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Therapeutic use of cloning and embryonic stem cells

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Church and Society Commission
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Mrs Christiane Bardoux
Secretariat general
Commission europeenne
BREY 7/320, rue de la Loi 200
1049Bruxelles

Ref: DIR/3.1

Brussels, 9 October 2000

Dear Mrs. Bardoux,

I refer to the contacts which my colleague, Rev. Richard Fischer, of our Strasbourg office has had with you concerning the therapeutic use of cloning and embryonic stem cells.

The attached paper was produced following discussions in the working group on Bioethics and Biotechnology of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The Conference is the regional ecumenical organisation for the whole of Europe comprising 126 churches of all traditions (Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, Old Catholic) except for the Roman Catholic Church.

The paper was discussed by the recent meeting of the Executive Committee of the Commission which agreed that it should be made available to the European Ethics Committee of the European Commission as a first reflection on the issue. The aim of the paper is to foster information and wider discussion within the Member Churches of the Conference. The Executive Committee recognised that this paper reflects the variety of views which are present among the Member Churches of CEC and, in the light of that variety, offers comments on therapeutic uses of cloning and embryonic stem cells.

The Executive Committee urges that, before any legislation is made on the particular issues of stem cell and cloning for cell replacement therapy, a wide public debate should be organised in Europe, which would allow different points to be made in a way understandable for the public at large.

The Executive Committee recognised this is a very complex issue and considers that any ethical reflection must reflect this complexity. Although some of the Member Churches of CEC or some members of all our member churches take clear and opposite views, we are convinced that only such a debate and careful examination can help to achieve prudent decisions which may avoid the "slippery slope" phenomenon, e.g. the risk of starting with some limited uses of stem cells research and then going by stages as far as reproductive cloning. In particular, the Executive Committee underlined that if any steps are taken which allow a more liberal approach in these areas (and some of its members preferred that no such steps be taken), the limits must be closely defined so that no decision to go further is taken without further reflection and a deliberate action.

Further reflection within the Church and Society Commission will have to deepen some fundamental theological and ethical questions linked to the perception of conflicting values about life, death, humankind and related issues, bearing in mind that the debate cannot be reduced, as it often has been in the media, to opposing slogans such as "killing embryos" against "saving lives of ill people" or "respecting the embryo" against "taking a mere utilitarian view".

The Executive Committee would also hope that the debate will not be over-pressured by economic and commercial pressures leading to decisions which may be regretted by future generations.

I hope that the discussions of the Executive Committee and the careful initial reflections of the Working Group will be a helpful contribution to the reflections of the Ethics Committee. As soon as the result of further reflections within our Commission and the Member Churches of CEC is available, it will be communicated to the relevant European bodies and made public. Given the complexity and sensitivity of the issue and the plurality of opinions in our Member Churches, I would ask that the enclosed paper is not made available to members of the European Ethics Committee separately from this letter.

Our Executive Committee recognises that the European Ethics Committee faces a very difficult task in framing its advice to the European Commission and it will await with attention and interest the outcome of the discussions.

If you or the Committee wish to have any further information, may I suggest that you contact Rev. Richard Fischer at our Strasbourg office.

With every best wish,

Yours sincerely,

Keith Jenkins SEE TEXT