

**Remarks by Daniel P. Sulmasy, M.D., Ph.D.  
at the Eleventh Annual Paul Ramsey Award Dinner  
March 22, 2014**

It is truly a profound honor to have been named the 2014 recipient of the Ramsey Award for Excellence in Bioethics. It is humbling to have my name connected with that of this eminent scholar, truly a founder of the field, whose book, *The Patient as Person*, was one of a half dozen that I put on my list of must-reads as I began to explore this field as a medical resident in the late 1980s. It is also a great honor because so many of the previous recipients have shared Paul Ramsey's stature—Edmund Pellegrino, Leon Kass, Gilbert Meilaender, Mary Ann Glendon, to name a few. I recognize that I am part of a second generation of bioethicists.

My work has proceeded as if the field had always existed, largely due to the scholarship of men and women such as those who have been previous recipients of this award. They, like Ramsey, were giants. I only follow in their footsteps. Yet, as TS Eliot has written, about those whose work one cannot hope to emulate, "There is no competition. There is only the fight to recover what has been lost and found and lost again: and now under times that seem unpropitious." That is the work that engages me.

The Center for Bioethics and Culture does truly excellent work in making it possible for the truth to be told again, in a new way, in this generation. On behalf of Jennifer Lahl and the Center, I thank you for your support.

I would like, tonight, to talk briefly not about any particular topic in bioethics, but about Ramsey's method of doing bioethics. Perhaps it is his greatest legacy. I want to point out four features of the method that characterize his work that I think we need to emphasize today. The first is his appreciation for reality as the starting point for ethics. The second is his non-polemical treatment of ethical topics. The third is his fidelity to his faith in his reflections. And the fourth is his use of a style of argument that engages and speaks to all people of reason and good will, even those outside any faith tradition.

I bring up these points because there is a grave temptation, in the face of both overt attacks and systematic marginalization of religious voices in public debates about bioethical issues, to abandon Ramsey's method. In its place, one all too often hears arguments that are polemical, strident, and/or undertaken with a style of reasoning that is fully faithful to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, yet is directed towards the converted and does not attempt to engage persons outside the faith.

I think it is mistaken to engage exclusively in such arguments. It is true that there is a place for full-throated theological engagement with these questions, directed towards believers, making full and explicit use of scripture and theological tradition. There is also a place for such "thick" and religiously content-full reflections in public debates about controversial issues in the context of a fully inclusive and respectful form of deliberative democracy. We need to make a place for such a form of deliberative democracy. But absent the kind of methods that Ramsey used, these other forms of argument will put us in the position of engaging in a kind of parallel play, always outside the public marketplace of ideas, looking in, and shouting.

So while Christians ought to talk to Christians as Christians about bioethics and Jews ought to talk to Jews as Jews, etc., we *also* ought to speak to the world at large, and Ramsey is our model. Polemic, after all, makes the polemicist and his or her followers feel good, but rarely changes anyone's mind. In the end, whether conceived of in secular time or eschatological time, ideas matter.

It is worth searching for the right ideas and speaking them calmly but correctly, whether in or out of favor. In an era when even the notion of truth is often dismissed as naive, we must be convinced that the truth is one—that there is no scientific truth or moral truth or fact about the world, that if genuinely true, can contradict God's plan for the world. We should not retreat from this engagement. Society—indeed the world—needs us.

So, bioethics must not shrink from the method of argument used by Paul Ramsey, and, indeed, by most of the recipients of the Ramsey Award.

Inspired by Ramsey's appreciation for reality as the starting point, we must engage scientists and clinicians and understand both the science and the clinical reality thoroughly, and take these data as the starting points for ethical reflection. We must not dismiss science with which we disagree as either "advocate science" or merely the work of the devil. Some of what scientists and clinicians do is evil, but the reality they seek to understand and the patients they seek to help are not.

Second, we must resist the move towards the polemical. Perhaps the era of soundbites and tweeting and the political mobilization (if not manipulation) of the masses through fear or anger tempts us to join the bandwagon. But we should be confident of our search for the truth and calm in our ethical deliberations. The world needs those who will take the higher ground.

Yet we should engage in bioethical debate as members of congregations and living faith traditions and remain faithful to those traditions. We should certainly not be co-opted by forces of secularization and liberalization, abandoning the wisdom of thousands of years of sustained reflection on the crucial topics that bioethics treats in the most general of ways—procreation, birth, child-rearing, human sexuality, discovery, progress, community, suffering, sickness, and death. If our faith commitments are the truly originating and defining concepts of our sense of

selfhood, it would be self-alienating to abandon these commitments altogether merely to "fit in," or to prioritize the canons of political correctness over the canons of faith.

Yet, while confident of that faith, and of the unity of truth, we should engage the wider world of ideas on its own terms, using language and concepts that do not require revealed faith. Perfect human reason and perfectly good will and a perfect understanding of reality will lead to the same place as revelation, perfectly understood. But such a way of seeing belongs only to God. Being imperfect and fallible creatures, we do our best to understand our world and how we should act in it, imploring God's grace to assist us in this process. We should engage the world of secular ideas on its own terms out of charitable concern for our brothers and sisters outside the fold of the faithful. We can even consider such work to be, at times, a form of "pre-evangelization," preparing the way for reception of God's word by encouraging a sustained engagement with the truth. This worked for Augustine. It can work in our world as well.

We also must also engage the world on its own terms out of a recognition of our duties to the common good, even in pluralistic settings—the need to shape reasonable societies in which to raise our children.

The stakes, of course, are high: abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, embryonic stem cell research, genetic enhancement, rights of religious conscience, and the like. I can't promise we will always be immediately successful if stay true to Ramsey's method, but I can promise that we will be right more often than we are wrong.

Thank you again.

May the Lord give you peace.