

Frank Sobiech

Ethos, Bioethics, and
Sexual Ethics in Work
and Reception of
the Anatomist Niels
Stensen (1638-1686)

Circulation of Love

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Ethics in Work and
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Niels Stensen (1638-1686)

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Circulation of Love
In memory of Dr. med. Paul Takashi Nagai
(1908–1951)

Foreword

Precisely 25 years after the beatification of Niels Stensen (1638–1686) by the late Pope John Paul II, this first ever study on the Danish anatomist, bishop and vicar apostolic combining the perspectives of medical ethics and theology is being published in answer to the challenges of medical ethics. I am grateful to Frank Sobiech for tackling this task. His historically substantiated work not only provides points of departure for further research, but indeed also lays a foundation for the discussion of medical ethics, including but not limited to aspects of ecumenical Christianity.

Stensen, who broke new ground as an anatomical researcher prior to his ordination, for example with the first anatomical confirmation of the female ovary in humans, is compelling by virtue of the Christian ideas on humanity which he developed during the course of his life, first as a Lutheran, then as a seeker and finally, after his conversion, as a Catholic.

Just as Stensen, who set great store by merciful pastoral care, likened the pastor's role to that of a hospital's head physician characterized by individual concern for every patient, Pope Francis sees the Church as a "field hospital after a battle" (Santa Marta, August 19, 2013) whose duty is to heal each individual's wounds.

The nucleus of the study consists of seven chapters examining questions of sexual ethics, the beginning of human life and development in the womb from Stensen's perspective as an anatomist and bishop as well as in historical comparison. Stensen views the human body as a tool of the soul, attributing to it an essential role as "interpreter of the love of God" which he contrasts with, as phrased by Benedict XVI, the "debasement of the human body" (encyclical "Deus caritas est", 5).

Sobiech also deals with Van Rensselaer Potter – who coined the term "bioethics" in his eponymous book –, and concludes the study by comparing Potter's free-thinking, secularist concept of life to Stensen's.

The ethos of Niels Stensen may be regarded by every scientist and practicing physician, and likewise by every bishop, as a paradigm for their own behavior.

Rome, on the feast of St. Vincent de Paul 2013

Gerhard Ludwig Müller

Preface

The fact that commemoration of the figure and work of Niels Stensen (1638–1686) in medical literature has never entirely ceased since the end of the seventeenth century – in particular following the complete edition of Stensen’s anatomical and geological writings by Vilhelm Maar more than 100 years ago – as well as the publication of various smaller contributions in medical periodicals throughout the past two decades clearly document that the Danish¹ anatomist and geologist Stensen is considered a part of the cultural memory of medicine as a whole.

Dr. med. Niels Stensen, the first modern natural scientist ever to be beatified – in a ceremony conducted by Pope John Paul II ([*1920] 1978–2005) in Rome on October 23, 1988 –, contributed significantly to the Scientific Revolution during the early modern period which marked the beginning of a new era in the field of medicine. Based on analyses of Stensen’s own writings as well as literature published in the fields of medicine and history of medicine since the early modern period, the historical-theological study presented herein describes for the first time Stensen’s ethos, its implications for medical ethics and theology and its reception by physicians and natural scientists from the seventeenth century until today. The study’s goal is to contribute to the interdisciplinary perception of Stensen. In light of its interconnections with theology and the Magisterium discussed on the following pages, it becomes obvious that medical science in the early modern period still largely awaits methodical examination.

In his address (January 27, 2012) to the plenary meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Benedict XVI (2005–2013) spoke of the challenges posed by “the great moral questions regarding human life, the family, sexuality, bioethics, freedom, justice and peace” on the path of ecumenism, stating that it would be important to speak “with one voice” on this topic based on the foundations in Scripture and living Tradition of the Church “to decipher the language of the

¹ Cf. the appreciation of Stensen in Ejvind Slottved and Ditlev Tamm, *Copenhagen*, esp. pp. 61–65.

Creator in his creation.”² For these questions, particularly those regarding the essence of professional ethics in medical science and practice as well as the principles of bioethics, the scientist Niels Stensen as a person, and likewise his work, provide astoundingly up-to-date answers despite lying more than 325 years in the past.

I wish to cordially thank the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, His Eminence Gerhard Ludwig Cardinal Müller, for kindly writing the foreword.

This study is the revised English edition based on the 2nd German edition *Radius in manu Dei: Ethos und Bioethik in Werk und Rezeption des Anatomen Niels Stensen (1638–1686)* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2014) as vol. 17 of the series *Westfalia sacra* (editor: Prof. Dr. Reimund Haas, Cologne/Münster).³ The 1st edition (2013) was presented in the presence of His Excellency Msgr. Czeslaw Kozon, bishop of Copenhagen, at the “Anniversary Seminar” in Copenhagen on November 23, 2013, celebrating the 25th anniversary of Stensen’s beatification and organized by the *Academicum Catholicum*, the *Sankt Andreas Bibliotek* (est. 1648) and the Cathedral parish of St. Ansgar in Copenhagen.⁴ On December 10, 1988, to commemorate Stensen’s beatification, a memorial plaque was affixed in the gallery before the Great Hall (Aula Magna) of the seat of the *Pontifical Academy of Sciences*, the *Casina Pio IV*, in the Vatican Gardens (Fig. 1).⁵ I thank the President of the *Pontifical Academy of Sciences*, Prof. em. Dr. Werner Arber (Basel), for his kind permission to publish a close-up of this memorial plaque.

My heartfelt thanks go out to Dr. Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen and his wife Charlotte for their hospitality and our pleasant conversation during my research visit to Copenhagen in June 2011. Dr. Helge Clausen (Århus) guided me through the *Sankt Andreas Bibliotek*, Dr. Troels Kadel informed me about his and Dr. Paul Maquet’s translation project, and with Fr. Dr. August Ziggelaar SJ in the *Sankt Knuds Stiftelse* on June 17, 2011, I once again experienced international ecclesial fellowship. I also wish to thank Rector Dr. Hans-Peter Fischer for the cordial acceptance into the community of the *Pontificio Collegio Teutonico di Santa Maria in Campo Santo* during my visits in Rome and the Vatican City. The Florentine journalist Dr. Maria Francesca Gallifante (Basilica of San Lorenzo) and Msgr. Angiolo Livi (1914–2014), the then Prior of the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, bestowed unforgettable experiences in Stensen’s spiritual hometown on me.

Dr. Finn Aaserud, director of the Niels Bohr Archive in Copenhagen, digitized the correspondence between Niels Bohr and Gustav Scherz. My thanks go out to Prof. Dr. Robert Kretz and Prof. em. Dr. Günter Rager (University of Fribourg,

²“Le grandi questioni morali circa la vita umana, la famiglia, la sessualità, la bioetica, la libertà, la giustizia e la pace [...] con una sola voce [...] a decifrare il linguaggio del Creatore nella sua creazione.” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 104 (2012), 108–111, here 110 (hereafter cited as AAS).

³Sobiech, *Radius in manu Dei*.

⁴Cf. <http://nielssteensen.dk/anniversary-seminar>; Rütz, “Seminar”.

⁵Pontificia Academia Scientiarum, *Memorial Plaque*, pp. 27–29 (text of the memorial plaque with two images); Marini-Bettòlo, “Background Notes”.



Fig. 1 The memorial plaque in the gallery before the Great Hall (Aula Magna) of the seat of the *Pontifical Academy of Sciences*, Casina Pio IV, Vatican City

The engraved inscription reads “Nicolao Stenonis/ MDCXXXVIII – MDCLXXXVI/anatomiae geologiae principi/quem a Dania oriundum/Roma in fidem suam receptum/episcopatu insignivit/a Ioanne Paulo II summo pontifice/anno MCMLXXXVIII beatorum in numerum relato/in rei memoriam posuerunt/XXIII – X – MCMLXXXVIII/Universitas generalis studii Hafniensis/Nordisk Insulin Laboratorium Danmark” (To Niels Stensen, 1638–1686, excelling in anatomy and geology, whom, descending from Denmark, Rome took charge of and honored with the bishopric, added to the numbers of the blessed by Pope John Paul II in the year 1988, the University of Copenhagen and Nordisk Insulin Laboratorium Danmark mounted [this memorial plaque] in the memory of that event, [which took place on] October 23, 1988)

Switzerland) for information about Prof. Dr. med. Adolf Faller (1913–1989), and to Prof. em. Dr. Carl Schirren (Hamburg) for insights into his former activities. Helge Clausen, Troels Kardel and the *Edizioni Studio Domenicano* (Bologna) gifted me with books; and the secretaries of the *Académie des Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres de Caen* (Caen), Nicolas Rajaomilison and Claude Roche, procured the difficult-to-obtain essay by Léon Tolmer for me at no charge.

I thank the translator Stephan Stockinger (Vienna) for his dedication to our joint translation project, and the St. Ansgarius-Werk of the archdiocese of Cologne, the Ansgar-Werk of the diocese of Münster and the Ansgar-Werk of the dioceses of Osnabrück and Hamburg for their financial assistance. Angelika E. Paul (Spokane, WA) was the first to read the manuscript.

Unless otherwise specified, all dates mentioned in this study refer to the Gregorian calendar with each year beginning on January 1.

Würzburg, Germany
March 2016

Frank Sobiech

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