

## ***Dignitas Personae*—A Brief Commentary**

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*Dignitas Personae* (*The Dignity of the Human Person*) was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) as an “Instruction” in December 2008. Its aim was to clarify some ethical questions concerning the use of technology in infertility, in research on human embryos and in the use of stem cells. *Dignitas Personae*, a less important form of teaching from an encyclical, addresses these questions in light of the main principles found in the earlier Instruction *Donum Vitae* (*The Gift of Life*), issued by the same Congregation in 1987.

The Congregation tells us it consulted with the Pontifical Academy of Life and with medical and research experts to ensure factual accuracy, and it refers to the encyclicals *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae* as sources of both the method and content used. The three-part document states that it draws on reason and faith, that it supports science when it serves the good of life and the dignity of the human, and that it is addressed not just to Catholics, but to all who seek the truth. It states that the eugenic viewpoint of many people today is a major cause of concern.

### **PART ONE:**

#### **ANTHROPOLOGICAL, THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ASPECTS OF HUMAN LIFE AND PROCREATION**

##### **ETHICAL PRINCIPLES**

The fundamental ethical criterion of *Donum Vitae* is restated in Note 5 as the first major principle underlying *Dignitas Personae*, and

as the method of evaluating all moral questions about the human embryo: “The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception, and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.” *Dignitas Personae* adds to this: “The human embryo has, therefore, from the very beginning, the dignity proper to a person.”

The second major principle of *Dignitas Personae* is found in Note 6, also already stated in *Donum Vitae*: “The origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and the family, where it is generated through an act which expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman. Procreation which is truly responsible vis-à-vis the child to be born ‘must be the fruit of marriage.’” The Instruction employs natural law to remind us: “The transmission of life is inscribed in nature and its laws stand as an unwritten norm to which all must refer.”

Another theological dimension is introduced in Note 8, where it states that the human being has “unassailable value”, saying: “...he possesses an eternal vocation and is called to share in the trinitarian love of the living God.”

This insight is continued in Note 9, where it states that “...the acts that permit a new human being to come into existence, in which a man and woman give themselves to each other, are a reflection of Trinitarian love.” These statements are extremely important in emphasizing the fundamental importance of the personal act of husband and wife as the only way in which procreation can be truly dignified.

Part One ends by reminding us in Note 10 that the Magisterium's mission is to contribute to the formation of conscience by teaching the truth and by declaring and confirming the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself.

## **PART TWO:**

### **NEW PROBLEMS CONCERNING PROCREATION**

#### FUNDAMENTAL GOODS

In treating infertility the Instruction tells us that three fundamental goods must be respected:

- a. the right to life of every human being from conception to death
- b. the unity of marriage and the right to become a parent only with and through the other spouse
- c. the procreation of a human person must be brought about as the fruit of the conjugal act specific to love between spouses.

It follows from respect for these goods that all techniques of fertilization which substitute for the conjugal act are morally excluded. Techniques which aid fertilization, e.g., unblocking fallopian tubes, are permitted. Methods of treating infertility discussed in the Instruction which substitute for the conjugal act are *in vitro* fertilization, intracytoplasmic sperm injection, and cloning for reproductive purposes. Since all of these separate procreation from the conjugal act, they are morally impermissible.

#### *IN VITRO* FERTILIZATION (IVF) AND REPRODUCTIVE CLONING

The Instruction discusses *in vitro* fertilization at length, perhaps because the passage of time since *Donum Vitae* has allowed some of the consequences of this technology to become more apparent. These consequences include:

- a. the destruction of embryos in using the procedure, where it is known that the success rate is low, and loss of embryos is accepted as part of the price of achieving pregnancy
- b. defective embryos are routinely discarded, as they are able to be genetically diagnosed prenatally
- c. where multiple embryos are inserted into the womb, too many pregnancies result in selective reduction to reduce the number of babies wanted
- d. unimplanted embryos are frozen, exposing them to damage, death, or further manipulation
- e. most frozen eggs surplus to the woman's demands are left in their frozen state, or abandoned to what *Donum Vitae* called an "absurd" fate.

*Dignitas personae* says in Note 19 that this "...represents a situation of injustice which in fact cannot be resolved."

These examples serve to underscore the lack of dignity accorded the embryos in these procedures, including eugenic tendencies towards defective embryos, leading to their being discarded, and abortion procedures in cases of selective reduction. IVF is seen by many as procreative, and therefore justified, but the Instruction reminds us that replacement of the conjugal act by a technical procedure leads to weakening of respect for every human being, borne out by the examples given.

#### CLONING

Cloning for reproductive purposes is technically dangerous at present, but the Instruction tells us that it is wrong in itself, because there is no connection to a personal, marital act, nor even to sexuality. The Instruction states in Note 29 that another problem in using cloning is that it imposes a predetermined genetic inheritance on another person, who will therefore not be truly "original", thus constituting a grave offence

against his or her personal uniqueness and freedom.

#### INTERCEPTION AND CONTRAGESTATION

Part Two ends in Note 23 by describing interception and contragestation, relatively new terms for drugs or procedures that prevent an embryo from implanting (interception), or that abort a developing embryo by trying to re-establish the woman's menstrual cycle (contragestation). Using these with the intention of preventing implantation or aborting an implanted embryo is clearly morally wrong.

#### **PART THREE:**

#### **NEW TREATMENTS WHICH INVOLVE THE MANIPULATION OF THE EMBRYO OR THE HUMAN GENETIC PATRIMONY**

##### GENETIC THERAPY AND ENGINEERING

Genetic engineering and gene therapy are the subjects of Notes 25-27. Gene therapy is allowed if used to eliminate defects in somatic cells, but not in germ line or reproductive cells. Risks must be carefully assessed as in any procedure. Germ line procedures may affect future children, and, therefore, the possibility of future harm to them precludes its use.

The use of genetic engineering for non-medical purposes, for some notion of "improvement", is questionable, especially if it involves an attitude of dissatisfaction with certain facets of being human, in contradiction of the idea of radical equality before God of every human person. The Instruction reminds us in Note 27 of "...the need to return to an attitude of care for people and of accepting human life in its concrete, historical, finite nature." This injunction fits well with our human needs and desires that sometimes drive us towards using the types of procedure dealt with in *Dignitas Personae*.

#### EMBRYONIC STEM CELL EXPERIMENTATION, CLONING AND HYBRIDS

The question of abortion is raised again in the Instruction's treatment of embryonic stem cell experimentation. Note 31 speaks positively about the therapeutic uses of stem cells in promoting cell growth and regeneration of tissue. Methods of obtaining stem cells which do not cause serious harm are considered permissible, for example from adult organisms, umbilical cords, or from fetuses whose death occurred naturally. Research initiatives involving these should be encouraged. Since embryonic stem cell experimentation results in the death of the embryo, however, Note 32 reminds us that such experimentation is immoral.

Note 33 points out that cloning to produce embryos for experimentation purposes is wrong, as is the use of hybrids for the same reason, with the further proviso that the latter "represents an offence against the dignity of human beings on account of the admixture of human and animal genetic elements capable of disrupting the specific identity of man."

#### COOPERATION IN EVIL AND COMPLICITY

The use of stem cell lines derived from embryos is discussed in Notes 34 and 35, and the Instruction is clear that researchers must distance themselves from use of such lines. In Note 35 the Instruction states that there must be "...no complicity in deliberate abortion, and the risk of scandal must be avoided."

Scientists and researchers in that field of experimentation are warned to avoid cooperating in evil, and are reminded that there is a duty to refuse to use stem cell lines derived from surplus embryos, even if there seems to be no close connection to the source. Note 35 is strongly worded, asserting that embryonic human life must be affirmed and any hint of complicity rejected.

Note 35 also refers to vaccines developed from such lines or otherwise illicit sources, saying that they may be used, but only in extreme situations, and those using them must be clear about the moral concerns involved and be active in trying to find licit sources.

IN SUMMARY:

*Dignitas Personae* re-affirms that procedures that violate the two fundamental principles outlined in *Donum Vitae* are wrong; it helps to clarify the differences in types of stem cell experimentation; it clarifies that researchers may not use stem cell lines from illicit sources; it discusses the morality of interceptives and contragestives, genetic engineering and cloning.

Overall, the Instruction redirects our attention to the dignity of every human person from conception until natural death, and demands our re-dedication to upholding the culture of life. Note 37 puts it well, urging us to a “courageous opposition to all those practices which result in grave and unjust discrimination against unborn human beings”. ■

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