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The Cloning of Human Embryos

OCA Chancery
Syosset, New York

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Dearly-beloved in the Lord:

On Sunday, November 25, 2001, Advanced Cell Technology, a biotech Company in Worcester, Massachusetts, announced the first successful cloning of a human embryo. Denying any intention to perform reproductive cloning, the ACT team of scientists declared that the techniques they used aimed at harvesting stem cells from the inner core of human blastocysts, in order to treat a wide range of illnesses: diabetes, leukemia and other cancers, AIDS, strokes, together with neuro-degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

The announcement elicited immediate opposition from right-to-life groups as well as from government officials of many nations. The Vatican issued a strong condemnation of the procedure, and was followed by Methodists and other Protestants together with Conservative and Orthodox Jews. President George W. Bush declared: "We should not, as a society, grow life to destroy it." His personal opposition to human cloning accords with legislation enacted in July of 2001 by the House of Representatives (H.R. 2505, the Weldon-Stupak bill, passed 265-162). If passed by the Senate, this bill would make it illegal to clone

human embryos for research purposes. Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kansas) has introduced his own bill into the Senate (S.790) which is due for a vote in February. The ACT announcement will spur earlier debate on the issue, since Brownback has threatened a filibuster.

The Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America recently published the statement, “Embryonic Stem Cell Research in the Perspective of Orthodox Christianity” (Oct. 17, 2001), which unambiguously opposed “any and all manipulation of human embryos as inherently immoral and a fundamental violation of human life.”

In this present statement we repeat our firm opposition to creation of cloned embryos, either for reproductive purposes or for so-called therapeutic purposes. Although the latter is usually judged acceptable even where the former is condemned, we urge recognition of a Basic truth: All cloning is reproductive. It always involves creating an embryo, recognized by the Church (and by much of the scientific community) as an individual human being.

This entire debate turns on a fundamental question: Is the pre-implantation embryo a unique human being? Or, as ACT president Michael West asserts, “Scientifically, biologically, the entities we are creating are not individuals. They’re only cellular life. They’re not human life.”

In reply, we must affirm that—scientifically and biologically—all human cellular life is by definition human life.

This is because even at the earliest stage of growth the cluster of blastomeres constitutes an entity characterized by both genetic and developmental individuality. The “totipotency” of the blastomeres is limited by the phenomenon of methylation from the two-cell stage of mitosis. Although cellular differentiation is clearly observable from only about the eighth day after fertilization, from the very beginning each cell functions as part of an organic whole. And although the early embryo is a “potential plurality” (i.e., it can twin), it is an actual organic unity, a specific and unique human individual, endowed with human nature and bearing the image of God. [1]

Any living organism is characterized by growth and change. Thus it possesses both actual and potential aspects. The fact that much in the life of an embryo is potential does not alter its nature as a human being. Because the DNA or genetic code is fully present from fertilization (or, we must specify today, from

the onset of embryonic growth), unique and individually differentiated human life is fully present, even though it has not been expressed as specific organs or capacities, and even though it may twin to produce multiple offspring.

Ours has been called a “culture of death.” The fact that we are now, through in vitro fertilization and cloning, destroying millions of embryos with the aim of producing or improving life suggests that we are living rather in a culture of utilitarian expediency, in which ends justify means. This is perfectly illustrated by the frequently heard assertion that the cloned embryo of a patient will some day serve as a “tissue factory.” [2]

In light of these recent and profoundly troubling developments, we, the Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, conclude the following:

The two techniques used by ACT to produce cloned embryos—nuclear transfer and parthenogenesis —should be legally banned because they are inherently immoral. We may not use evil means to achieve good ends; therefore we may not kill human embryos, even to make possible life-saving or life-enhancing therapies.

Every effort should be made to perfect the harvesting of stem cells from adult tissue and from the blood of umbilical cords. These cells have proven to be as potentially useful for therapeutic purposes as embryonic cells. Research on such cells should therefore be supported with public (government) funding.

Laws, such as exist in Western European nations, covering the private sector as well as government-funded institutions, should be passed to prohibit all human cloning and embryonic cell research. Accordingly, we urge passage of the Brownback bill, S. 790, at the earliest possible date. [3]

On Nov. 27 2001, Linda Chavez of CNSNews made the comment, “Once we start down the road to creating life for utilitarian purposes, there is no bright line that separates the permissible from the unthinkable.” With the recent cloning of human embryos we are already well down that road, moving rapidly toward the unthinkable. It is taking us ever further in the direction of a new eugenics,” in which human life is devoid of transcendent value and meaning.

We therefore urge our faithful to work and to pray for a renewed appreciation and vision in American society of a basic Christian truth: that from conception human life is a sacred gift, one called at every stage of its existence to grow toward eternal participation in the life of God.

With love in the Lord, the Source of Life,

+ THEODOSIUS

Archbishop of Washington

Metropolitan of All America and Canada

+ KYRILL

Archbishop of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania

+ PETER

Archbishop of New York and New Jersey

+ DMITRI

Archbishop of Dallas and the South

+ HERMAN

Archbishop of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania

+ NATHANIEL

Archbishop of Detroit and the Romanian Episcopate

+ JOB

Bishop of Chicago and the Midwest

+ TIKHON

Bishop of San Francisco and the West

+ SERAPHIM

Bishop of Ottawa and Canada

+ NIKOLAI

Bishop of Sitka and Alaska