

Science, religion not in conflict, bishops say in stem-cell document

WASHINGTON - The brief policy statement on embryonic stem-cell research that is to come before the U.S. bishops at their June 12-14 meeting in Orlando, Fla., is designed to set the stage for a later, more pastoral document explaining why the Catholic Church opposes some reproductive technologies.

“While human life is threatened in many ways in our society, the destruction of human embryos for stem-cell research confronts us with an issue of respect for life in a stark new way,” says the statement drawn up by the Committee on Pro-Life Activities of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Although the topic of embryonic stem-cell research has been raised in several broader USCCB documents and has been the subject of testimony and many letters to Congress, there has never been a formal statement on the issue from the full body of bishops, said Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, chairman of the pro-life committee, in an introduction to the draft document.

“The issue of stem-cell research does not force us to choose between science and ethics, much less between science and religion,” the document says. “It presents a choice as to how our society will pursue scientific and medical progress.”

The policy statement seeks to refute three arguments made in favor of permitting stem-cell research that involves the destruction of human embryos. Proponents of embryonic stem-cell research argue:

- “That any harm done in this case is outweighed by potential benefits.
- “That what is destroyed is not a human life, or at least not a human being with fundamental human rights. ...
- “That dissecting human embryos for their cells should not be seen as involving a loss of embryonic life.”

Responding to the first argument, the document says that “the false assumption that a good end can justify direct killing has been the source of much evil in our world.”

“No commitment to a hoped-for ‘greater good’ can erase or diminish the wrong of directly taking innocent human lives here and now,” the statement adds. “In fact, policies undermining our respect for human life can only endanger the vulnerable patients that stem-cell research offers to help. The same ethic that justifies taking some lives to help the patient with Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s disease today can be used to sacrifice that very patient tomorrow.”

On the claims that a week-old embryo is “too small, immature or undeveloped to be considered a ‘human life’” or “too lacking in mental or physical abilities to have full human worth or human rights,” the document notes that the embryo “has the full complement of human genes” and is worthy of the same dignity given to all members of the human family.

“If fundamental rights such as the right to life are based on abilities or qualities that can appear or disappear, grow or diminish, and be greater or lesser in different human beings, then there are no inherent human rights, no true human equality, only privileges for the strong,” the draft statement says.

The document also dismisses the argument that there is no harm in killing so-called “spare” embryos created for in vitro fertilization attempts because they would die anyway.

“Ultimately each of us will die anyway, but that gives no one a right to kill us,” the statement says. “Our society does not permit lethal experiments on terminally ill patients or condemned prisoners on the pretext that they will die soon anyway. Likewise, the fact that an embryonic human being is at risk of being abandoned by his or her parents gives no individual or government a right to intervene and directly kill that human being first.”

The document also addresses moves to permit human cloning and the “grotesque practice” - banned by the Fetus Farming Prohibition Act of 2006 - to develop cloned embryos in a woman’s womb in order to harvest tissues and organs from them.

“It now seems undeniable that once we cross a fundamental moral line that prevents us from treating any fellow human being as a mere object of research, there is no stopping point,” the policy statement says. “The only moral stance that affirms the human dignity of all of us is to reject the first step down this path.”

The draft document closes with a reminder that the use of adult stem cells and umbilical-cord blood have been shown to offer “a better way” to produce cells that can benefit patients suffering from heart disease, corneal damage, sickle cell anemia, multiple sclerosis and many other diseases.

“There is no moral objection to research and therapy of this kind, when it harms no human being and is conducted with appropriate informed consent,” it says. “Catholic foundations and medical centers have been, and will continue to be, among the leading supporters of ethically responsible advances in the medical use of adult stem cells.”