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The Subtle and Far-Reaching Tentacles of the Culture of Death: The Dehumanization of Human Embryos and the People Surrounding Them

by

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There are currently three difficult issues about which the Church's magisterium has not spoken. All three have to do with the beginning phases of human life. Two of the issues have directly to do with the status of human embryos and two of them have to do with the use of stem cells and stem cell lines derived from a human person at the beginning of the human person's life: in one case, from a human embryo, and in another case, from a human fetus. All three issues are difficult for three reasons. First, there is a "gray" or seemingly ambiguous set of circumstances that surround them. Secondly, with all three issues, it is possible to think of legitimate and even noble intentions for pursuing the practices involved in them. Thirdly, on all three issues, proponents of the practices involved appear to resort to apparently sound moral reasoning, especially in terms of the principle of cooperation. However, the fundamental problem afflicting the proponents of the practices connected with these issues is a dangerously narrow moral vision. More specifically, in the face of the long-term implications of modern technology, especially as it relates to human life, these proponents fail to weigh the long-term consequences of their proposed practices.

1. The first issue is about those human embryos that have been brought into the laboratory, usually for purposes of in vitro fertilization, but left unused.

The question arises: what should be done with them? Of course, they never should have been brought into the laboratory in the first place. Human embryos belong nowhere except in their own mother's wombs. Nevertheless, these human embryos are indeed in the laboratory and a moral decision has to be made about them.

Some have proposed that, in order to save them from being destroyed or subjected to further manipulation, these embryos should be adopted by women in whom they could be implanted for the purposes of gestation and birth. The magisterium has not spoken specifically to this matter, but has spoken to related matters that are grounded on a basic principle. The principle is that it is wrong — indeed, intrinsically evil — to implant human embryos in a genetically foreign womb (Charter for Health Care Workers, n. 29). The magisterium taught this in connection with “surrogate motherhood” but it logically follows that it applies to this specific proposal as well. This logical connection is easily lost within the context and/or under the influence of the culture of death, which numbs us to the evil of allowing human embryos to be anywhere other than in their mother's wombs. Numbness to this evil alone explains how “adopting” human embryos and implanting them in genetically foreign wombs could be viewed either as a morally good action or even as a morally neutral action that could be made morally distinct from a “surrogate motherhood” by a good intention.

If “surrogate motherhood” is intrinsically evil, then, of course, one may not morally justifiably resort to this act in order to avoid a lesser evil, namely, the destruction or manipulation of human embryos. According to the principle of double effect, even in a moral dilemma the act in question must be good or at least neutral. One may not do evil in order to accomplish good. The end does not justify the means.

Besides, even if there is a good intention in adopting and implanting human embryos in a genetically foreign womb, a good intention cannot make an intrinsically evil act good. Moreover, the long-term consequence of either denying the intrinsic evil of “surrogate motherhood” or claiming that a good intention can make “surrogate motherhood” morally justifiable is that, ironically and tragically, this ultimately plays into the hands of the culture of death, which seeks to manipulate human embryos. In other words, if “surrogate motherhood” can be morally justifiable in certain circumstances, why can't the use of human embryos for medical benefits be morally justifiable, especially in the circumstances in which the human embryos will otherwise be destroyed? (Even if the latter is not necessarily justified by the former, there is the danger, on a societal level, that this is precisely how it would be viewed. In other words, the significant weakening of respect for human life would be inevitable.) Thus, this is why the late Cardinal Basil Hume of England, when faced by a “surplus”

of human embryos in his own country, said that the human embryos, rather than being destroyed, and rather than being subjected to further manipulation and indignity, should be allowed to die, parallel to a person at the end of life, for whom further medical treatment would either be useless or upon whom further medical treatment would impose a burden that would outweigh the goal of that treatment.

2. The second issue is very much related to the first: the use of human embryos for the purpose of attaining stem cells for further research and experimentation, hopefully for a number of medical benefits.

The Church's magisterium has clearly taught that the use of human embryos for this purpose, and more generally the reduction of human embryos as a means to an end, however noble the end may be, is intrinsically evil and cannot be morally justified for any reason or set of circumstances. In the specific case of the use of human embryos for attaining stem cells, the necessity of destroying the embryos is clearly morally unacceptable. All the more unacceptable is the creation of human embryos for the purpose of manipulating/destroying them.

However, the further question arises: can it be morally justifiable to use existing stem cells lines without any further destruction or manipulation of any human embryos? President Bush decided to federally fund research on 60 existing stem cell lines, while refusing federal funds for any further manipulation/destruction of human embryos. The Holy See, in an August 2000 declaration, addressed the question in the following way: "The answer is negative, since: prescindendo from the participation — formal or otherwise — in the morally illicit intention of the principle agent, the case in question entails a **proximate material cooperation** in the production and manipulation of human embryos on the part of those producing or supplying them."

It is important to understand this notion of proximate material cooperation in a way that avoids a narrowed moral vision. One cannot apply the principle of cooperation to an issue of far-reaching implications, socially and historically, in the same way that one would apply it to the behavior of an individual human being. On a societal level, the application of this principle requires far greater rigor precisely because, when, on the basis of apparently sound moral reasoning, cooperation with evils such as the one at issue in this case is viewed as permissible, the evils, by becoming institutionalized, take on a life of their own and become part of the very fabric of society. Thus, even if one does not either intend to be an accomplice in the destruction of human embryos in the past nor want to be instrumental in the destruction of human embryos in the future, the use of existing stem cell lines, even if not requiring in that use the destruction of

human embryos, cannot be morally justified because, despite one's intentions, the proximity of the use of the existing stem cell lines to the evil of past and future destruction of human embryos "risks" — if it does not "necessarily entail" — the institutionalization, within the very fabric of society, and therefore within the habits of mind of its members, of "an elicited act of the will" by which one wills the destruction of human embryos, past or future.

An elicited act of the will, distinct from commanded acts of the will by which we move other parts and powers of ourselves in visible actions, is an act of "pure will" within one's own soul that involves no bodily action whatsoever, and can be identical with passive acceptance. On its very own, an elicited act of the will is a human voluntary act that can be intrinsically good or intrinsically evil. Thus, this institutionalization would be, or risk being, accomplice not only to the destruction or manipulation of human embryos, but also to the dehumanization of members of society through the significant weakening of their respect for human life. As Pope John Paul II explains in a number of ways in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, this kind of institutionalization is the very stuff of the "culture of death."

Presumably, these are the reasons why the United States Catholic Bishops' Conference president stated: "The federal government, for the first time in history, will support research that relies on the destruction of some defenseless human beings for the possible benefit to others," Fiorenza said in a statement. "It allows our nation's research enterprise to cultivate a disrespect for human life."

This kind of institutionalization is not morally justifiable also because there are alternatives. Stem cells obtained from postpartum placental tissue and from adult bone marrow and tissue, although lacking the pluripotency of embryonic and fetal stem cells, are nevertheless scientifically promising and do not involve the destruction of human life. Seeking these alternative means instead of depending on the destruction and degradation of human embryos would not only avoid the issue of cooperation with evil entirely but also set a powerful example for other scientists to follow.

3. The third issue is very similar to the second: is it morally justifiable to use vaccines from cell lines derived from aborted fetuses?

As in the case of the second issue, it is abundantly clear that direct abortion for the sake of using fetal tissue or cells for medical benefits cannot be morally justified. However, and likewise as in the second issue, the question arises: can vaccines derived from aborted fetuses be morally justifiably used if the use of the vaccines themselves does not require any further abortions?

Once again, the Church's magisterium has not spoken about this specific issue in a definitive manner, although the magisterium has

addressed related issues, as I shall indicate further on. In the meantime, let us consider the arguments used by those who favor the use of the vaccines. The two basic points of these arguments are that 1) these vaccines are the only available alternative to the spread of the disease (hepatitis A, a viral infection of the liver); 2) the individual receiving the vaccine is not in immoral cooperation with the evil of abortion.

If you examine the two basic points made by the arguments for the moral justification of the use of these vaccines, you will notice that they are intimately related. 1) The first point (they are the only alternatives to treating the disease) is essentially a matter of arguing that they are morally justifiable because we need them. 2) The second point (the person receiving the vaccine does not will the abortion from which it is derived) is essentially a matter of arguing that, because the abortion at issue happened so long ago and that no further abortions are required for this vaccination, receiving the vaccination is morally justifiable.

The first point is flawed for a number of reasons. First of all, leaving it simply at saying that something is morally justifiable because I need it as a means to an end, and indeed, a good end (preservation of one's life) is absolutely identical with the Machiavellian principle that the end justifies the means (or, that evil may be done in order to accomplish good) and, thus, absolutely unacceptable and morally indefensible. (A more sophisticated argument, based on the principle of double effect, might state that the degree of cooperating with the evil of abortion in order to attain the needed vaccines is morally justifiable in the face of the greater evil of suffering from the diseases that the vaccines would prevent. **However, the principle of double effect applies only if there are no alternative solutions; and this is far from being true in this case.**)

Secondly, precisely because this Machiavellian principle is morally indefensible, one needs to examine the very thing needed in this particular case — cell lines from aborted fetuses. To say that one needs the cell lines of aborted fetuses to preserve one's life is inseparable from saying that one needs the abortions — intrinsically evil actions — that make the cell lines available. And this is where the point of the first argument meets — and betrays — the point of the second argument.

To say that a person receiving this vaccination — derived from a fetus aborted long ago — does not will the abortion that makes the vaccination possible may well be true in the individual and isolated case of the person who does not know the origin of the vaccine. However, in keeping with the discussion in connection with the second issue above, one cannot base the moral argumentation for a practice intended for the entire population upon the ignorance of this person or upon the correct moral behavior of the individual recipient of the vaccine. In fact, the second argument in favor of

the moral justification of the use of these vaccines not only very clearly presupposes the knowledge of the origin of the vaccine, but also advocates that society in general adopt the use of this vaccine. With that knowledge in place, and with the **institutionalization** of the vaccine within the very fabric of society in place, to say that a person receiving this vaccination — derived from a fetus aborted long ago — does not will the abortion that makes the vaccine possible is patently false. If I need the vaccine (and it is a need that can be satisfied only by an aborted fetus) and if I defend my need, I will the abortion. The person receiving the vaccination may well be living long after the fetus was actually aborted, and had no involvement in and may even have no knowledge of the particular and actual fetus that was aborted. However, the remoteness in time is not sufficient for arguing that there is no act of the will on the part of the recipient of the vaccine, even if, once again, only an elicited act of the will, institutionalized within societal practice and within the habits of minds of its members.

This immoral elicited act of the will, if for no other reason, is why the Holy See, in its "Charter for Health Care Workers," teaches that "the fetus cannot be used for experimentation or transplant if the abortion was caused voluntarily. To do so would be an unworthy instrumentalization of a human life." Even if the Holy See is referring to the fetus as such and not to cell lines from the fetus, the moral principle about elicited acts of the will still applies. Beyond the point about this elicited act, there is the further problem of the long-term consequences of allowing the use of these vaccines. On this issue, and so many like it, we desperately need to see more than a few feet in front of us. Thinking that we know what we need here and now does not necessarily mean that we do know or, therefore, that we should want it. This is why it would be wise in this particular matter to abide by the U.S. Bishops' directive forbidding the use of tissue from aborted fetuses, even for therapeutic purposes. Again, even if the bishops are referring to tissue of aborted fetuses rather than cell lines from aborted fetuses, the moral principle about elicited acts of the will still applies. This is also why it would be wise to heed the directive of the Holy See's 1987 document, *Donum Vitae* (Gift of Life): "The corpses of human embryos and fetuses, whether they have been deliberately aborted or not, must be respected just as the remains of other human beings... the moral requirements must be safeguarded, that there be no complicity in deliberate abortion and that the risk of scandal be avoided."
