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Concluding document

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CONCLUDING DOCUMENT

The third Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life held in Vatican City, 14-16 February, 1997. At this Assembly papers were presented on the work carried out in the last two years on the subject *Identity and Status of the Human Embryo* by a study group (Task Force) established by the same Academy and composed of experts in various disciplines connected with this topic.

Biologists, physicians, philosophers, theologians and jurists from different countries, have worked together on the question of the identity and status of the human embryo, which is both complex and of great importance.

This issue has arisen especially in relation to the possibility of manipulating the human embryo as a result of artificial conception and of scientific research on the early stages of the development of the individual life.

The work of the Assembly - faithful to the character of the Academy itself - has developed in the context of an interdisciplinary discussion, which has brought together contributions from a number of different approaches which, in their nature and methods, are demanded by the question at issue.

From a biological standpoint,the formation and the development of the human embryo appears as a continuous, coordinated and gradual process from the time of fertilization, at which time a new human organism is constituted, endowed with the intrinsic capacity to develop by himself into a human adult. The most recent contributions of the biomedical sciences offer further valuable empirical evidence for substantiating the individuality and developmental continuity of the embryo. To speak of a *pre-embryo* thus is an incorrect interpretation of the biological data.

Judgement - as an act of the human mind - on the personal nature of the human embryo springs necessarily from the evidence of the biological datum which implies the recognition of the presence of a human being's with an intrinsic active capacity for development, and not a mere possibility of life.

The ethical exigency of respect and care for the life and integrity of the embryo, demanded by the presence of human being is motivated by a unitary conception of man ("Corpore et anima unus"), whose personal dignity must be recognized from the beginning of his physical existence.

The theological perspective, beginning with the light which revelation sheds on the meaning of a human life and on the dignity of the person, supports and sustains human reason in regard to these conclusions, without in any way diminishing the validity of contributions based on rational evidence. Therefore the duty of respecting the human embryo as a human person derives from the reality of the matter and from the force of rational argumentation, and not exclusively from a position of faith.

From the juridical point of view, the core of the debate on the protection of the human embryo does not involve identifying earlier or later indices of "humanity" which appear after

insemination, but consists rather in the recognition fundamental human rights by virtue of the presence of a human being. Above all, the righit to life and to physical integrity from the first moment of existence, in keeping with the principle of equality, must be respected.

In this great challenge of defending the life and dignity of the human embryo, special commitment is needed on the part of families, and particularly parents, as well as that of the scientific community. The woman is the first person called to welcome and nourish in love and solicitous dedication the human being who has been conceived in her womb. The irreplaceable role of a guardian of human life entrusted to a woman's motherhood must be encouraged and actively supported in civil society.

The Assembly hopes that its own contribution will serve as an occasion for reflection and dialogue with all those who understand that the expanding frontiers of civilization and the authentic progress of society rest on the unconditional defence of human life.