

Stem-Cell Experimentation: The Real Issue

By Jim Seghers

In a visit to the U.S. in 1976, when he was still Cardinal Wojtyla, John Paul II observed that the world is facing “the greatest historical confrontation humanity has gone through ... the final confrontation between the Church and the anti-Church, of the Gospel verses the anti-Gospel.” This great conflict is nowhere more evident or critical than the current debate over the sanctity of human life, affirmed by the Catholic Church and by our Declaration of Independence as “unalienable”.

Most recently that debate has focused on stem-cell experimentation, that is, scientific research on human embryos. The bankrupt arguments used to defend this horror are frighteningly familiar. However, because of the tidal wave of misinformation disseminated through the secular media, it will prove helpful to examine these arguments in the light of their moral content.

The end justifies the means. “Stem-cell research may lead to miracle cures.” This hoped for benefit may or may not result. However, the destruction of an innocent human life will certainly occur. Even if “miracle cures” would certainly be achieved, it is never morally permissible to do an evil act so good can come from it. Apart from the clear logic that the adoption of the principle that a good end justifies immoral means eliminates the possibility of unchangeable moral principles, the bloody legacy of the 20th century demonstrates the excesses that inevitably result from the adoption of this principle. All medical experimentation must be conducted within a moral framework.

Smear tactics. Those who oppose stem-cell research, especially the Catholic Church, are called among other things: “zealots,” “insensitive to the suffering of the sick,” “out-of-touch ultraconservatives,” “rigid ideologues” and “anti-science witch burners.” These and other “personal” attacks, which are often delivered with a great emotion, divert the focus of the debate away from the real issue, the sacredness of the human person. It’s ironic that the same tactics were used by the Ku Klux Klan to promote its fetid bigotry.

Dehumanizing. Most Americans will recoil in horror at the prospect of medical experimentations on little babies. Therefore human embryos are called “microscopic clumps of cells”. As such they have not really “needed” and have no “value” except, of course, for the purposes of scientific research. A similar depersonalization was used by the Nazis to exterminate millions in concentration camps, and to perform horrible medical experiments. After World War II the practitioners of this philosophy were tried as war criminals. The reality is that human embryos are genetically complete and unique individuals, otherwise experimentations would be meaningless. Certainly their minute size does not diminish their humanness. After all, every adult began as “microscopic clumps of cells”.

Culture is the engine that drives a nation up the path to greatness or down the road to self-destruction. Moral principles or the lack thereof are at the heart of every culture. Our great challenge as laymen and laywomen is to clearly articulate and defend Catholic morality by word and action. Convicted felon, Russell L. Ford, writes: “Nearly all violent crimes are committed because the offender cannot or will not view the victim as another human person, but rather as a ‘thing’ to be used or abused as he sees fit.” He further observes that in discussions with fellow inmates, they “understand that they violated the law, but they are completely mystified as to why the law exists in the first place; they have no idea why what they did is wrong.” The issues are not only about stem-cell research and violent crimes. Morality also touches issues like, abortion, contraception, divorce and remarriage, sexual behavior outside of marriage, the raising our children, education and business ethics.

There is a legend that many years ago there was a very wise and holy old man who could answer correctly any question. A boy in the village determined that he would ask a question so cleverly devised that the old man could not give the right answer. One day he captured a little bird. Holding it secretly in his hand

behind his back he approached the old man. "Old man," he said, "what do I hold in my hands?" The old man immediately replied, "You hold a bird in your hands." The boy knew the old man would answer this question correctly. Now he sprung his trap. "Old man," he said, "is the bird dead or alive?" If he said "dead," the boy could open his hands and let the bird fly away. If he said "alive," the boy could crush the bird and show that it was dead. The old man looked intently at the boy. Then he said, "My son, that life is in your hands." Like the bird in the boy's hands the vitality of our country breathes through moral principles. That life is in our hands.

Mr. Ford writes that his fellow criminals "have grown up in a morally relativistic society that preaches non-judgmental values while living under laws based on a very judgmental moral code. This is confusing them. When Catholic moral teaching is presented to them uncompromisingly, blunt, assertively, and authoritatively, these men eagerly embrace the Roman Catholic faith. They desire genuine authority. They find it refreshing to be taught there are absolute rights and wrongs." Isn't that what we all need to hear and how we must all live?

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