

Address to the International Conference on Adult Stem Cells

November 12, 2011

Pope Benedict XVI

Scientific research provides a unique opportunity to explore the wonder of the universe, the complexity of nature, and the distinctive beauty of life, including human life. But since human beings are endowed with immortal souls and are created in the image and likeness of God, there are dimensions of human existence that lie beyond the limits of what the natural sciences are competent to determine. If these limits are transgressed, there is a serious risk that the unique dignity and inviolability of human life could be subordinated to purely utilitarian considerations. But if instead these limits are duly respected, science can make a truly remarkable contribution to promoting and safeguarding the dignity of man: indeed, herein lies its true utility. Man, the agent of scientific research, will sometimes, in his biological nature, form the object of that research. Nevertheless, his transcendent dignity entitles him always to remain the ultimate beneficiary of scientific research and never to be reduced to its instrument.

In this sense, the potential benefits of adult stem cell research are very considerable, since it opens up possibilities for healing chronic degenerative illnesses by repairing damaged tissue and restoring its capacity for regeneration. The improvement that such therapies promise would constitute a significant step forward in medical science, bringing fresh hope to sufferers and their families alike. For this reason, the Church naturally offers her encouragement to those who are engaged

The English text reprinted here is the Vatican translation. The Pope's introductory and concluding remarks have been omitted.

in conducting and supporting research of this kind, always with the proviso that it be carried out with due regard for the integral good of the human person and the common good of society.

This proviso is most important. The pragmatic mentality that so often influences decision making in the world today is all too ready to sanction whatever means are available in order to attain the desired end, despite ample evidence of the disastrous consequences of such thinking. When the end in view is one so eminently desirable as the discovery of a cure for degenerative illnesses, it is tempting for scientists and policy makers to brush aside ethical objections and to press ahead with whatever research seems to offer the prospect of a breakthrough. Those who advocate research on embryonic stem cells in the hope of achieving such a result make the grave mistake of denying the inalienable right to life of all human beings from the moment of conception to natural death. The destruction of even one human life can never be justified in terms of the benefit that it might conceivably bring to another. Yet, in general, no such ethical problems arise when stem cells are taken from the tissues of an adult organism, from the blood of the umbilical cord at the moment of birth, or from fetuses who have died of natural causes (see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Dignitas personae*, n. 32).

It follows that dialogue between science and ethics is of the greatest importance in order to ensure that medical advances are never made at unacceptable human cost. The Church contributes to this dialogue by helping to form consciences in accordance with right reason and in the light of revealed truth. In so doing she seeks, not to impede scientific progress, but on the contrary to guide it in a direction that is truly fruitful and beneficial to humanity. Indeed, it is her conviction that everything human, including scientific research, “is not only received and respected by faith, but is also purified, elevated and perfected” (*ibid.*, n. 7). In this way science can be helped to serve the common good of all mankind, with a particular regard for the weakest and most vulnerable.

In drawing attention to the needs of the defenseless, the Church thinks not only of the unborn but also of those without easy access to expensive medical treatment. Illness is no respecter of persons, and justice demands that every effort be made to place the fruits of scientific research at the disposal of all who stand to benefit from them, irrespective of their means. In addition to purely ethical considerations, then, there are issues of a social, economic, and political nature that need to be addressed in order to ensure that advances in medical science go hand in hand with just and equitable provision of health care services. Here the Church is able to offer concrete assistance through her extensive health care apostolate, active in so many countries across the globe and directed with particular solicitude to the needs of the world’s poor.