I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak about the Orthodox Christian theological approach to bioethics at the Fourth Research Symposium of the Hellenic Medical and Dental Society of New England (Boston, MA).

Certainly, it is appreciated by all that there are many different systems of ethics that are based on different philosophies and ideologies. For instance, we could mention the ethical theory of relativism, Marxist ethical theory, Christian or Islamic ethical theology, and so on.

All ethical systems do not agree on every ethical issue. There is a general agreement on some ethical issues like the value of a person’s life, the need to provide therapeutic treatment to people who suffer from illnesses, and the appropriateness for using technology for therapeutic purposes.

The medical community, the socio-political agencies, the religious and the philanthropic organizations believe that they contribute—in their own particular ways—to the good health of the people. The physicians provide therapy, the socio-political and philanthropic organizations provide financial and psychological support, the religious ministers provide spiritual care.

There are other ethical themes, however, where the different worldviews and beliefs produce different ethical positions. It is not difficult to realize that. For example, when we read the proclamation of Dimitris Koufontinas, a terrorist recently arrested in Greece, we are astonished looking at his references to the value of human life. The terrorist group “November 17” believes that its assassinations serve humanity because they punish the enemies of the people. This is an ethical principle that derives out of the group’s particular ideology. We all reject this principle, except those who believe and accept this particular ideology.

Likewise, there are many issues that are approached differently by Osama bin Laden, by the Christian nuns in India, by Dr. Jack Kevorkian, by Mimis Androulakis or by Henry Kissinger. Therefore, when there is a dialogue between people who do not share the same worldview, and who have a different understanding of life and death, concepts must be clarified in order for the dialogue to be meaningful.

I accept as a given that the majority of people appreciate the life of a person as a biological episode. A man or a woman is understood as a psychosomatic being who is born, lives a certain number of years, and dies. Certainly, that is how science views human life, because it cannot prove religious claims for life after death. Scientific knowledge is limited to what we can measure and describe scientifically.
Christian knowledge, on the contrary, is an existential - personal knowledge of God. We know God and we obtain knowledge of our fellow human beings only when they reveal themselves to us, and when we are ready – at the same time – to receive this revelation. Do I know, for example, Dr. Theoharidis? I do not really know him, because I do not have a personal relationship with him, and he has never revealed his inner self to me. I can describe scientifically Dr. Theoharidis, and share with you the good things I have heard about him. But I cannot claim that I know him.

The same thing is true about the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. Orthodox Christians live their faith in Christ. The authority and divinity of Christ are validated existentially. This kind of knowledge, however, cannot be accepted in a scientific laboratory. The scientific laboratory will tell us, for example, that Holy Communion is just bread and wine, while the Orthodox Christians will claim that it is also the body and blood of Christ.

Truly, religion and science oftentimes speak different languages. They understand things differently. This is evident in the field of bioethics as well. Some time ago, I read an article written by Dr. Thomas Shannon about the findings of modern biology. Dr. Shannon tries, in his article, to persuade the Church that abortion must not be rejected if it is performed during the first three weeks of pregnancy, because the embryo needs about three weeks after fertilization to become an individual.

He writes in his article: “Given the findings of modern biology, there is no evidence for the presence of a separate ontological individual until the completion of either restriction or gastrulation, which occurs around three weeks after fertilization. Therefore, there is no reasonable basis for arguing that the pre-embryo is morally equivalent to a person or is a person as a basis for prohibiting abortion. That is, there is no biological support for the position that the fertilized egg is from the beginning of the process of fertilization a distinct individual needing no outside agency to develop into a person”.

This position, scientifically correct I imagine, emphasizes the personality of the individual. Nevertheless, it ignores the position of the Church that a human being receives (also) the “breath of God” at the time of conception. A human being is saved as a being who has received the “breath of God” and who eschatologically (at the end of times) participates in the human nature of Christ that embraces all humanity. Orthodox Christians “put on Christ” through the sacrament of baptism and receive communion from the same cup. They cease to exist as individuals separated from each other and from God. St. Paul says in his epistle to the Galatians: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). We realize, that a different understanding of personhood leads to different ethical positions.
The same is true about the issue of euthanasia. If human life is not God’s gift, if God is not the
governor of our life, if there is no life after death, then the government of Netherlands did the
right thing; it legalized euthanasia. Euthanasia, according to the logic of the government of
Netherlands—and allow me to say—according to the logic of the common man (who is not
religious or Christian) must be allowed when the terminally ill individual suffers without hope,
and without having quality of life. Pain and suffering, in our society, must be avoided at all
costs; even if we have to sacrifice our own life...

The Orthodox Church, on the contrary, considers the martyrs as its first saints, appreciates “the
divine gift of tears” and believes that pain can become beneficial; it can reconcile man with
God. The Church understands differently the term “quality of life”. Quality of life, for the
Orthodox Church, means life with God, beyond the end of a person’s biological life, and despite
a person’s temporary suffering.

The Christian understanding of life, and life’s quality, approaches the issue of infertility with a
non-secular mentality as well. The conservative secular mentality understands a marital
relationship successful when it includes the procreation of children. This mentality pressures
many couples that “suffer” from infertility to develop anxiety disorders or to ask the help of
medical technology in order to conceive a child.

Such a decision requires sometimes the involvement of a third person in the procedure or
accepting to fertilize as many eggs as possible (some of which are destroyed when they are not
needed anymore). These options do not have the blessing of the Church. The Church believes
that God knows better what is good and beneficial for our lives. Childless couples are called to
accept that God wishes to protect them from spiritual dangers that could emerge in the future.
He also gives them the opportunity to adopt children who need adult protection and care (if
they are ready to become parents). St. John Chrysostom emphasizes that the real purpose of
wedding is the spiritual perfection of the couple, and not the procreation of children.

The Orthodox bioethical positions are very clear, I believe. However, there are some cases
where the Church accepts as ethically permissible the act of abortion (when the life of a
pregnant woman is in danger), the artificial insemination (when all fertilized eggs are used in
the procedure), and unplugging the machines that keep a brain dead person alive (after a long
time of waiting for his recovery has passed).

These acts are considered, by the Church as permissible [using “economy”]; neither rejected
nor recommended. The Church will not stop a mother from putting her life on risk for her baby,
or a couple that decides to adopt a baby instead of having a baby at the laboratory, or a family
that wants to keep a relative alive with the help of technology. The Church marginally
“accepts” some ethical decisions, because it appreciates the weakness of human nature (St.
Peter could not “walk on the water” despite Christ’s command...); and also that people – oftentimes- make the wrong decision, because they are victims of a sinful society.

The woman who is having an abortion because she was raped, the couple that goes to an IVF center pressured by a conservative secular mentality, the terminally ill patient who commits suicide because he got sick from the polluted atmosphere, are partially responsible for their actions. We (the “children of Adam and Eve”) are all co-responsible for the existence of social evil and sin.

In the final analysis, no-one is innocent and no-one is completely excluded from salvation in Christ. The prayers of forgiveness, in every Orthodox sacrament and service, reveal the faith of the Church that God “who listens to the prayers of all” is able to restore everything that needs restoration, forgive our sins, and offer us another “quality of life” through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Thank you for listening to my thoughts.

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