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HELLENIC REPUBLIC
THE HOLY SYNOD
OF THE CHURCH OF GREECE

BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

14 IOANNOU GENNADIOU - 115 21 ATHENS
GREECE

Press Release
28.6.2000

DECODING OF HUMAN GENOME

The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece warmly welcomes the greatest and probably the most significant discovery of human science and technology: the decoding of human genome.

She admires the achievement, supports the thirst for new knowledge and is deeply sympathizes with the anticipation of revolutionary progress in diagnostic, preventive and therapeutic medicine. She glorifies the omniscient God for this gift, and prays and hopes that a more profound knowledge of our biological and genetic identity will facilitate the course towards spiritual self-knowledge as well as the knowledge of God.

Nevertheless, the Church of Greece perceives, that along with the great promises, genetic revolution includes dangers which are based on the fact that knowledge is less than our ignorance; prudence is more scarce than our unreasonable desire; and values are weaker than interests.

For all these reasons, She calls for our attention so that the human genome be protected in every possible way from all kinds of interests and profits, financial exploitation, eugenic orientation and arrogant dominance. The genome by itself does not give value to man, neither does the achievement of its decoding; rather, it is man who gives value to his genome.

Our responsibility towards future generations, towards the rights and dignity of man, the value and freedom of the human person, the free progress and research and the preservation of social stability makes us deny categorically every act which reduces man to a genetic parameter or a deterministic unit, as well as any form of racist discrimination based on eugenics. Simultaneously, it obliges all of us to work for the prevalence of respect for man upon every form of research objectives and achievements, for the confidentiality of genetic information and for the protection of the genome from any kind of abuse.

Moreover, we consider necessary the formation of independent Committees of Bioethics and Deontology and the commitment of all countries to promote education and updating on Bioethics and relevant discussions, which must definitely be open to the various religious trends. In addition, the "International Declaration of Human Genome and Human Rights" should be adapted in accordance to the above principles.

Finally, the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece has the pleasure to announce the organization of an International Scientific Convention under the title "Orthodox Christian faith before the challenge of the 21st century science and high technology," which will take place on October 4-8, 2000, in Athens. In the fifth session of the said Convention, world wide known Greek Orthodox scientists, specialized in Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, have been invited to analyze in depth the problems related to the scientific and social dimension of the mapping of the human genome.

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**Press Release
14.12.2000**

CLONING OF EMBRYONIC CELLS

The recent decision of the British Government to allow experiments on human embryonic cells resulting from cloning not only did it provoke intense political and medical controversies, but it also offers the opportunity to stress that the ethical criterion is incomparably superior to any form of scientific achievement.

Our Church, which daily experiences the drama of disease and the need for a healthy life, embraces with love and understanding every single scientific endeavor that promotes health and

grants hope for life.

Nevertheless, She also expresses Her sensitivity towards the parallel need to safeguard the eternal ethical and spiritual values. Man as a person has greater value than biological life. We recognize that it is very difficult to resist to the given applications of science that operate as accomplished facts of a generalized practice. However, surrendering without fighting may be proven disastrous.

Therefore:

1. Our Church expresses Her categorical opposition to the conduct of experiments on embryonic cells, since this implies the destruction not only of embryonic cells but of human embryos as well.
2. The viewpoint that the human person begins to be formed on the 14th day after conception gives an alibi to British scientists, but being the result of scholasticism and not of a scientifically based finding, it constitutes a subjective faith and an arbitrary belief. The Church and the Christian conscience believe that man is a person with eternal and immortal perspective from the very moment of his conception.
3. Discrimination between people gradually increases. Everything shows that the course of our societies is clearly "eugenic" and racist. The effort, however, to improve life cannot entail destruction of millions of human entities in an embryonic stage.
4. Our knowledge in regards to the consequences of cloning is minimal and the possibilities to pre-estimate our acts are even fewer. For this reason, every decision concerning the implementation and experiments of cloning must be taken with great prudence, common agreement and deep respect for the human values and person. The danger of turning man into an object and using him as a piece of material is already apparent.
5. In addition, it is possible that cloning may lead to a consideration of man on financial grounds or to a consideration subject to uncontrollable interests and planning. Moreover, it could hand over the fate, dignity and future of man to governments or companies that have immoral and selfish purposes or intend to make unwise and superficial use.
6. Who can reassure us that a society, which legalizes today what it prohibited so far -this is already a fact-, will not legalize tomorrow what it prohibits today? Who can protect us from the danger of therapeutic cloning becoming the intermediate step towards reproductive human cloning?
7. Does the British government wish, by any chance, to legalize something that has already been accomplished and has been familiar with some time ago?
8. "The benefits of humanity are such that surpass any ethical reservation," stated the chairman of the Health Committee, Liam Donaldson. "The ethical inhibitions, however, are such that surpass any kind of "benefit" for humanity," replies our Church.

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**Press Release
17.8.2000**

EUTHANASIA

On November 28, 2000, the Dutch Parliament approved by a vote of 104-40 the legalisation of euthanasia. Since it is the first time in history that such an act has been legalised and that rationalistic perception of modern society easily sacrifices the respect for life and man in the altar of well-being and narrow self-interest, our Church introduces to her flock the following:

1) Our life constitutes the supreme gift from God, the beginning and end of which depends entirely on Him (Job 12:10). It is within biological life that man's free will finds its full expression, encounters the grace of God and thus his salvation is being realised.

2) The moments of our life which are connected to its beginning and end, such as the moments of weakness, of pain and of our trials, have a unique sacredness and constitute a mystery which requires special respect on the part of the relatives, the doctors, the nurses and society as a whole. These moments facilitate humbleness, open up the road of the quest for God and provoke miracles and the sign of God's grace and presence.

3) These moments favour the bond between human beings, the development of love and communion, the manifestation of sympathy and mercy. The request of certain patients to end their lives may conceal a wish to test their relatives' love and desire to be with them for as long as possible. During these moments one can experience the grace of God and the love of human beings.

4) The presence of pain in human life, as well as any other trial, is "a contributor to man's salvation" and sometimes "even superior to health itself," according to saint Gregory Palamas. Nevertheless, the Church, recognising the weakness of human nature, requests always with philanthropy the deliverance from "all affliction, wrath, danger and need", and often prays for the repose of people in pain (prayer for people in agony of death). As human beings, our task is to pray, not to decide about life and death.

5) Society, being unable to treat pain with patience, prayer, human support and divine encouragement, copes with suffering and pain solely by the use of medicines. Recently, it introduced the practice of provoked death, which it identifies as "good" (in Greek eu-thanasia means "good death"); yet, it accepts death only as a socio-biological event in the course of every human being.

6) While euthanasia is justified in a secular sense as a "dignified death", in reality, it constitutes an assisted suicide, namely a combination of murder and suicide.

7) The so-called "right to death," which justifies the legalisation of euthanasia, could develop into a threat for the life of patients who are unable to respond to the financial demands of their therapy and hospitalisation.

8) Therefore, the Orthodox Church proclaiming

the immortality of the soul,
the resurrection of the body,
the eternal perspective and reality of man,
pain as "the marks of Lord Jesus" on our bodies (Gal. 6:17),
trials as causes and opportunities for salvation,
the prospect of growing loving communion and mutual support,

rejects every death resulting from human decisions and choices as being an insult against God - no matter how "good" it may be called. Moreover, the Church condemns as unethical and insulting for the medical profession every medical act, which does not contribute to the prolongation of life, but, instead, provokes the speeding up of the moment of death.

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Press Release
16.9.2002

MEDICALLY ASSISTED REPRODUCTION

Recently, a group of competent civil law attorneys presented a bill to the Ministry of Justice, under the title "*Medical Assistance in Human Reproduction*". The bill has already been submitted to the 3rd summer session of the Parliament for discussion and voting. The above legislative adjustment overturns in essence our family law and seriously affects family ethics. Therefore, the following should be taken into consideration:

1. Before the bill is discussed in Parliament, the opinion of all carriers involved, as well as of the Church, should be sought, as it was the case in the past with other bills (i.e. the bill on transplantations).

2. Due to the special significance of the particular bill, the following is required:

- a. More time for thorough examination of its details
- b. A wider coverage of viewpoints
- c. Discussion of the subject at the plenary session of the Parliament

3. It is noteworthy that only a group of civil law attorneys was involved in drafting the specific bill, without consulting representatives of other fields (physicians, genetists, theologians, experts on constitutional law, psychologists, etc.) and that it was hastily submitted in Parliament. These two facts trigger the citizens' suspicion and justify the fear that the opinion of a minority group is imposed upon the majority; that people who are not exactly experts decide for those who are directly affected by the bill; and, finally, that the sacred institution of the family is threatened by those who should, in fact, protect it.

4. The writers of the bill claim that it is the most "progressive" in Europe. Since we all support progress, we wonder what do they mean by the word progressive? Do they consider

"conservative" the fact that our country has fewer divorces than other countries, or that it is distinguished for the cohesion of its family ties, or that the majority of citizens prefers religious weddings to civil ones?

5. Is it progressive to refer to the embryo as "genital material" so we can do anything we like with it and, actually, be lawful? Perhaps it is the first time that a group of progressive people dare to identify a human being in its embryonic stage with the concept "material".

6. The bill proposes fertilisation with the sperm of a deceased spouse and childbearing for unwed and overage women. Is it progressive to oblige human beings to come into this world as orphans, or to ignore the natural laws that determine the conditions of human development?

7. Do the enactment of sperm or embryo donation, the legalisation of surrogate motherhood and relevant matters, which according to experts may lead to the birth of children with five parents, prove the progressive character of the law?

8. The law, as it is proposed, accepts the creation of "surplus embryos". The Church refuses to accept that there are surplus people, whose fate is determined by third parties. Every human being and, therefore, every embryo bears the uniqueness of personhood, the sacredness of the image of God and the necessity of being in communion with other people.

9. The freezing of embryos is combined with insurmountable problems. For example, for how long is it legal to keep embryos in the freezer, or what will happen in case parents neglect them due to divorce, death or some other reason? Is it better to destroy them or donate them to other couples? Who is competent to choose the best between two evils?

10. The new measures may lead to the weakening or questioning of the relationship between parents and child; to the unequal relationship between each of the two parents with the child- since one of them is the biological parent and the other is a stepfather or a stepmother-; to the intervention of a surrogate mother in the sacred relationship of the genetic parents with the child, or to the creation of brothers or sisters unknown to each other. Each form of fertilisation with donor basically degrades the principles of motherhood and fatherhood. Furthermore, since the intervention of a third person is required in the sacred process of human reproduction, the mystery of marriage is downgraded.

11. Surrogate motherhood may have a positive aspect for it assists child bearing. However, since the developing relationship with the embryo during pregnancy is an essential and integral part not only of motherhood, but also of the embryonic development, the continuation of the relationship between the surrogate mother and the child is unjust for the genetic parents; its interruption is unjust for the surrogate mother; and, furthermore, both solutions are unjust for the child, for they disrupt family cohesion.

12. The new law gives the possibility for unwed mother to bear children. This, however, should be rejected because, on the one hand, it implies birth of a child by unwed parents, and, on the other hand, it is unjust for the child because it is destined to grow without a father. Moreover, it opens the way for the legalization of relationships and childbearing contrary to nature with destructive consequences upon the child and society.

13. The Greek Orthodox Church believes that at this moment it is imperative to discuss once again the subject of abortions and the legal status of the embryo. This is the only way to initiate a substantial dialogue and safeguard the sacredness of the human person that has been recently defiled.

14. Contemporary technology does not only give solutions, but it also creates persistent needs and insurmountable problems in our lives. Only if we determine our limits, can we turn achievements into blessings and transform man from a biological ephemeral entity to an image of God with eternal perspective.

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Press Release
4.4.2003

ABORTION

On February 13, 2003, the European Parliament outvoted the report No. A5-0020/2003 by Europarliamentarian Ulla Margrethe Sandæk on *aid for policies and actions on reproductive and sexual health and rights in developing countries*.

The aforementioned report proposes, on one hand indirectly the legalisation of abortions, and on the other hand the provision of financial aid for the relevant policies and actions, including abortions.

As a result, the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece declares the following:

We sympathise with the size of the problem and acknowledge the genuine concern of political and social organisations in resolving all problems related to sexual and reproductive health, and, particularly, the one of high mortality rate of women undergoing unsafe abortions in developing countries.

It is obvious that the resolution presents many positive elements, such as the prevention of abortion as a method of family planning, the introduction of the amendment only to protect mother's life or health, the emphasis on the need for information and education and the assumption of individual responsibility, as well as the participation of families in implementing the resolution.

Nevertheless, we believe that:

- A)** Abortion does not constitute an individual right, but an ethically unacceptable act, and its legalisation, direct or indirect, an impermissible social deviation.
- B)** No part of the resolution refers to the ethical dimension of the issue.
- C)** While the need to protect the mother's health and individual rights is overstressed, there is no reference to the rights of the embryo.

D) The discrimination between dangerous and non-dangerous abortions leaves room for one to conclude that non-dangerous abortions are permitted.

E) Developmental policy surely plays a significant role in dealing with the problem. However, the suggested policies and actions are limited to updating, education and family planning and overlook the promotion of ethical and spiritual values as well as personal responsibility towards the family, society and mainly towards embryonic life.

F) While the said adjustment does not suggest financial motives, it proposes financial coverage of the entire programme, obviously including abortions as well.

We wish to believe that:

A) Given that European developmental cooperation is applied always within the legislative context of the relevant country, these developing countries, especially the ones that prohibit or set restrictions upon abortions, will not be obliged directly or indirectly to adapt their legislations.

Therefore, we consider ethically imperative to include an explicit reference in the text so that the legislation of the countries receiving European aid be safeguarded, and if they judge so, to exclude abortions from financial aid. And

B) No discrimination whatsoever shall be made against health and development organisations, which do not include abortions in funding decisions proposed by the resolution.

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Press Release
25.11.2003

RESEARCH ON HUMAN EMBRYOS

On November 19, 2003, the European Parliament outvoted a report, which permits the funding of embryo research that in turn implies their eventual destruction.

The Orthodox Church of Greece expresses Her explicit opposition to the adoption of such a policy, which is contrary to fundamental ethical principles and offensive towards the respect for man as the image of God. Moreover, it undermines the validity of the ethical guidelines proposed by the European Commission in regards to the funding of research on human embryonic stem-cells and violates the serious ethical reservations invoked by a strong minority in the Parliament

and expressed by an even stronger majority within modern societies.

The haste with which the report was voted indicates a tendency to impose viewpoints rather than initiate a dialogue. This is also confirmed by the inflexibility and persistence with which the proposal to restrict experiments on human embryos created prior to the crucial date of June 27, 2002 (the date on which the Sixth EU Research Framework Programme was adopted) was dealt and ultimately rejected.

We, as Orthodox Christians, consider that human life begins "at the very onset of conception"; in fact, the more weak and concealed human life is, the more it needs our own care and legal protection. The embryo, whether a fertilised egg, a zygote, or blastocyst, is a perfect human being as per its identity, and is constantly being perfected as per its phenotypic expression and development. In this sense, we are against every technique that implies the destruction of embryos, no matter how promising it may be for the progress of health and medicine, and we consider it as ethically unacceptable.

Instead of research on embryonic stem-cells that raises hopes, we could direct our thought to other ethically acceptable therapeutic sources or methods, that we can neither suspect nor correctly assess at present (i.e. adult stem-cells). Usually our tendency to exaggerate things magnifies our possibilities and restricts alternative solutions.

We wish to believe that the Council of Ministers, which has the final word, will not adopt the proposal of the European Parliament and will not approve, even at the last moment, the funding of embryonic stem-cell research by the European Union. Such an act would not restrict research, but rather safeguard due respect for the value of man.