A New Key to Doors of Life

(Concluded from page one)

by writing our responses to particular positions to those conducting such studies, prayerfully and financially.

Your active participation in the study currently being undertaken by the Pope John Center would be welcomed. We urge you to write the Center regarding your position and interest in the study of the ethical issues of Genetic Manipulation. Only if together we develop today’s policies in a manner consonant with Catholic teaching can we thereby participate in directing the course of our lives tomorrow!

Parenthood (From page one)

Church’s teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the gospel. That divine law reveals and protects the integral meaning of conjugal love, and impels it toward a truly human fulfillment. (“The Church in the Modern World,” para. #50)

There are two major lessons to be learned from these passages, the first of which is that the couple has a responsibility to decide not on the basis of their own feelings and preferences but in terms of their objective duties. It seems not at all unreasonable to believe that the couple, after prayerful reflection, could arrive at the conclusion that their existing responsibilities militate against having any further children at this time. Such a conclusion would not be based on any “quality of life” considerations relating to the judgment that a future child's life would be of insufficient value to himself, to the family, or to society. Rather, the conclusion would require saying only that obligations to presently existing persons would not be discharged adequately were a fourth child to be born.

The second point the Church is concerned to emphasize is that the decision must be made by the parents themselves and cannot justifiably be made by any other authority, whether it be ecclesiastical or civil. This is not to say that whatever the parents decide is ipso facto correct, but it does mean that it is upon them that ultimate responsibility for the decision must rest. Therefore, the State should not seek to take the decision away from the couple by the introduction of coercive legislation. A number of reasons may be given for limiting the power of the State in this area: (1) State action constitutes an unwarranted intrusion into the divinely instituted husband/wife relationship and private sphere of decision-making; (2) intrusion into this area could set a dangerous precedent for further interference relating to the questions of contraception, sterilization, and abortion; (3) State interference could introduce an element of arbitrariness and injustice in deciding who will be allowed to bear and raise children; and (4) the State declaration that couples at risk for bearing a child with a particular genetic defect shall not be permitted to procreate may give rise to an attitude of intolerance toward those afflicted by that defect. The State would of course be permitted to engage in programs of education for its citizens, but since such programs may have implicitly coercive effects, they would require close scrutiny. The best forum for moral instruction resides with the Church, with other nongovernmental organizations, and in private discussions among individuals.

History Repeats Itself

In the past, issues such as abortion and sterilization became facts before most of us dealt with the ethical questions important to our lives as Christians. If we do not wish to allow history to repeat itself, we cannot leave to others the important questions with which we must reckon.

Frequent newspaper accounts reflect the rapid progress of DNA research. As more doors are opened the questions increase. Were a child “produced” by asexual means such as cloning:

—Could such an act be sanctioned by the Church?
—Who would care for the individual so produced?
—Would this being be recognized as a person with the same rights as other persons?
—What would be the effect on those immediately responsible for care, i.e., the doctors, nurses and other hospital personnel?
—What would be the effect on the Institution of the family?

Such are but a sample of the questions which challenge us today. The Church, through a statement issued by the Bishops’ Committee For Human Values “on Recombinant DNA Research” (May 2, 1977), has urged “informed public participation” and that “basic ethical questions about recombinant DNA research be raised and dispassionately addressed.”

Process For Research

The POPE JOHN CENTER has frequently brought such issues to the attention of its readers. Currently, the Center has been gathering the background necessary to develop a study of the ethical implications of Genetic Manipulation. It has assembled a bibliography of the scientific data, of possible resource persons and of many of the pertinent questions upon which we must focus. It is currently developing a process to provide expert input for the presentation, discussion and formulation of guidelines with respect to these issues. But what about the public’s role?

We must not be content to “leave it to the experts.” We participate in these endeavors by keeping informed, by informing others, by becoming aware of the involvement of our institutions; by making our own positions known, and by promoting serious study of these questions, actively (e.g.,

Just as there are doors all of us want to have opened, there are those before which we hesitate or from which we quickly withdraw. Such are those which hide uncontrollable new diseases, new forms of life with which we might not be able to cope, and possibly that of the production of man himself.

It is tempting for each of us to pass by or ignore this corridor since it is not our hand that holds the key, but that of the researcher, the geneticist. But because what lies behind these doors affects our lives as well as those of future generations, we cannot afford to remain ignorant.

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countless other possibilities. The corridor might be endless.

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