn out of *Dignitas personae* which can be of great assistance in proposing the Church’s moral and bioethical teaching in a way that engages contemporary society and furthers the new evangelization.

Drawing “upon the light both of reason and of faith and [seeking] to set forth an integral vision of man and his vocation” (*Dignitas personae*, n. 3), the Instruction presents rather succinctly two fundamental ethical criteria by which biomedical questions should be evaluated. These two criteria concern the dignity owed the human person and the intimately personal nature of the sexual act. *Dignitas personae* articulates the first criterion in this way: “The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place
is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life” (n. 4). The second fundamental criterion follows from this: “The origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and in the family, where it is generated through an act which expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman. Procreation which is truly responsible vis-à-vis the child to be born must be the fruit of marriage” (n. 6).

From these two criteria, the whole of the Instruction’s reflection on complex biomedical issues proceeds. The genius of these criteria, if I might say so, is three-fold.

First, these criteria are simple. How many of our clergy shy away from preaching and teaching about biomedical issues because they perceive such issues as too complex or beyond their level of understanding? But the principle of the dignity owed the human person is straightforward and unburdened by overly technical medical jargon. It also happens to be true, and so instilling this basic principle into our faithful empowers them to confront specific bioethical issues in their own lives, whether in the media discussion, at the ballot box, or in medical decisions facing family members.

Similarly, the teaching about the uniquely personal nature of procreation and the sexual act is marked by a compelling and beautiful simplicity. So many people ask why the Church is so concerned with sex—they mean this as a criticism, of course. The Church is so concerned with sex because sex has everything to do with love, and God is love! There is plenty of loneliness, brokenness, and unhappiness in the world. The symptoms of a fundamental brokenness abound in the lives of so many people. But the Church is often the only voice speaking to the cause of that existential loneliness and unhappiness. The degradation of the sexual act, reducing it to a function of pleasure, power, or control, demeans the human person. The great lie of the sexual revolution is that sex without personal responsibility always leads to happiness and personal liberation. It leads to such in its authentic context of marriage and family, but otherwise it leads people into the desert of meaninglessness. In the stark simplicity of our moral teaching and through the working of grace in the sacrament of Penance, there is a tremendous power for liberation and happiness if we but teach people the intrinsic meaning of sex in the image and likeness of God.

Secondly, these fundamental moral criteria are recognizable as true by human reason. For the past several years, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has tried to promote renewed attention to the natural moral law, and happily several universities and Episcopal Conferences have organized symposia on this issue. At the heart of our bioethical and moral teaching is the conviction that the natural moral law is engraved on the heart and soul of each and every human being, because it is human reason which ordains man to do good and avoid evil. Sadly, civil society is increasingly forgetful of this original moral sense in its public discourse. For its part, the media nearly always portrays the teaching of the Church as sectarian or based entirely on articles of faith—and often purposely so in an attempt to relativize and dismiss that teaching. And yet human reason, that great gift of our Creator, will not be so thwarted! God created man as a rational being who can initiate and control his own actions. Because the dignity of the human person and the nature of human sexuality are concepts accessible by reason, it is possible to set forth the Church’s teaching in a convincing way that rouses the intellect from its rational amnesia.

Thirdly, these criteria are reinforced by our Christian faith. The revealed knowledge that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God and
redeemed by the Precious Blood of Christ Jesus the Lord opens our moral and ethical reflection to an eternal horizon. Human dignity takes on new vibrant dimensions when man understands himself as possessing “an eternal vocation… called to share in the Trinitarian love of the living God” (Dignitas personae, n. 8). Faith can never be divorced from human sexuality, but rather it helps us discover its true meaning and beauty. From within a prayerful meditation on the divine Mystery, we come to understand that procreative acts “are a reflection of Trinitarian love. God, who is love and life, has inscribed in man and woman the vocation to share in a special way in His mystery of personal communion and in His work as Creator and Father… The Holy Spirit who is poured out in the sacramental celebration offers Christian couples the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus” (n. 9).

On a more pragmatic level, I am proposing that bishops reread the Instruction Dignitas personae themselves and reflect anew on the breadth and beauty of the Church’s wise teaching. This is an essential first step in opening a wider conversation with their diocesan staff and clergy about identifying new ways of promoting the Church’s bioethical teaching. The New Evangelization will be supported and, indeed, carried out by Catholic laity who are solidly formed in their faith, who have internalized these fundamental bioethical criteria, and who are able therefore to give a persuasive, even eloquent, witness to the truth of that teaching in society at large.

The Teaching of the “Seamless Garment”

Finally, allow me to return to the image of the bishop as the teacher of the Church’s faith. We are all familiar with the image of the “seamless garment” describing our Catholic moral teaching: a consistent ethic of life uniting ethical, religious, and political threads to form a unified moral vision. Attributed to Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the “seamless garment” image was used to great effect to root the Church’s response to various moral issues, from nuclear proliferation to poverty, in the overarching teaching on the sanctity of human life from natural conception to natural death. It is also true, however, that many theologians, prominent Catholics, even some Catholic politicians have used the image of the “seamless garment” in an intellectually dishonest manner, allowing or at least turning a blind eye to instances of abortion, contraception, or public funding for embryonic stem cell research as long as these were accompanied by opposition to the death penalty or promotion of economic development for the poor, issues which are also part of the fabric of Catholic moral teaching.

There is a natural tendency on the part of some in the Church to look for “common ground” with the surrounding culture, that is to say, to emphasize in their teaching and preaching those elements of Catholic doctrine, such as social justice and human rights, that are acceptable to the non-Catholic ambient culture. This is understandable and an appropriate pastoral strategy. But what also must be taken into account is the difference which exists between those elements of Catholic teaching that may be attractive to the surrounding culture and those elements which Catholics themselves need to hear proclaimed by their pastors.

There is a beautiful coherence to the Church’s moral teaching, but that coherence can only be demonstrated and its truth apprehended when the moral teaching
of the Church is taught in its entirety and lived out integrally. As the fundamental moral criteria articulated in *Dignitas personae* indicate, the separation of the sexual act from its proper context is at the very core of so many of the bioethical problems which confront us today. The prophetic teaching of *Humanae vitae* on human dignity and the intrinsic meaning of the sexual act is so important that without it we cannot engage our faithful—to say nothing of the larger society—in a coherent discussion of the problems and moral evil presented by techniques of artificial fertilization, preimplantation diagnosis, the cryogenic freezing of embryos and “embryo reduction,” human cloning, and the therapeutic use of stem cells. Our teaching is based on an inspired vision of the meaning of love, wherein the sexual act finds its proper place as an expression of nuptial intimacy and openness to the life-giving creativity of God. In marriage, sex is an expression of love with a particular and intrinsic meaning. Once the sexual act is removed from this defining context, however, the “seamless garment” begins to unravel.

Over the last forty years, the so-called sexual revolution has promoted a distorted understanding of sex as lacking any intrinsic meaning and has reduced it to simply a pleasurable pursuit or a morally irrelevant activity. The experience of the Church in this same period demonstrates that, wherever there has been an overemphasis on finding common ground with the ambient culture, there has been an attendant danger of losing a vibrant Catholic identity. This is especially true in the area of sexual morality, where Catholic teaching is so consistently at odds with the secular culture. When the Church has tried to accommodate this secular understanding by deemphasizing the specific witness of her moral teaching, this has lead to a collapse of family life, a diminishment of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and a languishing of parish life.

On the other hand, we have also seen that in those places where Catholic teaching has been robustly presented, it has indeed taken root and has flowered in a renewal of family life and a new vitality for the Church. In many respects, this situation was foreseen and predicted by *Humanae vitae* as a consequence of a contraceptive culture. These experiences have shown that the Church’s response to modernity has to be one which is completely faithful to the teaching of the magisterium on matters of sexual morality, because this is where doctrine touches life.

We are told again and again that a majority of the faithful have rejected the Church’s teaching expressed in *Humanae vitae*. I propose that they have not done so. What many have rejected is a caricature of the Church’s teaching, merely imagining that document to express a no to artificial contraception. Many have never heard the fullness of the Church’s teaching, the profound yes to the sanctity of sexual love lived out in marriage and the family, the yes to responsible parenthood, the yes to the dignity of the woman, which protects her against manipulation by a process that views her body as a problem to be overcome or circumvented.

The indispensible role of the bishop is to exercise the *munus docendi* in such a way that faith is presented in its entirety with particular attention to the interrelatedness of the various aspects of our teaching. Yes, the bishop fights for the religious liberty of the Church, and the bishops of the United States have given us a splendid example of this. At the same time, the bishop needs to set forth persuasively and continually the Church’s vision of love and sexuality, including the intrinsic
immorality of abortion and contraception, which is at the heart of the current debate in the United States concerning religious liberty. He articulates this unified vision in his own preaching and teaching, but also by ensuring that the fullness of the faith is presented at each level of the diocesan structure. If our teaching on the essential dignity of the human person and the intrinsic meaning and value of the sexual act is not presented in our schools, in parish homilies, by diocesan offices, in our Catholic newspapers, and in marriage preparation programs, how can we legitimately expect that this true faith will form consciences and equip our people to confront the moral decisions in their own lives? Only by such a thorough presentation of our teaching can we begin to reclaim the language and concept of human rights as it relates to family life and especially to marriage as constituted by one man and one woman.

In the specific field of bioethics, the bishops cannot supplant moral theologians, researchers, and specialists, each of whom has a vital role in the articulation of the Christian vision of human dignity and the sanctity of human sexuality. Rather, we must hold together and promote an integrated vision of the faith which informs bioethical considerations as much as it is enriched by them. With the strength offered by this global vision, bishops may engage physicians, medical researchers, and health care professionals in a dialogue based in truth and charity to promote a more human civilization, a civilization of life and love. At the same time, if Catholic theologians and medical professionals are to further the Church’s teaching and health care ministry and influence the secular vision of life, they must acknowledge the normative role of magisterial teaching. Bishops bear a responsibility of office which is exercised in a particular way in the administration of our schools, hospitals, and other ecclesiastical institutions. There is a spiritual and magisterial quality to the pastoral governance exercised by bishops at the service of ecclesial communion. While they are always ready to teach and thereby proclaim the Church’s faith, the dialogue in which they engage must ultimately lead to actions and decisions in harmony with that faith, actions and decisions which reflect the bishop’s particular role of governance.

Further, the image of the “seamless garment” reminds us that faith, worship, and life are interwoven, and so our munus docendi, expressed and supported by the munus regendi, is also intimately bound with the munus sanctificandi. We teach the faith in its fullness as pastors, not speculative theologians. We know that the Church’s moral teaching must be lived by fallen human beings who are prone to sin. But where sin abounds, God’s grace abounds all the more! And so our teaching is supported by frequent reference to the sanctifying power of the sacrament of Penance. In making sacramental confession widely available in our dioceses at convenient times and in ensuring that our priests receive appropriate ongoing formation in biomedical issues so that they might be effective confessors, we demonstrate to our people that the Church stands with them in their moral discernment, exhorting them to greatness, and providing them every assistance when they fall.

It is no small task to which we have been called, and it must be said that this hopeful vision of human life in God, a vision captured by Gaudium et spes and Dignitas personae, has found expression in the renewal and resurgence of ecclesial life in North America as in few other places in the world.