

Reflections on Stem Cell Research

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Key Ideas

- ❖ Stem cells are cells that are capable of giving rise to other cells like themselves or of differentiating into various other types of cells. Stem cells appear to be able to repair or replace damaged or sick cells.
- ❖ There are various sources of stem cells. The ethical sources are from stem cells in the adult human person and from post-natal sources like placentas and umbilical cord blood.
- ❖ The unethical source of stem cells is from human embryos as acquiring the stem cells requires their destruction.
- ❖ The Church supports the efforts of adult and post-natal stem cell research.
- ❖ The Church strongly opposes embryonic stem cell research because it cannot happen without the intentional destruction of human embryos.
- ❖ Research using adult and post-natal stem cells has resulted in therapies and treatments for 58 illnesses and injuries. Research using embryonic stem cells have not resulted in even one treatment or therapy.
- ❖ There is a long-standing ethical directive that calls the scientific community to take extraordinary care in the use of human life in medical research. This directive is a vital guidance that necessarily protects the inherent dignity of each human person. This directive is at the core of the stem cell research debate.
- ❖ Embryonic life is human life and should not be destroyed for research purposes.
- ❖ It is never justifiable to use an evil means to achieve a good end.



The Church and Bioethics: Stem Cell Research

There has been considerable discussion in the news lately about stem cell research. We turn on the television or radio, read in the newspaper or in the weekly news magazines, that everyone has an opinion of stem cell research. Government is now intensely involved in this issue and it has divided the political parties. It has divided America.

Those who suffer from a major illness or have loved ones suffering are desperate to find a cure to end their pain and suffering. Celebrities affected by disabilities, diseases, or injuries such as actor Michael J. Fox, the late actor Christopher Reeve and former First Lady Nancy Reagan have all spoken out to promote embryonic stem cell research. At the same time, however, there are many raising serious moral and ethical questions of how far science should go in research that threatens the sacredness of human life.

Even a decade ago few people had heard of the term “stem cells.” Now it is a huge national debate. Stem cells are capable of giving rise to other cells like themselves or differentiating into various other types of cells. They appear to have the capability of repairing or replacing damaged or sick cells and regenerating damaged organs or tissue.

There are various sources of stem cells. The ethical sources are from the adult human person and from post-natal sources like placentas and umbilical cord blood. The Church encourages this promising research that has already resulted in very real and very effective treatments.

Harvesting stem cells from human embryos is unethical. Why is embryonic stem cell research unethical and, from the understanding of the Church, immoral? Because human embryos are

destroyed in order to acquire their stem cells.

Bishop Donald W. Wuerl, in an August, 2001 statement, reiterated: “The Church does not oppose all stem-cell research; it encourages medical development and technological advance. What the Church, as the conscience of society, calls for is moral and ethical reflection on the use of human embryos for stem-cell research. No scientific, technological, and medical development and advance should take place divorced from human conscience and moral and ethical consideration.”

Advocates of embryonic stem cell research say it could lead to breakthroughs for numerous debilitating diseases. They say it holds the potential for a cure for cancer, Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s Diseases.

The reality to date is that research using embryonic stem cells has not resulted in even one successful treatment or therapy. Research using adult and post-natal stem cells has resulted in therapies and treatments for fifty-eight illnesses and injuries.

But there is a greater issue here than effectiveness. There is a long-standing ethical and moral directive that calls the scientific community to take extraordinary care when contemplating the use of human life in medical research. This directive, which protects the inherent dignity and life of each human person, is at the core of the stem cell research debate.

Christopher Currie, a Juvenile Diabetes patient, recently gave testimony to Congress. He said, “Please remember that the goal of medical research is not to investigate new or mysterious phenomena, but to preserve or improve the

lives of real people. Congress should never sanction the destruction of some human lives in order to help others. Neither should it waste taxpayer money on research that probably will benefit no one, and certainly won’t benefit people like me, who refuse to sell our souls to save our bodies.”

The church promotes respect for all human life from conception to natural death. Pope John Paul II once said, “God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can, in any circumstance, claim for himself the right to destroy directly an innocent human being.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2274) states, “Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being.” The Church teaches that all life is sacred. Therefore, embryos must be treated with respect and dignity. Human life is sacred because it arises from the creative action of God.

In the Gospel we see that Christ was compassionate to others, especially those who suffered physical illnesses: the blind, the lepers, and the crippled. Christ cared for them. In chapter six in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was debating with the Pharisees. He sees a man in the synagogue with a withered hand. The scribes watched Jesus closely. Jesus out of love and compassion healed the man. He said, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or evil, to save life or destroy it?”

As the debate continues, let us pray that all may come to embrace the essential truth that human life is precious and sacred.