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Embryonic stem cell research in the perspective of Orthodox Christianity

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EMBRYONIC STEM CELL RESEARCH IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

A Statement of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America

October 17, 2001

Dearly-beloved in the Lord:

The current debate over research on embryonic stem cells raises in the starkest way a crucial moral question concerning the ultimate meaning and value of human life.

From the perspective of Orthodox Christianity, human life begins at conception (meaning fertilization with creation of the single-cell zygote). This conviction is grounded in the Biblical witness (e.g., Ps 139:13-16; Isaiah 49:1ff; Luke 1:41,44), as well as in the scientifically established fact that from conception there exists genetic uniqueness and cellular differentiation that, if the conceptus is allowed to develop normally, will produce a live human being. **(1)** Human life is sacred from its very beginning, since from conception it is ensouled existence. As such, it is "personal" existence, created in the image of God and endowed with a sanctity that destines it for eternal life.

Conservative, pro-life voices throughout the country have enthusiastically praised President Bush's recent decision regarding scientific research using human embryonic stem cells (ESCR). That decision would allow research on some sixty lines of existing stem cells, developed from human embryos which were destroyed as the cells were harvested. It would prohibit creation of embryos for research purposes, and it urges further study into the feasibility of utilizing adult stem cells to achieve the same therapeutic ends envisioned for embryonic stem cells. These limitations, it is argued, would ensure that extra embryos resulting from in vitro fertilization techniques would not be subjected to manipulation by researchers, nor would embryos be created, by cloning or any other means, for the specific purpose of serving as research subjects.

We, the Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, applaud the President's initiative in seeking a reasonable compromise between assuring protection of human life at every stage of its development, and exploring the potential therapeutic benefits to be derived from pluripotent stem cells. We are gratified that he has expressed unambiguous opposition to human cloning. We cannot, however, condone the manipulation of embryonic cells in any form for research purposes, including lines

developed from destroyed embryos. Rather, we can only express dismay at the fact that the debate over this issue has avoided major considerations regarding the very meaning and value of human life.

President Bush's proposal to use only the existing sixty lines of stem cells (2) because the embryos had already been destroyed (i.e., killed) falters on the precept enunciated by the apostle Paul in Romans 3:8, "We may not do evil so that good may come." The very act of destroying those embryos is evil, and we may not profit from evil even to achieve a good and noble end.

Although the President's Solomonic decision appears to serve pro-life interests, in fact it unwittingly opens the floodgates to ever more utilitarian manipulation of human life. Research on existing stem cell lines should be prohibited for the simple reason that those embryos should never have been created in the first place. The moral line has been crossed, and Mr. Bush's proposed limitations do little to prevent an inevitable descent down an increasingly slippery slope.

Our opposition to ESCR is based on the following considerations, which are political as well as medical and theological.

In the first place, debate on this issue has too often overlooked the fact that among the most vocal proponents of embryo research are pro-abortion activists, supported by much of the media. If the government refuses to fund such research, it would thereby tacitly acknowledge that human life begins at conception. This flies in the face of abortion legislation such as *Roe v. Wade* and would inevitably undermine the view that an embryo is merely a clump of tissue and can therefore be aborted on demand with no moral consequences. The real issue underlying the debate, then, is less the development of potential therapies than the preservation of so-called "abortion rights." (3)

Second, enormous pressures to legalize and federally fund embryonic stem cell research is coming from the biotech and pharmaceutical industries, because of the promise of nearly limitless profits. The "new medicine" based on stem cell therapies is largely driven by the marketplace. As with AIDS medications and other recently developed therapies, market forces will determine who has access to them, and at what cost.

Third, it should be noted that in the recent past (1992) scientists were touting the exceptional benefits of fetal tissue, particularly in the treatment of illnesses such as Parkinson's disease. To date, such therapies have been a disappointment. Some Parkinson's patients, in fact, have suffered irreversible damage due to the introduction of foreign cells into their brains. And no new medicines of significance have been produced using fetal cells. Claims that embryonic stem cells will produce a panacea are likely to be equally exaggerated.

Fourth, the slippery slope of ESCR is dangerous and potentially irreversible. Already an Australian company, in November 2000, received a patent to create chimeras: animals with body tissue and organs produced using human stem cells. And in February 2001, a team of San Francisco researchers announced that they had created a strain of mice, one quarter of whose brains were composed of human cells. In just thirty years the utilitarian slope has taken us from legalized abortion to partial-birth abortion, to

physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, in addition to acceptance of fetal tissue therapy and destruction of embryos to harvest stem cells. Unless moral persuasion can reverse the trend, the slope will lead to a tragic devaluation of human life.

Fifth, ever since the Holocaust the principle has been universally accepted by the scientific community that no experimentation should be undertaken on human subjects without the subject's informed consent. Obviously, such consent cannot be granted by an embryo (nor, by the way, by a two-year old). Neither the mother nor anyone else has "proxy" rights in this regard over the life and well-being of a Child *in utero* or *in vitro*.

Sixth, ESCR relies on cloning to produce multiple copies of the cells under investigation. Cloning in animal experiments has a failure rate on the order of 95%, and mice and other animals produced through cloning have been born with serious genetic defects. The cloning of human embryos for research purposes presents similar dangers, and for this reason alone it should be permanently banned.

Finally, it has been proved recently that adult stem cells, together with those harvested from placentas and umbilical cords, hold as much if not more promise than embryonic stem cells. In May, 2001, the prestigious scientific journal *Cell* published a report showing that adult bone marrow cells have an extraordinary capacity to differentiate into epithelial cells of the liver, lung, GI tract and skin. The report noted that "This finding may contribute to clinical treatment of genetic disease or tissue repair."⁽⁴⁾ In August, 2001, researchers reported finding adult stem cells in mouse brains that were used to produce muscle cells; and a Canadian team isolated "versatile" (pluripotent) cells in mice that produced neural, muscle and fat cells. This means that in the relatively near future it should be possible to harvest stem cells from a patient's skin, multiply them by cloning, and use them for therapeutic purposes, including the growing of new organs.

In conclusion, we firmly reject any and all manipulation of human embryos for research purposes as inherently immoral and a fundamental violation of human life. We call upon the President and the Congress of the United States to restore and maintain a total ban on ESCR. Furthermore, we encourage the scientific community to reject pressures for ESCR exerted by the pro-abortionist lobby, the biotech and pharmaceutical industries, and to devote their energies and resources to discovering, harvesting and utilizing non-embryonic stem cells, including those derived from adults, placentas and umbilical cords.

Above all, we urge our faithful, together with the medical community and political leaders, to return to the spirit of the Hippocratic Oath: *primum non nocere*, "First of all, do no harm." Embryonic stem cell research results in unmitigated harm. It should be unequivocally rejected in the interests of preserving both the sacredness and the dignity of the human person.

With love in the Lord, the Source of Life,

+THEODOSIUS

Archbishop of Washington

Metropolitan of All America and Canada

And the members of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America:

+KYRILL

Archbishop of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania

+PETER

Archbishop of New York and New Jersey

+DMITRI

Archbishop of Dallas and the South

+HERMAN

Archbishop of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania

+NATHANIEL

Archbishop of Detroit and the Romanian Episcopate

+JOB

Bishop of Chicago and the Midwest

+TIKHON

Bishop of San Francisco and the West

+SERAPHIM

Bishop of Ottawa and Canada

+NIKOLAI

Bishop of Baltimore

1 J. Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), chp. 2, "Procreation and the Beginning of Life," pp. 127ff.

2 According to numerous reports, this figure is exaggerated. There may exist throughout the world today only some thirty lines that can prove useful for research purposes. As a result, many scientists are calling for expanding these proposed limitations or for dropping them altogether.

3 This same motivation explains the proliferation of terms to specify discrete stages of life growing in the womb: pre-embryo, embryo, fetus. The reality is that at every stage from conception to birth it is a matter of a human child. Its life is no more "potential" or less human at these stages than is the life of a newborn, a two-year old or an octogenarian.

4 *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 3 (2001), 443.