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Franciscan University Launches Bioethics Program

BY PATRICK NOVECOSKY

STEUBENVILLE, Ohio — Patrick Lee is getting used to his new title. The head of Franciscan University's Institute of Bioethics was recently handed the first fully endowed chair in the university's history.

"Up until last year, I thought of bioethics as one of the things I did," he explained. "I thought of myself as a general philosopher. Now I've become a full-time bioethicist."

With the commanding title — John N. and Jamie D. McAleer professor of bioethics — comes a commanding challenge: to fiercely engage the culture of death by clearly articulating Church teaching on bioethical issues.

"The program is dedicated to examining all the controversies in bioethics," he said. "It answers the call of Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* (The Value and Inviolability of Human Life) for universities to provide the research, discussion and articulation of arguments that are going to really stand up for the culture of life."

Father Terence Henry, Franciscan University's president, said the Church needs to be where the culture of death is pressing in the hardest.

"The attack on the dignity of



CONVERT-MAKER. As the first director of the Institute of Bioethics at Franciscan University of Steubenville, Patrick Lee said he wants to convert hearts and minds on life issues. He is seen speaking at the October 'Human Life: Its Beginning and End' conference. Behind him is Franciscan University philosophy professor John Crosby. Courtesy Franciscan University of Steubenville

human life is greatest in the areas of the origins of life," said Father Henry, a Third Order Regular Franciscan. "There's a danger of a utilitarian and mechanized approach, so this is a genuine response to the culture of death."

Joseph Esposito, director of the Center for the Study of Catholic Higher Education at the Car-

dinal Newman Society, says the university's emphasis on bioethics is significant on many levels.

"This is important because it makes a statement," he said. "The fact that the first fully endowed chair at Franciscan University of Steubenville is in the area of bioethics emphasizes that the university places a priority on this issue."

Bioethical issues continue to grab headlines around the world. Scientists continue to push the boundaries of what is morally acceptable while society grapples with ethical questions involving physician-assisted suicide, embryonic stem-cell research, organ transplantation, assisted reproduction technologies and various end-of-life issues.

"These are confronting us on a day-to-day basis now, and we need to be equipped to make appropriate decisions in keeping with Catholic Church teaching," Esposito said. "This is so important for young people because they are on the cusp of radical changes in technology and the ability to use science for good or for ill."

John Haas, president of the Philadelphia-based National Catholic Bioethics Center, concurs.

"Not only is there a need to articulate Church teaching on bioethical issues, but there is the need to engage faithful Catholic intellectuals in developing the moral tradition in the area of bioethics because issues are surfacing that have never been addressed before because they're just too new," he said.

Beginning this fall, Franciscan University will offer a master of arts in philosophy with a

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concentration in bioethics. It includes a practicum where students spend time in a hospital, making rounds with physicians, med students and social workers.

"They will see up close a lot of the things we talk about in class," Lee said.

But Lee says Franciscan's bioethics program reaches far beyond the classroom. He wants to prepare students to convert the hearts and minds of those leading the push for abortion, euthanasia and embryonic stem-cell research.

His new position has also given Lee the freedom to take on some of that "converting" himself. His schedule includes conducting research, public speaking and debating on panels with those who hold contrary opinions on bioethical issues.

Lee butted heads with Princeton's notorious Peter Singer at a May 1 conference that discussed the question "Is It Wrong to End Early Human Life?" Singer contends that infants and unborn humans are not "persons" and are therefore not worthy of protection under law.

With influential scholars like Singer making inroads in the culture, Esposito contends that programs like the one at Franciscan University are needed now

more than ever.

"There's a need for teaching courses, but also for having a wide range of intellectual inquiry in this area — conferences, workshops, papers, to fold in the issue of bioethics into other courses in sciences and other areas," he said.

No Stranger

Lee himself is no stranger to the bioethics debate. He has been a professor of philosophy at Franciscan since 1992. He has authored numerous articles in scholarly publications like the *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, *Bioethics*, and *Faith and Philosophy*. He's the author of *Abortion and Unborn Human Life*.

He contends that Catholics have not done enough to influence the culture and articulate Church teaching on life issues.

"We Catholics have been taking it on the chin for 20 or 30 years with the development of biotechnology," Lee said. "The way Catholics are often painted by some in the mainstream media is that we're fundamentalists trying to impose our religion on everybody."

"Everyone knows we hold these controversial positions regarding the beginning and end of human life, but we need to

specifically train people to go out and articulate the logical case for those positions," he said. "We have rich Church teaching, we have logic on our side and, for a lot of them, we have science to back us up, too."

But Haas of the National Catholic Bioethics Center is quick to point out that the Church has consistently taken the lead in bioethical issues.

"I don't think we've been taking it on the chin," he said. "The Catholic Church has consistently been ahead of the curve on these issues. The National Catholic Bioethics Center was established in 1972 before anybody ever talked about bioethics."

The first school of bioethics in the world, at the Legion of Christ's Pontifical Regina Apostolorum College in Rome, was founded in 2001.

In 1987, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addressed reproductive technology in *Donum Vitae* (Respect for Human Life in Its Origin), saying that cloning is beneath the dignity of the human person.

"In 1987, most mammalian biologists didn't think it was possible to clone a mammal," Haas explained. "Dolly wasn't cloned until 10 years later. Again you have the Catholic Church ahead of the curve."

"I agree with him [Lee] wholeheartedly that we need to have more people trained in this moral tradition to get out there in the public square and articulate the Catholic moral tradition so it's intelligible to everybody," he said. "There's no other institution out there that has anywhere close to the refined and sophisticated articulation of a moral tradition to deal with these issues than does the Catholic Church."

As for Franciscan University, Father Terence Henry summed up the university's excitement about the new development. He said that last fall he met with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, and told him about the school's intention of having a newly endowed chair.

"He leaned over the table and said that the whole area of bioethics is so dear to the heart of our Holy Father," said Father Henry. "He repeated that it's so dear to the heart of the Holy Father. So, we're excited that Dr. Patrick Lee will now have an international platform to engage the culture."

*Patrick Novecosky writes
from
Naples, Florida.*

INFORMATION

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