

Vatican condemns use of embryonic stem cells in tests on humans

VATICAN CITY – The Vatican condemned the recent decision by U.S. regulators to begin using embryonic stem cells in clinical tests on human patients.

The destruction of human embryos involved in such research amounts to “the sacrifice of human beings” and is to be condemned, said the president emeritus of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Bishop Elio Sgreccia.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration gave final approval for a clinical trial of embryonic stem cells as a treatment for patients with spinal-cord injuries, making the United States the first country to allow the testing of such cells on human beings.

Geron Corp., the U.S. company which won the FDA approval, plans to perform tests on a small group of patients paralyzed by a spinal cord injury.

The company had won FDA approval early last year, but after mice treated with the cells developed spinal cysts, the government put the clinical trials on hold amid concerns over the safety of the procedure. The new government-approved trials aim to test the therapy’s safety on humans as well as its effectiveness.

In a July 31 interview with Vatican Radio, Bishop Sgreccia said science itself recognizes the human embryo “is a human being in the making.”

Destroying embryos “receives a completely negative judgment” from an ethical point of view, no matter what justifications are given for their use, he said.

The Italian bishop said embryonic stem cells have not been proven to be effective in therapies. He said embryonic stem cells are “totipotent,” that is, they tend to reproduce a whole organism or individual, but not specialized cells.

However, even if there were positive results from the use of such cells, “morally it would still be a crime,” he said.

The church supports research and therapies that utilize adult stem cells and stem cells derived from umbilical cord blood.