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Fetal Farms

By Fr. John Breck

For some time now I have been appealing to various people to reopen the question of “the beginning of human life,” in order to base an Orthodox view of the status of the embryo on biological fact, that is, on the truth about how God creates human beings. However embryologists finally assess the issue, there is a moral line that should never be crossed. That line corresponds to implantation of the embryo on the uterine wall.

Biologists may one day convince us that the cells that make up the pre-implantation embryo are not yet “differentiated,” that is, their genes are not yet expressed so that each cell is developing into a specific organ or tissue. They may lead us to acknowledge that “individuated human existence” only begins once the embryo embeds itself in the uterine membrane and the so-called primitive streak appears, marking the beginning of neurological development. That is, they may persuade us, on the basis of irrefutable scientific evidence, that the “pre-embryo” is precisely that: the indispensable precondition to individual human existence, but not an individual human being as such.

If they do, they will first of all have to convince us that the continuum that seems to exist from fertilization through implantation and on to birth is an illusion, that any such continuum only begins after the first week or so of biological existence. However that may be, the ultimate line that must be drawn in any such speculation exists at implantation.

This means that we need to cut through the obfuscation that proponents of embryonic stem cell research, cloning and “fetal farming” have created around

the question of the meaning and value of life in the womb. Until scientists prove unequivocally otherwise, Orthodox anthropology should continue to locate the beginning of individual, even “personal,” human existence at fertilization. If some day it is shown conclusively that pre-implantation embryonic life is merely the precondition, the “substratum,” of an individual human being, then perhaps we will find ourselves obliged to lift our opposition to experimentation using the pre-implantation embryo and even to the creation of cloned embryos for strictly therapeutic purposes. (Since clones would be created a-sexually from differentiated somatic cells, rather than sexually by the union of gametes, there is question as to whether they are indeed “human embryos” at all; yet the question might be rendered moot by the fact that such embryos can still be implanted in a womb and brought to term.)

Even if someday we must conclude that an individual human life does not begin at fertilization, there can be no doubt—theological or scientific—that it exists from implantation. Once an embryo is implanted, it is indisputably a living, growing human being. As such, it deserves nothing less than the same respect and legal protection that we accord to any child or adult. To deny the child that respect and protection is to offend in the most fundamental sense that child’s civil rights, not to mention his or her moral and spiritual integrity.

This reasoning obliges us to pay careful attention to a recent development that illustrates as clearly as any other the slipperiness of the moral slope we now find ourselves on.

In a world that has tossed away its moral compass, there’s a simple and sure way to get what you want. When your initial demand is rejected, increase the demand tenfold, and they’ll give you at least what you originally asked for, and maybe a good deal more.

The abortion and pharmaceutical industries, together with other vested interests, initially demanded that “extra embryos” from IVF procedures be used as a source for stem cells. This provoked moral outrage in some quarters, so they shrewdly upped the ante. Accumulated pressure from these and related sources have just led the New Jersey legislature to pass Assembly Bill 2840, a measure likely to have more far-reaching consequences than *Roe v. Wade*. The bill not only legalizes the cloning of human embryos. It allows those embryos to be implanted into a woman’s uterus, grown nearly to term, and then destroyed before birth, in

order that their various body tissues and organs might be used for “therapeutic” ends.

Increase the demand outrageously, and they’ll give you in any case what you originally asked for, and maybe more. Keep working this model, and eventually what was considered outrageous yesterday will seem reasonable today.

Opposition to the request for legalizing use of embryonic stem cells, in other words, moved those who would most profit from such use to make a still more outrageous demand: that babies be created, carried in the womb until the ninth month of gestation, then—by legal edict—killed. If this egregious violation of everything from human dignity to human rights is accepted in New Jersey, it will not be long before it is accepted throughout the country. “Fetal farms” will spring up, where not-quite-born-yet children will be destroyed for purposes of experimentation and organ harvesting. And yesterday’s opposition to embryonic stem cell research will “melt like wax before the fire.”

Miscarriages, as tragic as they may be to the parents who experience them, are morally neutral, the unintended consequence of biological vagaries in a fallen world. Fetal farms, however, which will exist with the express intent to create and then destroy living human beings, are the epitome of moral depredation. Now only a potential threat, they may soon become reality. Like pornography or addictive drugs, with time they will elicit increased tolerance. And with it will come an increased cheapening of human life.

Just a couple of years ago we were sweating out the moral implications of destroying embryos in order to obtain their stem cells. Today we are envisioning the creation of fetal farms where children will be conceived, grown in the womb, and then intentionally killed for allegedly therapeutic purposes. We have become inured to the whole issue, though, because for so long we have tolerated such practices as “partial-birth abortion,” a euphemism for an act that in reality is nothing other than infanticide.

Certain elements in our society have successfully disguised their greed as a commitment to promoting advancements in the field of medicine. Not long ago, they forced us to raise questions about the morality of creating embryos in a petri dish, then of killing them in the interests of therapy. Now the New Jersey legislature and like-minded people have upped the ante. Now they are asking not only for embryos to kill, but for fetuses to extract, dissect and distribute.

“Increase the demand outrageously,” they said to themselves, “and they’ll give us what we originally asked for, and maybe more.” Now we’re on the verge of giving them fetal farms. What will it be next time?