

September 7, 2008

In order to intelligently address the moral dimensions of the issues of our day, we must be well informed by the light of the Gospel and the wisdom of Church teachings. I wish to clarify the Church teaching on stem cell research.

Stem cells are relatively unspecified cells that, when they divide, can replicate themselves and also produce a variety of more specified cells. In recent years, scientists have been investigating the possibility of stem cells producing many types of cells to repair the human body, cure disease, and alleviate suffering.

Adult stem cells, those obtained from adult tissues, umbilical cord blood, and placenta, can be obtained without any harm to the donor and, therefore, they do not present any ethical problem. Such adult stem cells have already shown great medical promise. They are already in widespread use to treat many kinds of cancer and other illnesses. In clinical trials, they have also benefited patients suffering from heart disease, corneal damage, sickle-cell anemia, multiple sclerosis, and other devastating conditions.

There is no moral objection to research and therapy of this kind since it brings no harm to any human being and is conducted with appropriate informed consent. Catholic medical centers are involved in adult stem cell research and will continue to be involved.

Our moral and ethical problem has to do with embryonic stem cell research because it involves destroying an embryonic human being in the first week or so of development. In effect, it involves the deliberate killing of innocent human beings and that is always a gravely immoral act.

Our Catholic position is rooted in our belief that life is our first and most basic gift from our infinitely loving God. Therefore, human life deserves our utmost respect and protection.

Some would argue that the harm done in destroying human embryos to obtain stem cells is outweighed by potential benefits. However, a good end cannot justify an immoral means. We cannot diminish the moral evil of directly taking innocent human lives. Any policy undermining our respect for human life can only endanger the vulnerable patients that stem cell research offers to help.

Some claim that life at its earliest stages in the embryonic phase is too weak or undeveloped, too lacking in mental or physical abilities to have human worth or human rights. Our rights do not depend on such factors. Every human being has an inherent dignity and value because he/she was created by God and is a reflection of the image and likeness of God.

Every human being matters to God and is loved by God, no matter how weak or small or seemingly insignificant. Even our Declaration of Independence recognizes that all members of the human race are created equal in their fundamental rights, beginning with the right to life.

Pope John Paul II stated Church teaching in this matter very clearly in his encyclical, "The Gospel of Life," no. 63: "The killing of innocent human creatures, even if carried out to help others, constitutes an absolutely unacceptable act."

The Church promotes scientific and medical progress. However, we must pursue progress in ethically responsible ways that respect the dignity of each human being.