

Vatican newspaper responds to U.S. journal on human dignity, science

VATICAN CITY – Protecting human dignity is the only guiding principle that ensures progress in biomedical technology does not harm the weakest humans, the Vatican newspaper said.

Using human dignity as the guiding principle for determining what is medically and scientifically ethical is not simply a Catholic approach and it is not a ruse to stop scientific progress, said the front-page article in *L'Osservatore Romano*.

The newspaper's May 28 article, "In Defense of Human Dignity," was a response to an article dated May 28 in *The New Republic*, a U.S. journal, arguing that members of President George W. Bush's Council on Bioethics were using the concept of dignity, particularly in its Catholic understanding, to obstruct scientific progress and impose conservative Christian values on the nation.

The journal's article, "The Stupidity of Dignity, Conservative Bioethics' Latest, Most Dangerous Ploy," was written by Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass.

Dr. Pinker said the bioethics council's March report, "Human Dignity and Bioethics" – a collection of essays by council members and invited contributors – "should alarm anyone concerned with American biomedicine and its promise to improve human welfare."

The general idea of the essays, he said, "is that even if a new technology would improve life and health and decrease suffering and waste, it might have to be rejected, or even outlawed, if it affronted human dignity. Whatever that is."

Dr. Pinker said the president's council is packed with "conservative scholars" and "advocates of religious (particularly Catholic) principles in the public sphere," and that many of the articles in the report appeal directly to the Bible or Catholic teaching to support their defense of dignity as the ultimate ethical measure.

At the same time, he said, “almost every essayist concedes that the concept remains slippery and ambiguous.”

Dr. Pinker said that is because “dignity is a phenomenon of human perception,” a reaction of appreciation, care or concern “that causes one person to respect the rights and interests of another.”

Respecting dignity, he said, “amounts to treating people in the way that they wish to be treated.”

In that case, he said, the determining factor should be respect for the autonomy of an individual and respect for his or her health care choices.

Responding to Dr. Pinker, the Vatican newspaper said: “The elimination of the concept of dignity founded on human nature would mean the elimination of its universalistic perspective. On a rational level, human dignity is the only objective reference that bioethics can recognize to affirm that every human being, without distinction, has dignity.”

Using autonomy as the guideline, the paper said, automatically eliminates protection for the unborn, who are not yet autonomous, and for the afflicted and the aged who have lost their autonomy.

“To affirm that all human beings intrinsically have dignity means to deny the pretext of extrinsically distinguishing between the ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy,’” it said.

The newspaper said it is true that placing the protection of human dignity as a primary value in the field of medical research could limit some freedom of research, but as in most spheres of life some limits must be placed on an individual’s freedom in order to protect the freedom of others, particularly the weakest members of society.

The principle of dignity, it said, “does not halt progress, but orients it in the direction of justice, which can be based only on the equality of all human beings,” including the unborn, the impaired and the aged.