

St. Bernadette Respect Life Committee Newsletter - January 2007

Excerpts from "Questions And Answers On Stem Cell Research - A statement of the Catholic Bishops of Pennsylvania"

What is a stem cell?

A stem cell is an unspecialized cell. Stem cells have the potential to develop into a full range of tissues that constitute the human body. This makes them so attractive to researchers. The science of cell therapy concentrates on ways to replace, repair or enhance the biological function of damaged tissues or organs in the body.

What are embryonic stem cells?

At the very beginning of human life, the sperm and egg come together to form an embryo. After that embryo has grown for about 5-7 days, it contains embryonic stem cells which can be extracted. In this procedure, the embryo is killed.

What are adult stem cells and from where do they come?

Fortunately, embryos are not the only source of stem cells. Adult stem cells are found in the individual at any time after birth. There are a number of ethical sources of stem cells that hold out realistic hope for cures and treatments of diseases. Stem cells from adult tissues, which are committed to differentiating into a limited number of cell types such as liver, brain or blood, are called adult stem cells. These too have the capability of developing into specific tissues. Adult-type stem cells can also be derived from various pregnancy related sources such as umbilical cords, placentas and amniotic fluid. Some scientists today assert that not only are adult stem cells more readily available but

they are also more effective in treating diseases.

What does the Church teach about adult stem cell research?

The Church does not oppose all stem cell research. In fact, the Church encourages and supports medical development and technological advancement. There are methods available for obtaining human stem cells from adults. Many therapies in humans have been successfully developed using adult stem cells. These include treatments for leukemia, juvenile diabetes, spinal cord injury, immune deficiency and corneal damage. It is important to note that no therapies in humans have ever been successfully carried out using embryonic stem cells.

Why is the extraction of embryonic stem cells immoral?

At the heart of the moral issue involving embryonic stem cell research is the fact that the embryo is killed so that the stem cells can be used for research - for the potential benefit of someone else. Embryos are human and at the very beginning of the process of life-long human development. Even though the human embryo is tiny at this point, as human beings and in solidarity with that life, we are not free to allow its use simply as a commodity for our convenience or benefit. What makes this experimentation immoral is that in each case a human embryo in the process of human development would be intentionally destroyed for the sake of scientific experimentation. Immoral means can never be used even in achieving a good and noble end.

Is Being Pro-life Imposing Your Morality On Others?

Article in *The Catholic Sun* by Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of the Diocese of Philadelphia

Some Catholics and other believers have been frightened into silence and even confused by charges that they are imposing their morality on others, especially when they oppose abortion. It is contended that a person's faith should have no impact on his or her public life. This is the infamous "I am a Catholic but..." syndrome! Of course, if one's faith does not impact on one's whole life, including one's political and social responsibilities, then it is not authentic faith; it is a sham, a counterfeit. A democratic society needs the active participation of all its citizens, people of faith included. People of faith engage issues on the basis of what they believe, just as atheists engage issues on the basis of what they hold dear; they fight for what they think is right and oppose what they consider wrong. This is not an imposition on other's morality. It is acting with integrity. It is good for society and it is responsible citizenship (Remember that the U.S. Constitution protects the free exercise of religion). Moreover, people of genuine faith strengthen the whole moral fabric of a country, whereas atheism can erode this moral fiber. Look at the social and moral disarray of those countries that until the past decade or so were dominated by atheistic communist ideology.

Thou shalt not kill: Is the death penalty needed today?

Also from Bishop Olmsted's article

There are times in history when the state has the right to resort to the death penalty. The "Catechism of the Catholic Church" teaches (#2266), "Legitimate public authority has the

right and the duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense... Assuming that the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person."

Then, the Catechism adds this important judgment, "Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm — without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself — the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent."

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