CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

INSTRUCTION DIGNITAS PERSONAE

ON CERTAIN BIOETHICAL QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. The dignity of a person must be recognized in every human being from conception to natural death. This fundamental principle expresses a great “yes” to human life and must be at the center of ethical reflection on biomedical research, which has an ever greater importance in today’s world. The Church’s Magisterium has frequently intervened to clarify and resolve moral questions in this area. The Instruction Donum vitae was particularly significant.[1] And now, twenty years after its publication, it is appropriate to bring it up to date.

The teaching of Donum vitae remains completely valid, both with regard to the principles on which it is based and the moral evaluations which it expresses. However, new biomedical technologies which have been introduced in the critical area of human life and the family have given rise to further questions, in particular in the field of research on human embryos, the use of stem cells for therapeutic purposes, as well as in other areas of experimental medicine. These new questions require answers. The pace of scientific developments in this area and the publicity they have received have raised expectations and concerns in large sectors of public opinion. Legislative assemblies have been asked to make decisions on these questions in order to regulate them by law; at times, wider popular consultation has also taken place.

These developments have led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to prepare a new doctrinal Instruction which addresses some recent questions in the light of the criteria expressed in the Instruction Donum vitae and which also examines some issues that were treated earlier, but are in need of additional clarification.

2. In undertaking this study, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has benefited from the analysis of the Pontifical Academy for Life and has consulted numerous experts with regard to the scientific aspects of these questions, in order to address them with the principles of Christian anthropology. The Encyclicals Veritatis splendor[2] and Evangelium vitae[3] of John Paul II, as well as other interventions of the Magisterium, offer clear indications with regard to both the method and the content of the examination of the problems under consideration.

In the current multifaceted philosophical and scientific context, a considerable number of scientists and philosophers, in the spirit of the Hippocratic Oath, see in medical science a service to human fragility aimed at the cure of disease, the relief of suffering and the equitable extension of necessary care to all people. At the same time, however, there are also persons in the world of philosophy and science who view advances in biomedical technology from an essentially eugenic perspective.

3. In presenting principles and moral evaluations regarding biomedical research on human life, the Catholic Church draws upon the light both of reason and of faith and seeks to set forth an integral vision of man and his vocation, capable of incorporating everything that is good in human activity, as well as in various cultural and religious traditions which not infrequently demonstrate a great reverence for life.

The Magisterium also seeks to offer a word of support and encouragement for the perspective on culture which considers science an invaluable service to the integral good of the life and dignity of every human being. The Church therefore views scientific research with hope and desires that many Christians will dedicate themselves to the progress of biomedicine and will bear witness to their faith in this field. She hopes moreover that the results of such research may also be made available in areas of the world that are poor and afflicted by disease, so that those who are most in need will receive humanitarian assistance. Finally, the Church seeks to draw near to every human being who is suffering, whether in body or in spirit, in order to bring not only comfort, but also light and hope. These give meaning to moments of sickness and to the experience of death, which indeed are part of human life and are present in the story of every person, opening that story to the mystery of the Resurrection. Truly, the gaze of the Church is full of trust because “Life will triumph: this is a sure hope for us. Yes, life will triumph because truth, goodness, joy and true progress are on the side of life. God, who loves life and gives it generously, is on the side of life”.[4]

The present Instruction is addressed to the Catholic faithful and to all who seek the truth.[5]  It has three parts: the first recalls some anthropological, theological and ethical elements of fundamental importance; the second addresses new problems regarding procreation; the third examines new procedures involving the manipulation of embryos and the human genetic patrimony.

First Part:

Anthropological, Theological and Ethical Aspects of

Human Life and Procreation

4. In recent decades, medical science has made significant strides in understanding human life in its initial stages. Human biological structures and the process of human generation are better known. These developments are certainly positive and worthy of support when they serve to overcome or correct pathologies and succeed in re-establishing the normal functioning of human procreation. On the other hand, they are negative and cannot be utilized when they involve the destruction of human beings or when they employ means which contradict the dignity of the person or when they are used for purposes contrary to the integral good of man.

The body of a human being, from the very first stages of its existence, can never be reduced merely to a group of cells. The embryonic human body develops progressively according to a well-defined program with its proper finality, as is apparent in the birth of every baby.

It is appropriate to recall the fundamental ethical criterion expressed in the Instruction Donum vitae in order to evaluate all moral questions which relate to procedures involving the human embryo: “Thus the fruit of human generation, from the first moment of its existence, that is to say, from the moment the zygote has formed, demands the unconditional respect that is morally due to the human being in his bodily and spiritual totality. The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life”.[6]

5. This ethical principle, which reason is capable of recognizing as true and in conformity with the natural moral law, should be the basis for all legislation in this area.[7] In fact, it presupposes a truth of an ontological character, as Donum vitae demonstrated from solid scientific evidence, regarding the continuity in development of a human being.

If Donum vitae, in order to avoid a statement of an explicitly philosophical nature, did not define the embryo as a person, it nonetheless did indicate that there is an intrinsic connection between the ontological dimension and the specific value of every human life. Although the presence of the spiritual soul cannot be observed experimentally, the conclusions of science regarding the human embryo give “a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of the first appearance of a human life: how could a human individual not be a human person?”.[8]  Indeed, the reality of the human being for the entire span of life, both before and after birth, does not allow us to posit either a change in nature or a gradation in moral value, since it possesses full anthropological and ethical status. The human embryo has, therefore, from the very beginning, the dignity proper to a person.

6. Respect for that dignity is owed to every human being because each one carries in an indelible way his own dignity and value. The origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and in the family, where it is generated through an act which expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman. Procreation which is truly responsible vis-à-vis the child to be born “must be the fruit of marriage”.[9]

Marriage, present in all times and in all cultures, “is in reality something wisely and providently instituted by God the Creator with a view to carrying out his loving plan in human beings. Thus, husband and wife, through the reciprocal gift of themselves to the other – something which is proper and exclusive to them – bring about that communion of persons by which they perfect each other, so as to cooperate with God in the procreation and raising of new lives”.[10]  In the fruitfulness of married love, man and woman “make it clear that at the origin of their spousal life there is a genuine ‘yes’, which is pronounced and truly lived in reciprocity, remaining ever open to life... Natural law, which is at the root of the recognition of true equality between persons and peoples, deserves to be recognized as the source that inspires the relationship between the spouses in their responsibility for begetting new children. The transmission of life is inscribed in nature and its laws stand as an unwritten norm to which all must refer”.[11]

7. It is the Church’s conviction that what is human is not only received and respected by faith, but is also purified, elevated and perfected. God, after having created man in his image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26), described his creature as “very good” (Gen 1:31), so as to be assumed later in the Son (cf. Jn 1:14). In the mystery of the Incarnation, the Son of God confirmed the dignity of the body and soul which constitute the human being. Christ did not disdain human bodiliness, but instead fully disclosed its meaning and value: “In reality, it is only in the mystery of the incarnate Word that the mystery of man truly becomes clear”.[12]

By becoming one of us, the Son makes it possible for us to become “sons of God” (Jn 1:12), “sharers in the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). This new dimension does not conflict with the dignity of the creature which everyone can recognize by the use of reason, but elevates it into a wider horizon of life which is proper to God, giving us the ability to reflect more profoundly on human life and on the acts by which it is brought into existence.[13]

The respect for the individual human being, which reason requires, is further enhanced and strengthened in the light of these truths of faith: thus, we see that there is no contradiction between the affirmation of the dignity and the affirmation of the sacredness of human life. “The different ways in which God, acting in history, cares for the world and for mankind are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they support each other and intersect. They have their origin and goal in the eternal, wise and loving counsel whereby God predestines men and women ‘to be conformed to the image of his Son’ (Rom 8:29)”.[14]

8. By taking the interrelationship of these two dimensions, the human and the divine, as the starting point, one understands better why it is that man has unassailable value: he possesses an eternal vocation and is called to share in the trinitarian love of the living God.

This value belongs to all without distinction. By virtue of the simple fact of existing, every human being must be fully respected. The introduction of discrimination with regard to human dignity based on biological, psychological, or educational development, or based on health-related criteria, must be excluded. At every stage of his existence, man, created in the image and likeness of God, reflects “the face of his Only-begotten Son… This boundless and almost incomprehensible love of God for the human being reveals the degree to which the human person deserves to be loved in himself, independently of any other consideration – intelligence, beauty, health, youth, integrity, and so forth. In short, human life is always a good, for it ‘is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory’ (Evangelium vitae, 34)”.[15]

9. These two dimensions of life, the natural and the supernatural, allow us to understand better the sense in which the acts that permit a new human being to come into existence, in which a man and a woman give themselves to each other, are a reflection of trinitarian love. “God, who is love and life, has inscribed in man and woman the vocation to share in a special way in his mystery of personal communion and in his work as Creator and Father”.[16]

Christian marriage is rooted “in the natural complementarity that exists between man and woman, and is nurtured through the personal willingness of the spouses to share their entire life-project, what they have and what they are: for this reason such communion is the fruit and the sign of a profoundly human need. But in Christ the Lord, God takes up this human need, confirms it, purifies it and elevates it, leading it to perfection through the sacrament of matrimony: the Holy Spirit who is poured out in the sacramental celebration offers Christian couples the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus”.[17]

10. The Church, by expressing an ethical judgment on some developments of recent medical research concerning man and his beginnings, does not intervene in the area proper to medical science itself, but rather calls everyone to ethical and social responsibility for their actions. She reminds them that the ethical value of biomedical science is gauged in reference to both the unconditional respect owed to every human being at every moment of his or her existence, and the defense of the specific character of the personal act which transmits life. The intervention of the Magisterium falls within its mission of contributing to the formation of conscience, by authentically teaching the truth which is Christ and at the same time by declaring and confirming authoritatively the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself.[18]