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Bioethics message lost in Vatican's \"credibility gap\"

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 20, 2009 All Things Catholic

How bad is the Vatican's image problem right now? Consider that recent weeks have seen CEOs taking corporate jets to ask for government bailouts; the governor of Illinois was tossed out of office in a bribery scandal, and his last-minute appointment to the U.S. Senate may not be far behind; three Obama nominees have embarrassed the administration by withdrawing under a cloud; Japan's finance minister quit after reportedly being soused at a G-7 meeting; the world's best baseball player has been caught taking steroids, and the world's best swimmer caught smoking a bong.

Yet even in that sorry context, Monday's *New York Times* saw fit to devote a lead article to the pope's communications woes. Managing to stand out amid this PR carnage is, in a perverse sense, a rather remarkable accomplishment.

The backdrop was not just the row involving a Holocaust-denying traditionalist bishop, but also Benedict XVI's on-again, off-again appointment of an auxiliary bishop in Austria, Gerhard Maria Wagner, who believes that Hurricane Katrina was God's vengeance upon sinful New Orleans, and that the Harry Potter series is Satanic. Once more, the Vatican failed to see a train wreck coming, and breathed a sigh of relief when Wagner withdrew.

Plenty has already been said about the need for greater savvy in Rome, and, in any event, the ancient principle of *res ipsa loquitur* applies ? the thing speaks for itself. In the meantime, the Vatican is stuck with one of the painful consequences of these self-inflicted wounds, which is that it struggles to get a hearing even when it has something valuable to say.

That truth comes to mind in light of an important Vatican symposium this week, sponsored by the Pontifical Academy for Life, on "New Frontiers of Genetics and the Risk of Eugenics." The term "eugenics" refers to attempts to improve the human race by fostering certain genetic traits, and by suppressing those considered undesirable. In the 1930s, a pseudo-science of eugenics was invoked to justify the racial laws in Nazi Germany, and ultimately it helped pave the way for the Holocaust.

Materials for the conference praise recent breakthroughs in genetics, but also warn that, "Excesses can lead to so-called 'eugenics,' which, in its various forms, seeks to obtain the perfect human being -- in some cases, running contrary to non-negotiable ethical principles, such as respect for human life and non-discrimination." Two points deserve to be made -- neither of which, alas, is likely to have much media traction in the present climate of incredulity about all things Vatican:

- The risks to which the conference alludes are real, and hardly of concern just to religious believers;
- Eugenics is an area where Catholicism has a fairly unique history of keeping its head when much of the rest of the world seemed to be going mad.

As Bishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Academy for Life, observed in a Vatican press conference on Tuesday, the fact that no one openly advocates "eugenics" anymore doesn't mean the idea has gone away.

Already, it's become routine in in vitro fertilization labs around the world for embryos to be subjected to genetic diagnosis before implantation, a procedure justified as a way to screen for harmful traits. Practitioners say that pre-implantation diagnosis has resulted in the birth of thousands of children free of genetic disorders such as cystic fibrosis, Tay-Sachs, sickle-cell disease, hemophilia, muscular dystrophy, and Down's syndrome. While preventing disease is obviously a laudable aim, critics have raised questions about where this process might lead. If parents can determine which diseases their children won't have, what's to stop them from deciding which qualities they will have -- for example, the "right" eye color, or height, or facial features? Why not make them more disposed to be good at math, to excel at sports, or to win "American Idol"?

From a Catholic point of view, all this is a non-starter because In Vitro Fertilization, or IVF, in itself is a no-no. Even if one could somehow get around the problem of technique, however, critics have raised five other categories of concern:

- Genetic engineering may compromise human freedom by hard-wiring people toward certain behaviors, attitudes, and life choices. Critics often invoke C.S. Lewis' famous work "The Abolition of Man," in which he argued that the first generation to master genetic technology would become the architect of succeeding generations, thus eradicating "man" in the sense of a free rational agent.
- Children may be subject to new forms of exploitation, such as the phenomenon of "savior babies" -- offspring deliberately conceived in order to provide genetic materials for siblings or other family members, obviously without informed consent.
- "Genetic profiling" could lead to new forms of discrimination in health care, insurance, employment, housing, and other sectors, as the rights of genetic "undesirables" are progressively curtailed.
- The high cost of genetic enhancement will likely mean that only the rich will be able to afford it. As a result, inequality will be deliberately encoded in our genes -- a prospect some refer to as "genetic apartheid". The children of the rich will not only be richer, but stronger, faster, better-looking, and smarter.
- Genetic selection may disrupt human ecology. One already sees this potential in India and China, where widespread use of cheap ultrasound technology has led parents to abort female children at a much higher rate because they're perceived as less desirable. The natural sex ratio is about 105 boys for 100 girls, but in India today it's 113 boys for every 100 girls, and in some regions it's as high as 156 boys per 100 girls. In China, the sex ratio has gone as high as 120 boys for every 100 girls, which among other things could mean that a fifth of Chinese men won't be able to marry for lack of available mates.

Each of these points may be debatable, and there's certainly a case to be made for the other side. Science journalist Ronald Bailey published *Liberation Biology* in 2005, arguing that just as liberation theology attacked economic and social oppression, the biotech revolution promises liberation from genetic disadvantage. Yet one does not have to be a Luddite or a "bio-con" to regard the worries listed above as worth pondering, or to believe that neither scientists nor politicians, left to their own devices, are likely to confront the hard ethical questions they suggest.

In that context, a brief historical parenthesis is in order.

Edwin Black's massive 2003 book *War Against the Weak* demonstrates that the pioneers of the eugenic movement in the early 20th century were not Nazis, but rather socially progressive Americans. Prominent backers included Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Graham Bell, John Maynard Keynes, Margaret Sanger, Leland Stanford, and many others. Research was funded by the Rockefeller and the Carnegie foundations, and had the support of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Medical Association. Involuntary sterilization laws were adopted all across the country, with the first in Indiana in 1907 -- decades

ahead of the Third Reich. Mental patients, prisoners and the poor were all subject to vasectomies and tubal ligations so their "bad genes" would be arrested. In the notorious 1920 case *Buck* v. *Bell*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld these procedures; Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote for the majority, "Three generations of imbeciles is enough."

Compare that with the position taken by Pope Pius XI in his 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, by which time the eugenics movement had begun to shift to Europe: "Public magistrates," the pope wrote, "can never directly harm, or tamper with the integrity of the body, either for the reasons of eugenics or for any other reason." In March 1931, the Holy Office (forerunner of today's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) ruled that "the theory of 'eugenics' is to be held entirely blamable, false and condemned." Nor was this simply Vatican verbiage; Catholic opposition in Great Britain helped block the adoption of a involuntary sterilization law there, and grassroots Catholic outrage in the States often made American laws impossible to enforce.

To be sure, that stance was bound up with the church's opposition to almost any form of limiting births, and with a deeply physical reading of natural law, both features of Catholic morality which some theologians today dispute. Whatever its roots, however, Catholicism undertook a prophetic -- and sometimes lonely -- defense of the dignity of every human person, which may never be sacrificed on the altar of alleged social progress.

Especially in light of that history, this week's Vatican effort to stimulate debate about a 21st century of eugenics is worth taking seriously.

Unfortunately, the near-term prospects for that seem fairly dim. The Vatican is suffering from a "credibility gap," making it difficult for some people to take it seriously as a source of moral leadership. In the long run, however, the ethical quandaries posed by genetic science are not going away, and one hopes the church will once again be in the forefront of seeking humane answers.

Getting the Vatican's PR act together would be, needless to say, a helpful first step.

(**Editor's Note:** This week's edition of the PBS newsmagazine program RELIGION & ETHICS NEWSWEEKLY #1225 (distributed Friday, February 20 at 5 p.m., check local listings) will include the following report: **Pope Benedict's Agenda and Interreligious Relations** -- Bob Abernethy is joined by National Catholic Reporter senior correspondent John Allen for a studio discussion focusing on Pope Benedict XVI's May trip to the Middle East and his papacy's troubled interreligious relations.

Go to the program Web site at www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics where a transcript and streaming video of the segment will be available after 8:30 p.m. Feb. 20.)

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