

# Dignitas Personae: The Dignity of a Person

– A Synopsis of Pope Benedict XVI's Instruction by Rev. Dr. Michael McCabe

## Synopsis of the Instruction on Certain Bioethical Questions

The Instruction is written in three parts: the first recalling key anthropological, theological and ethical assumptions and issues; the second addressing new problems relating to human procreation; the third examining new procedures involving the manipulation of embryos and the human genetic legacy. It is preceded by a short introduction and finishes with a short conclusion.

### Part I

Developments in understanding human life in its initial stages are positive and worthy of support when they seek to overcome or correct pathologies and when they succeed in re-establishing the normal functioning of human procreation. They are negative when they involve the destruction of human beings or when they contradict the dignity of the human person or when they are used for purposes contrary to the integral good of persons.

The authentic context for the origin of human life is the marriage and the family where it is generated through an act of reciprocal self-giving love between spouses. Such acts are a reflection of the love of the Divine Persons, the Trinity. In this way the conjugal act takes on a specific personal character.

### Part II

#### *Techniques for assisting fertility*

With regard to the treatment of infertility, new medical techniques must respect three fundamental goods: the right to life and to physical integrity of every human being from conception to natural death; the unity of marriage and the right within marriage to become a parent only together with the other spouse; the specifically human values of sexuality which require that the procreation of a human person be brought along as the fruit of the conjugal act specific to the love between spouses.

#### *In vitro fertilisation and the deliberate destruction of embryos*

Even while recognising that not all the losses of embryos in the process of IVF have the same relationship to the will of those involved in the procedure, it is noted that *in vitro* fertilisation very frequently involves the foreseen and willed abandonment, destruction and loss of embryos. Embryos which have defects are directly discarded and now cases are becoming ever more prevalent in which couples who have no fertility problems are using artificial means of procreation in order to engage in genetic selection of their offspring. Thus the “various techniques of artificial reproduction, which would seem to be at the service of life and which are frequently used with this intention, actually open the door to new threats against life.”

The Church understands the suffering of couples struggling with problems of fertility but the legitimate desire for a child cannot be allowed to override the dignity of human life.

The full respect due to the individual embryo must not be – and too often is – sacrificed in the presence of the competing desire for offspring.

#### *Intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI)*

This technique is intrinsically illicit because, just as with in vitro fertilisation of which it is a variety, it causes a complete separation between procreation and the conjugal act.

#### *Freezing embryos*

Cryopreservation is incompatible with the respect owed to human embryos. As well as presupposing their production in vitro, it exposes them to serious risk of death or physical harm and also deprives them, at least temporarily, of maternal reception and gestation. The large numbers of embryos already in existence constitute a grave situation of injustice which cannot be resolved. Proposals to use these embryos for research or for the treatment of disease are unacceptable because they treat the embryos as mere biological material. The proposal that these embryos could be put at the disposal of infertile couples as a treatment for infertility is not ethically acceptable for the same reasons which make artificial heterologous procreation illicit as well as any form of surrogate motherhood.

Prenatal adoption, undertaken solely for the purposes of allowing human beings otherwise condemned to destruction to be born, is “praiseworthy with regard to the intention of respecting and defending human life” but presents various problems.

#### *The freezing of oocytes*

While acknowledging that the freezing of oocytes has been advanced as a means of avoiding the serious ethical problems posed by the freezing of embryos, this procedure is described as “morally unacceptable”.

#### *The reduction of embryos*

Embryo reduction, from the ethical point of view, is an intentional selective abortion. It is never permitted to do something which is intrinsically illicit, not even in view of a good result.

#### *Preimplantation diagnosis*

This is a form of prenatal diagnosis in which embryos formed *in vitro* are scanned to ensure that only embryos free from defects or having particular qualities are transferred. As well as being connected with artificial fertilisation, which is itself always intrinsically illicit, preimplantation diagnosis is directed toward the qualitative selection and consequent destruction of embryos. Such practices presume to measure the value of a human life only within the parameters of 'normality' and physical well-being, and are therefore the expression of a *eugenic mentality*.

#### *New forms of interception and contragestation*

Alongside methods of preventing pregnancy which are contraceptive, there are other methods which act after fertilisation – they are interceptive if they interfere with the embryo before implantation and contragestative if they cause the elimination of the

embryo once implanted. The use of means of interception and contragestation fall within the sin of abortion and are gravely immoral.

### **Part III**

In recent years knowledge acquired has opened up new perspectives for both regenerative medicine and for the treatment of genetically based diseases. In particular, research on the possible medical advances which might result from the use of embryonic stem cells has prompted great interest.

#### *Gene therapy*

It is possible to use gene therapy on somatic cells or on germ line cells, the latter approach transmitting the therapeutic effects on to offspring of the individual. Procedures used on somatic cells for strictly therapeutic purposes are in principle morally licit. However, the moral evaluation of germ line cell therapy is different. Because the risks of cell therapy are considerable, and because germ line cell modifications will be transmitted to any potential offspring, in the present state of research, germ line cell therapy in all its forms is morally illicit.

The possibility of using genetic engineering for purposes other than medical treatment, that is, for the purposes of improving and strengthening the gene pool would, apart from the real physical risks involved, promote a eugenic mentality and lead to indirect social stigma with regard to people who lack certain qualities. These kinds of interventions imply an unjust domination of certain humans over other humans.

#### *Human cloning*

Human cloning is intrinsically illicit in that it seeks to give rise to a new human being without a connection to the act of reciprocal self-giving between the spouses and, more radically, without any link to sexuality. The fact that anyone would arrogate to themselves the right to determine arbitrarily the genetic characteristics of another represents a grave offence to the dignity of that person as well as to the fundamental equality of all people.

From the ethical point of view, so-called therapeutic cloning is even more serious; creating embryos with the intention of destroying them, even with the intention of helping the sick, is completely incompatible with human dignity.

#### *The therapeutic use of stem cells*

With regard to the ethical evaluation of the use of stem cells, the origin of the stem cells must be taken into consideration. Only methods which do not cause serious harm to the subject from whom the stem cells are taken are to be considered licit. The use of adult stem cells should be encouraged and supported since they do not present ethical problems.

#### *Attempts at hybridisation*

The admixture of human and animal genetic elements capable of disrupting the specific identity of human persons represents an offense against the dignity of human beings. The

possible use of the stem cells taken from such embryos may also involve additional health risks.

*The use of human “biological material” of illicit origin*

When researchers use human biological material care must be taken that there is no complicity in deliberate abortion and that the risk of scandal be avoided. Any appearance of acceptance of actions which are gravely unjust would in fact contribute to the growing indifference to, if not approval of, such actions in certain medical and political circles. The criterion of independence is necessary but may not be ethically sufficient.

**Conclusion**

The moral teaching of the Church is based on the recognition and promotion of all the gifts bestowed on humanity by God, including life, knowledge, freedom and love – the legitimacy of every prohibition is based on the need to protect an authentic moral good. Through work and technological activities humans participate in the creative power of God and transform creation. We have abused and can continue to abuse the power and capabilities that we have been given. In our own time, there is a downside to biomedical developments; the oppression of the fundamental right to life of a distinct category of person – those in the first stages of human life. The Church is duty bound to speak out on behalf of these poor, those who have no voice.

The fulfilment of this duty implies courageous opposition to all practices which result in grave and unjust discrimination against unborn human beings who have the dignity of a person. The Christian faithful are hereby called to commit themselves to the energetic promotion of a new culture of life.