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“Goodbye, Dolly!”

By Fr. John Breck

Six years ago, the world said “hello” to Dolly, the first mammal to be a-sexually produced through a process of cloning. On February 14, scientists at the Scottish Roslin Institute, where Dolly was created and lived, announced that they had to euthanize Dolly, because she had acquired a progressive and fatal lung disease.

In its report on Dolly’s death, the Associated Press declared that her case “raised questions about the practicality of copying life.” It concluded by noting that many other animals have been cloned (pigs, cows, goats, mice, and most recently, a cat), and added: “many of them appear—robust and healthy.” To the mind of the London based AP reporter, this last point apparently reduces the matter to one of “the practicality of copying life.” No hint that there might be a moral question involved.

CNN, on the other hand, reminded its readers that already in 1999, researchers had determined that Dolly’s DNA was in effect the same age as the ewe from which she was cloned. The so-called telomeres, or natural endings of the chromosomes contained in the nuclei of her cells, were shorter than normal, indicating premature ageing. Extrapolating on the case of Dolly, one specialist in human genetics and cloning, Dr. Patrick Dixon, was quoted as saying: “The greatest worry many scientists have is that human clones—even if they don’t have monstrous abnormalities in the womb—will need hip replacements in their teenage years and perhaps develop senile dementia by their twentieth birthday.”

As we could expect, spokespersons for the Roslin Institute are claiming that Dolly actually succumbed to a viral infection caught from other sheep housed

with her. They conclude that it is “unlikely” that her illness was due to her being a clone. A post-mortem examination should quickly resolve the issue.

However that exam turns out, the likelihood that the cloning process itself is inherently flawed raises the most serious objections to its use as a means to “reproduce” human embryos. Yet with the media focused so heavily on impending war with Iraq and the tragic loss of the space-shuttle Columbia, laboratories here and throughout the world are proceeding apace, with little or no public oversight, to reproduce human embryos with the purpose of harvesting their stem cells or implanting them in the womb of a surrogate mother.

The problem with “copying life”—animal or human—is not one of “practicality.” It is the most significant and troublesome moral issue of our age, even considering the AIDS and Ebola epidemics sweeping across Africa, and the ethical and political consequences of preemptive strikes aimed at a sovereign if tyrannical government.

There is little chance we will be able to mobilize massive street demonstrations against cloning, as anti-war activists have recently done. The issue is too little understood and the consequences too little appreciated by most of the world’s population, including our own.

This makes it all the more imperative that the churches—individual parishes and bodies such as SCOBA—work to inform their faithful of the true significance and threat of human cloning, and urge them and the general public to pursue every appropriate means to bring a halt to the international movement to legalize such cloning.

In the United States this mean not only prohibiting the use of public monies to support cloning and the embryo manipulation that underlies it. It means passing legislation to outlaw the procedure altogether. Otherwise, Dolly’s fate may well befall coming generations of our own children.

The dictionary notes that the expression “goodbye” or “goodby” entered the English language sometime in the mid-sixteenth century, as an abbreviated version of “God be with you.” With Dolly’s premature demise, and the increasing threat that cloning poses to human as well as animal life, we would do well to return to the original sense of that expression. As we say goodbye to Dolly, may we pray that God will be with us, to make effective and lasting our

efforts to insure the integrity and well-being of human life at every stage of its existence, even from its very beginning.