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ETHICAL PROBLEMS RAISED BY SCIENCE

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English translation.

On account of new discoveries and constant evolution, science and technology are raising new ethical problems. This situation is made still more difficult by their rapid diffusion and practical application.

This is a difficult matter to keep under control: humanity risks becoming ever more dependent on unknown factors that are impossible for the common man to understand. On the other hand, it would not be fair to forget the undeniable advantages that we can all draw from new discoveries and new technology.

If Church bodies take position on these issues, they do not expect to impose their own scientific vision. At the same time, they do claim the right to intervene in the public discussion from the point of view of the needs and opinions of the persons who are involved. Their intent is to clarify the problems, spread knowledge and consequently make people more aware of the issues, so as to encourage responsible decisions that take account both of scientific advances and of the rights of the more vulnerable.

When making ethical choices, churches are inspired by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This opens up reference points and diverse factors that are variously interconnected:

- Profound faith, not abstractly in man or objects, but in answer to the pact between God and human reality which brings forth a new way of looking at things. (See Psalm 111, 7-9: John 10;10.)
- A critical attitude which questions every proposition without bowing down to anyone, including our own opinions.
- Constructive concern for others, which aims to overcome contrasts and find solutions. We must be unwilling to let ourselves be enclosed between rigid alternatives but rather must accept that some questions will not have any answers. We must, therefore, be ready to act with mercy in order to diminish contradictions and alleviate suffering.
- A universalistic desire to cooperate and not just insist on one's own point of view, a desire to construct a welcoming society which honours liberty and equality, where each person, wherever he comes from, can be made part of the whole.
- An invitation to every single person to reach a profound, mature awareness of himself so that he can go beyond crises and mirror himself in the task at hand.

These reference points make us refuse the following attitudes:

a. A dualistic attitude which is too simplified and which tends consider oneself "in the right".
b. A clerical point of view, which excommunicates any effort to be rational and frames every human act in a sphere of holiness regulated on a sacerdotal basis which divides citizens into "good" and "evil" tying them to concepts which are paternalistic, conservative and authoritarian.
c. A conception which is mechanistic and excessively confident in science in which reality is reduced to a mere object to be studied and experimented on and which risks losing track of the complex nature of living things and the interaction of human and cultural factors.

The ethical problems raised by science can be delt with on the basis of four notions of great import: the idea of limits, of autonomy, of respect and of rights. These are to be taken in their various connections and referred to science, to human beings, and to the ecosystem. The following seeks to examine these connections and indicate the consequences.

Ethics does not deny the concept of the autonomy of science. Human knowledge is potentially unlimited. It is not possible to define an absolute limit to science or mark off an area which can be withdrawn from its scrutiny.

Nevertheless, there is an intimate relationship between knowledge and responsibility. A limit is imposed on science by the very nature of living material and by the historical and temporal structure of human culture. Each discovery opens up new horizons, but still must be elaborated and evaluated according to the level of human development that is involved. Every new level of knowledge brings with it a new consideration of global responsibility which it itself has brought forth.

Along with and in relation to this concept of the autonomy of science, ethics recognises and therefore utilises the concept of limits, in the sense that a thing should not be done just because it is possible. This idea of limit must be vigilante especially when genetic engineering is present.
Ethics recognises and uses the concept of respect which applies to every form of life and to the ecosystem as a whole. It contributes to the search for solutions where the interests of the human community conflict with those of other life forms.

This respect regards especially the human embryo which must not degenerate to a useful object for any reason. At the very most, it can be studied in connection with careful scientific regulation which aims to promoting essential and universal knowledge. As for medically assisted procreation, individual choice, especially that of the woman, must be respected, and complete information given on all aspects of the matter. This includes becoming aware of the little-known and less-understood consequences of this therapy.

Alongside and in relation to this idea of respect, ethics recognises and uses that of rights, autonomy and protection of the person. Personal freedom cannot be limited in order to assert particular viewpoints which belong to philosophic or religious traditions. From rights, however, duties are born. For this reason, we affirm the duty of law to put down limits and obligations where freedom to act, left to its own devices, would negate existing notions of justice and equality which humanity has elaborated with difficulty and only partially put into practice.

The ethical concept adopted by us implies the struggle against every evil that afflicts mankind. Therefore we refuse to accord any intrinsic value to suffering. Suffering, be it in animals or humans, can be greatly reduced and medication to alleviate it must be used without hesitation. Human beings have a right to die with dignity and when, in a terminal phase of illness, medical therapy has no effect, it is the patients right to ask to be helped to die.

Humanity considers self-defence against natural evils (disasters) that afflict it a mobile and decisive task, which it mostly hands over to science. It is necessary, however, to avoid the illusion — nourished at times by a distorted perception of scientific progress itself — of a world devoid of suffering, in which natural evils are completely removed. Such an idea can lead to mystification which it is right to denounce. Science cannot be taken as a panacea having unlimited power, but an efficacious help to seek and receive in a responsible way.

Concern for suffering people means that our attitude towards problematic social ills (for instance, voluntary abortion) must never become judgmental. Rather than condemning those involved we must try to see the problem from their point of view.

The combination of the problems we have outlined brings us now to mentioning their economic aspect. At this level we find other important elements of moral and judicial nature are tied to the notions we already touched on when speaking of rights and limits. At present there is an important on-going discussion concerning use of resources and patenting of living organisms or parts thereof. According to our prospective, scientific discoveries must become property of the international scientific community and be used for the benefit of humanity without economic conditioning.

On the base of what we have said, Churches have the duty to spread information and animate open debate between citizens and experts in the various sectors.

Ethics, in fact, tends to promote a consensus around actual behaviour and not mere theories, and must be put to practice by calling persons from every origin to participate with equal dignity in the discovery of just solutions that are universally applicable. Solutions which are themselves an expression of a common desire for citizenship.