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Brief Presentation on Human Genetics at the Public Hearing with the Civil Society

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THE HOLY SYNOD
OF THE CHURCH OF GREECE

BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

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Brief Presentation on Human Genetics at the Public Hearing with the Civil Society European Parliament, Brussels July 9 and 10, 2001

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.

The Orthodox Church **embraces everything** that constitutes a human attainment on the cognitive level, particularly if it is associated with the progress of health, the relief of pain, and the hope for better living conditions. She admires the achievement, supports the thirst for knew knowledge and rejoices the anticipation of revolutionary progress in diagnostic, preventive and therapeutic medicine.

Nevertheless, the Orthodox Church has a deeper sense of her spiritual obligation to protect man as an icon of God, than she has of her social mission to safeguard a better earthly future for humankind. We realize that along with the great promises, genetic revolution includes dangers that are based on the fact that knowledge is less than our ignorance; prudence more scarce than our unreasonable desire; and values are weaker than interests. Therefore, when scientific discovery is not **combined with respect towards man** but is accompanied by arrogance, is prompted by financial interests and serves selfish perspectives, the effect of science may be proved harmful upon humankind.

The fact that our scientific knowledge is inadequate justifies our inability to pre-estimate exactly the consequences of our achievements. The errors in estimating a timetable for the entire attempt, in determining the exact number of genes, in understanding the mechanisms and effectiveness of gene therapy may also excuse an erroneous appraisal regarding the apparent **dangers on our biological entity, social stability and the safeguarding of ethical parameters**.

The Orthodox Church understands this inability and **observes progress with prudence** and a sense of responsibility and 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**.

On the other hand, **ethics** is not just binding rules, laws and regulations; it is mainly an expression of a **healthy ethos, according to which man can grow and act by choosing freely his own ways**. The Orthodox Church is never assertive on human conscience by imposing strict commandments and restrictive rules or by providing people with recipes of behavior. Instead, she interprets and expresses human conscience by respecting divine values, man's freedom and the sacredness of the human person.

It seems that the possibilities that genetic engineering offers bring us closer to eugenic threat, to racist dominance, to embryo experimentation, to the submission of man's free-will and to the

unknown consequences of life planning.
In general, we could stress that 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. At the same time, 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.

If research is not based on respect for time, respect for God's creation, respect for natural imperfections and disabilities and respect for the unprotected embryos, we believe that the genetic profit will be much less than the respective cost.
The oscillation between enthusiasm and high hopes, on one hand, and fears and threats, on the other, leads to extremes and unjust opinions concerning the truth. The Orthodox Church prefers to wait, to be alert and prudent. **Every scientific or technological achievement is characterized as positive not only if it promotes health, but mainly if it cultivates respect for man**. Humankind will certainly find the mechanisms to be protected against the probability of biological disorder; ultimately, physical health will improve. **The question is what mechanisms will humankind find in order to defend itself against the threats of socio-psychological disorders**. The Church adds to this question her skepticism on the fact that an eventual genetic explosion may **disturb the balance between soul and body or lead to the amputation of man's free will and eternal perspective and the downgrading of his divine dimension**. It **would be tragic if we finally end up knowing the secrets of our biological genome and ignore the basic functions of our spiritual potential. Perhaps, genetic prevention is ultimately better than gene therapy.**