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Declaration of the Basic Principles of Bioethics Based on the Orthodox Tradition

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"Declaration of the Basic Principles of Bioethics Based on the Orthodox Tradition"

We, who represent the parliaments or groups of parliaments of our country in the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy,

Declare:

1) The rapid progress of biomedical sciences and the impressive results of related research and technological applications hold high promises for improving the quality of life and relief of pain via preventive, diagnostic and therapeutic means. We all welcome this progress with enthusiasm and high expectations.

2) The issues of bioethics affect the sacredness of man in an extremely pervasive way. They touch upon the beginning and end of human life, influence its form and determine the psychosomatic bond. Moreover, they stimulate the more profound aspects of human soul. For all these reasons, religions are entitled to express their positions that require caution, respect and understanding.

3) The freedom of science grew with consistency in the countries of the Orthodox Christian tradition since the beginning of the Middle Ages and forms part of their cultural identity.

4) However, the use of most recent research achievements generates not only hopes, but also reasonable speculation on the way countries, societies, group of individuals and individuals may choose to take advantage of these immense possibilities. Man should be protected as a value, and social balance and traditions should be respected and remain intact. When scientific discovery is not combined with reverence towards man but is coupled with arrogance and prompted only by financial interests, the effect of science may be proved harmful upon humankind.

5) *Respect of human dignity and personal freedom in human societies and especially in the sector of health do not only contribute to the development of the individual, but also form an element of society's democratic organization.*

6) A characteristic of the explosion of biomedical sciences is that its correct application is a greater achievement than its emergence. For this reason, our responsibility as politicians is to make sure that scientists will define, through regulating and controlling mechanisms, the safest possible boundaries in order to prevent biomedical progress from turning from a unique blessing to a destructive threat for human societies and individuals.

7) The Orthodox Christian tradition is characterized by an anthropology -namely, a theory on man- which is unique and very important, since it regards every human being as an image of God and recognizes as its destination the "likeness" and union of man with God.

8) Within the Orthodox Christian tradition, man is not considered only as an individual that is judged by his actions, but mainly as a person who is substantiated by his relationship with his fellowmen and with God.

9) An ethical assessment of contemporary scientific achievements of biomedicine should always take into consideration the following principles of respect:

a. Respect for time. While our knowledge is very limited we proceed to decisive steps that bring immediate consequences. We should not move to applications involving human cloning and the in-vivo alteration of the human genetic material, before we acquire all the necessary knowledge regarding these processes.

b. Respect for God's creation. Knowledge and curiosity are so essentially and deeply bound with the nature of man, that the danger of not limiting ourselves to therapeutic applications but proceed to the correction of what some may regard as "natural imperfections" is apparent. Consequently, along with gene therapy approaches, we may also provoke disastrous changes in human social conduct and relationships leading, perhaps, to genetic discrimination. Scientists must use their knowledge with discretion and prudence without preconception and short-sighted vision. In addition, they must not forget that they are part of nature and not its ruler.

c. Respect for human variability, imperfections and disabilities. The possibility to intervene in the quality and shape of our characteristics for reasons other than diagnostic, preventive or therapeutic opens the way to a society characterized by genetic discriminations, racism and eugenics; a society in which there will be room only for healthy and strong people, people with predetermined specifications. Societies should consider among their priorities not only research but also the protection of human variability and the amelioration of the conditions of the disabled.

It is the responsibility of every religious, political, scientific and social carrier towards future generations to take all measures, so that man is not downgraded to a financial figure, a genetic parameter or a deterministic unit, and to avoid every form of racist discrimination of a eugenic character. At the same time, we will all work together so that priority be given to preserving human dignity over any kind of research goals and achievements as well as for the confidentiality of genetic and personal information.

The potential provided by biomedical progress and, more specifically, by genetic engineering and new reproductive approaches requires that the human genome and technological advancements in assisted reproduction be protected by all means from any form of self-interest, financial exploitation, eugenic orientation and arrogant domination.

d. Respect for human life from its conception until the moment of death. Every political resolution or legislative adjustment which refers to matters of biomedicine, medical technology, biotechnology and genetic engineering should necessarily respect the fact that every human being from his/her conception until his/her last breath constitutes a unique irreplaceable and unrepeatable being, that has by nature free will, is sacred and transcendental in his/her essence and perspective, and forms a social entity with rights and obligations.

10) Human life is not perceived only as the existence of an individual, but also as one's co-existence with other individuals within a given environment. This ascertainment gives birth to the principle of responsibility and respect of the individual's autonomy, the environment and future human generations. This respect of the environment refers so much to the animals as to nature.

11) Responsibility towards future generations requires special attention in regards to the approval of germ-line therapy methods that will be passing on their effect to the descendants of the persons undergoing the therapy. At the same time, all forms of discriminatory treatment of individuals suffering from any kind of health problems should be excluded. Finally, the genetic identity of the individual should be protected in regards to interventions that do not have a diagnostic or therapeutic character or do not aim to prevent a disease.

12) The autonomy of the individual should be taken into consideration when referring to his/her status as patient or as research subject (consent to medical/genetic tests and medical

interventions, non-directive counselling, protection of medical/genetic and personal data information) and with regard to his/her choices as a consumer or specialist in the fields of medicine and biology.

13) In countries, where the Orthodox Christian faith prevails, a "social perception" has been developed for various historical or social reasons on matters related to the human cycle of life: Birth, disease, death constitute concerns not only of the wider family but of the entire community. This perception leads today to the realization of the need for a consistent, systematic and continuous updating of the wider social strata in matters related to health and mainly to the genetics of man. From the viewpoint of the scientific and political leadership, this updating does not only constitute a tool for the creation of consensus but also an expression of mutual responsibility among the members of the human community. Transparency during the decision-making process referring to scientific experimentation and applications should constitute a fundamental prerequisite of the democratic regime.

14) We consider the correct education and updating on biomedical developments and especially on human genome advances of us politicians and of all citizens as absolutely indispensable. For this reason, we believe in the formation of independent committees on bioethics and deontology. Further, the states should commit themselves to promoting education on bioethics and endorsing public dialogue, which should always be open to the various religious streams of thought. Technology assessment instruments such as the elaboration of multidisciplinary studies should be promoted and incorporated into the legislative process. Statesmen should initiate special legislation in order to regulate the frame of scientific endeavors and to control medical activities in this field.

15) Professional bodies should also elaborate appropriate codes of conduct and guidelines for sensitive and controversial issues such as human assisted procreation or organ transplantation.

16) Mass media should act in this field in a thoughtful, professional and responsible way appropriately counselled by specialists.

17) Sometimes, the financial interests of companies may suppress time, just when research requires it. The alliance with time and thorough scientific knowledge through investigation is the greatest safety valve. The knowledge of experts on these specialized issues and its possible selective use guided only by financial interests is uncontrollable and may be proven dangerous, when it is not accompanied by a wide and correct updating of the society.

18) The welfare that accompanies biotechnological development and the expected financial growth should not minimize the effort towards a more just distribution of wealth on a national and international level as well as towards the progress of countries under development. Therefore, the dependency of the developing countries on the countries producing biotechnological knowledge through the monopoly of production and management of the new technological knowledge should not be prolonged. The principle of solidarity should govern state politics concerning this matter.

19) The production of all Genetically Modified Organisms and products should be subject to appropriate safeguards (European Directive) and monitoring. Genetically engineered food supplies should be labelled.

20) Moreover, plans should be formulated in advance for the effective management of possible "biological crises" that may occur in the future. These measures should be such as to minimize all possible negative consequences due to these crises.

21) New knowledge should be used only for the benefit of humanity and not as a means of enriching the world's weaponry. The need to undertake a campaign aiming at the prohibition of "biological weapons" should become a common conscience.

