

**Blessed Niels Stensen, scientist,  
Catholic convert, and bishop  
of the seventeenth century**

**Beato Niels Stensen, científico,  
católico converso y obispo  
del siglo XVII**

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The volume is number 117 in the collection Philosophy and Medicine, English translation of the second edition of the German work *Radius in manu Dei: Ethos und Bioethik in Wer und Rezeption des Anatomen Niels Stensen (1638-1686)*, published in Munich by Aschendorff in 2014. Frank Sobiech holds a doctorate in Catholic theology from the University of Münster (Germany). The work he presents also reflects his background in history, Latin and law. In the presentation of the book, Cardinal Getrhard Ludwig Müller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in those years, already refers

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to the value of the almost unknown figure of Niels Stensen, beatified by John Paul II in 1988. Danish anatomist, Protestant converted to the Catholic faith (1667), ordained priest (1675) and bishop (1677). His person combines the scientific spirit and the ethical sense of the physician with the theological and pastoral perspectives of the priest. To him we owe discoveries in anatomy (salivary duct that bears his name, ovary in the human species) and contributions in paleontology and stratigraphy. In the preface, the author notes that he is presenting a historical-theological study that describes for the first time Stensen's ethics (ethos), its implications for medical ethics and theology, and its reception by physicians and naturalists from the 17th century to the present day. The study deals mainly with Stensen's thought on human reproduction, sexual ethics, the beginning of life and the animation of the embryo. Along with this we find interesting and detailed contributions, of a biographical type, about his personal experiences, first as a researcher and later as a pastor. Also important is the description of the cultural context in which Stensen's life developed. The study is the result of a careful analysis of Stensen's own writings and those of his contemporaries.

The work is structured in four chapters. The first two chapters present, in combined form, the cultural context, Stensen's life and his thinking on the various topics. Chapter 1, entitled "Basic Premises", presents the following points: 1) structure of the study, 2) the life of the anatomist Niels Stensen, 3) methodology and sources of the study, 4) the state of research on Niels Stensen in the history of medicine and in medical ethics, 5) the medical ethos in the 17th century, 6) the medical ethos in its relations with theology since the beginning of the modern age.

Chapter 2, entitled "Ethos and Bioethics of the Anatomist Niels Stensen", is divided into three parts. The first presents Stensen's activity as a student and researcher in the field of anatomy. His conflicts with Blasius and Deusing concerning the authorship of anatomical discoveries are described in detail. His main qualities as a researcher (intuition, reflection, empathy, and prudence) are highlighted. His

view of the human brain as an instrument of the researcher and how the latter moves between intellectual heights and awareness of one's own ignorance is explained. His detection of haste and pride as the main obstacles in research is pointed out. The second part of Chapter 2, entitled "Medicine, Patient and Creator", is devoted to Stensen's understanding of the doctor-patient relationship and anatomy itself ("On the Metaphysics of Anatomy").

The third part of this chapter 2, entitled "Between Medicine and Theology", is the longest and, I would say, the central part of the book. It explains Stensen's view on three bioethical-spiritual arguments: the beginning of life, suffering/death, and the priest as physician of the soul. Regarding the beginning of life ("The Beginning of Life: Research and Ethics") it is emphasized that he was the first to describe the ovary and its follicles. The historical circumstances surrounding the event of the public dissection of a woman's body, performed by Stensen in Copenhagen in 1673, are described. Other points covered are his studies and reflections on 1) human sexuality, 2) conjugal sexuality, 3) embryo animation, 4) the training of midwives and their dedication to pregnant women, and 5) the demystification of deformities. In relation to suffering and death ("In the Face of Suffering and Death"), Stensen's emphasis on spiritual aspects is emphasized. His vision of the relationship between the patient and the Creator, of the spiritual dimension of illness, as well as of asceticism as a form of redemption is presented. In his vision of the priest as physician of the soul, he considers the union that must exist between the care of bodily health and the care of spiritual health, as well as the therapeutic efficacy of the sacraments. Some extreme pastoral cases that he experienced are also presented.

In the third chapter ("Niel's Stensen's Character Sketch in History") the main features of his personality are described. His talent and originality, his humility, his pastoral zeal, and his qualities for public life are highlighted, as they have been recognized by different people throughout the following centuries. The fourth ("Niel's Stensen's Last Significance") discusses the significance of his figure for our

times. A highly recommended work for those who wish to approach with rigor the figure of this great man of science and faith who is hardly known.

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