

DISTURBING ADVANCES FOR THE CULTURE OF DEATH

Commentary by the Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades, Bishop of Harrisburg

This past January, I and over 1,000 faithful from our diocese were part of an estimated 300,000 people in Washington, D.C. at the annual March for Life. The majority of participants in recent years have been young people. This always gives me renewed hope for the future as we work to build a culture of life in our nation. Each year, and especially this year, the secular media provided little, if any, coverage of this significant event. I cannot imagine the media ignoring other gatherings of this size in our nation's capital.

The very day after the March for Life, President Obama, by executive order, reversed the Mexico City policy, first established in 1984, which prevented U.S. funding of organizations that perform and promote abortion as a family planning method in developing nations. According to polls, most Americans opposed this decision by the president. It is profoundly disturbing that our tax dollars are being used to fund organizations dedicated to performing and promoting abortions. It is shameful that our nation is exporting anti-life propaganda to people overseas whose values and cultures are often profoundly respectful of the right to life.

On March 9th, again by executive order, President Obama lifted the ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. It is profoundly disturbing that our tax dollars will be used to destroy human embryos. The president described his order as "an important step in advancing the cause of science in America." I agree with Cardinal Justin Rigali, the chairman of the U.S. Bishops Committee on Pro-Life Activities, in calling the executive order "a sad victory of politics over science and ethics."

I have often been asked, by non-Catholics as well as by some Catholics, why the Catholic Church opposes stem cell research. I must always begin by explaining that the Church only opposes *unethical* stem cell research. We support research that does not destroy or harm human life in the process. We support research using adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood stem cells, now

recognized by scientists as having great versatility and already effective against some serious illnesses. There are also recent scientific advances in the development of a genetic technique that produces stem cells without destroying (or using) any human embryos. It involves the transfer of genes into adult cells, triggering them to convert into pluripotent stem cells. This reprogramming of adult cells into embryonic-like stem cells was praised by the journal *Science* as the scientific breakthrough of the year. So why divert funds from these promising avenues of research to support research that involves the destruction of human life at its earliest stages?

The Church cannot and will not support research that involves the deliberate destruction of human embryos. The obtaining of stem cells from a living human embryo is gravely wrong since it invariably causes the death of the embryo. Pope Benedict XVI teaches: “Research in such cases, irrespective of efficacious therapeutic results, is not truly at the service of humanity. In fact, this research advances through the suppression of human lives that are equal in dignity to the lives of other human individuals and to the lives of the researchers themselves. History itself has condemned such a science in the past and will condemn it in the future, not only because it lacks the light of God but also because it lacks humanity.” (From a talk

given by Benedict XVI on Sept. 16, 2008, to the participants in the symposium on "Stem Cells: What Future for Therapy?" organized by the Pontifical Academy for Life. See <http://www.zenit.org/article-17829?l=english>

I am afraid that many people in our society today have forgotten or reject the principle that “the end does not justify the means.” A good intention (e.g. curing disease) does not make evil means (e.g. killing embryonic human life) good or just.

I realize that many good people struggle with this issue principally because of the existence of frozen embryos, embryos that were conceived *in vitro* and then frozen. There are indeed thousands of frozen embryos as a result of *in vitro* fertilization. It is important first of all to note that cryopreservation is itself “incompatible with the respect owed to human embryos” (cf. *Dignitas Personae* #18). We would not be faced with the moral dilemma about what to do with frozen embryos if they were not frozen to begin with and if *in vitro* fertilization had not taken place.

It is extremely important that we teach clearly and convincingly about the immorality of *in vitro* fertilization. Techniques that dissociate the sexual act from the procreative act are morally unacceptable (cf. *Catechism* # 2377). Also, the process of *in vitro* fertilization very frequently involves the deliberate destruction of embryos. It is deeply disturbing, yet often ignored, that the number of embryos sacrificed is about 80% in relation to those that are born in this process of artificial procreation. And then there is the process mentioned above of freezing embryos conceived *in vitro*, preserving them for repeated pregnancies if initial attempts are unsuccessful. Many of these embryos do not even survive the process of freezing and thawing (cf. *Dignitas Personae* #14, note 27).

The ethical dilemma now facing us is what to do with the large number of frozen embryos already in existence. It is a grave injustice that these embryos have been produced, frozen and stored in the first place. How can this injustice be remedied? It is not remedied by treating the embryos as mere *biological* material and destroying them for research purposes. “Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception” (cf. *Catechism* # 2270).

There have been other proposals made to try to resolve the ethical dilemma of what to do with frozen embryos. Each is morally problematic. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recently stated in *Dignitas Personae* (#19): “All things considered, it needs to be recognized that the thousands of abandoned embryos represent a situation of injustice that in fact cannot be resolved. Therefore John Paul II made an ‘appeal to the conscience of the world’s scientific authorities, and in particular to doctors, that the production of human embryos be halted, taking into account that there seems to be no morally licit solution regarding the human destiny of the thousands and thousands of frozen embryos that are and remain the subjects of essential rights and should therefore be protected by law as human persons’.”

It is indeed sad that the appeal of Pope John Paul II has mostly gone unheeded. It is particularly sad that in the United States our tax dollars are now being used in a way that treats human life at its very beginnings as a commodity, as mere biological material, for research. President Obama’s reversal of the ban on federal funding of

embryonic stem cell research is not an advance for science. It is an advance for the culture of death in our country.

There was perhaps one ray of hope in President Obama's statement of March 9th. The president stated: "we will ensure that our government never opens the door to the use of cloning for human reproduction. It is dangerous, profoundly wrong, and has no place in our society, or any society." I was glad the president made that statement. It is wrong to seek to have cloned children. But I wish he had just as forcefully recognized that it is wrong to clone human embryos because we want them for their body parts. This is euphemistically called "therapeutic cloning." The president should have stated his unequivocal condemnation of this as well. (cf. *Dignitas Personae* #30).

We should all be gravely concerned that our new president may rescind existing federal protections for conscience rights in the health care profession. On February 27th, the Administration placed on a federal website the news that it intends to remove a conscience protection rule for the Department of Health and Human Services. We need these legal protections for health care workers. No doctor, nurse, or other health care worker should be coerced to be involved in abortion or other immoral acts. We must stand up for freedom of conscience and freedom of religion on behalf of individuals and on behalf of our religious institutions. Cardinal Francis George, the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, recently warned that a failure to protect conscience rights would move the country "from democracy to despotism." I join Cardinal George in urging the faithful of our diocese to communicate to the Department of Health and Human Services in support of strong conscience protections for health care workers.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is inviting public comment on this attempt to rescind important federal regulations protecting the conscience rights of health care providers, especially those at risk of being discriminated against because of their moral or religious objection to abortion. The Catholic

community must speak out to protect Catholic doctors, nurses and hospitals. The deadline is April 9th for public comments. How? Go to this website: <http://www.usccb.org/conscienceprotection>

1. Be informed: listen to the videos, read the statements, check out the resources.
2. Be involved: click on the link and send your message (courtesy of the NCHLA). The link is on the right hand side of the web page.
3. Be an advocate: get others involved.

The recent orders of our president have been profoundly disappointing and may tempt us to lose hope for the building of a culture of life in our nation. We must pray for our president and our elected representatives that no matter what good they do in other areas, they must protect innocent life. But the foundation of our hope is not in political leaders or policies. Easter reminds us of the foundation of our hope: the Risen Jesus. As the great John Paul II reminded us: “The Lamb who was slain is alive, bearing the marks of his Passion in the splendor of the Resurrection. He alone is master of all the events of history: he opens its ‘seals’ (cf. *Rev 5: 1-10*) and proclaims, in time and beyond, *the power of life over death*” (*Evangelium Vitae # 105*).

March 25, 2009