

## STEM CELL? SO WHAT?

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PINE BLUFFS — In August 2001, President George W. Bush made his first prime-time TV address. Among items discussed was his long-awaited decision regarding whether or not government funds would be used to underwrite scientific research on stem cells taken from embryos – one of the earliest forms of human life. The President opted to ban use of federal funds to support research on embryonic stem cells created after August 2001.

To appreciate the Roman Catholic Christian position on this matter, one must understand what stem cells are; cells that are differentiated based on what human tissue they are taken from.

### **Stem Cells are building blocks**

Writing in USA Today, 2/1/02, the more secular Dan Vergano described them this way: "Stem cells are building blocks capable of growing into any type of organ in the body. Medical researchers say they hope they can be developed into replacement organs for people with diseases such as Alzheimer's Parkinson's and diabetes."

This is certainly noble. We've all heard about the plight of celebrities like Mary Tyler Moore, Michael J. Fox, and the late Christopher Reeve, who looked to stem cell research in hope of being restored to robust physical health.

When the Bush Administration took the position it did back in 2001, was the President declaring embryonic stem cell research illegal? NO. Currently, there's no law against destroying human embryos for research purposes. While President Bush banned use of *federal* funding to support research on embryonic stem cells created after August 2001, it is NOT illegal.

*Private* laboratories using private funding are free to do it, as are the governments of countries that have not taken the moral position the United States has, which, simply put, allows federal funding of embryonic stem cell research on some 60 existing stem cell lines — because the life and death decisions for those embryos has already been made — but bans funding research on embryonic stem cells created after August 2001. Embryos created prior to that date were killed some time ago

The Roman Catholic Church supports embryonic stem cell research in most cases. Father Tadeusz Pacholczyk, director of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, says: "Ethical concerns exist, depending on the source of the stem cells. The Church has no problem with stem cell research when the stem cells are taken from adults, umbilical cords, or miscarriages. However, the Church is against standard embryonic stem cell research."

### **Against embryonic stem cells only**

Here's why. Embryonic stem cells come from embryos that are five to seven days old. Some researchers are pushing their use because they believe those cells are more flexible and not committed to a particular type.

Hypothetically, they could be manipulated in the lab to become ANY type of

tissue in the body. But the only way to extract stem cells located in the inner cell mass of the embryo which eventually becomes a baby, is to extract it violently from the embryo. In other words, by killing it. That's what Christians oppose. Human life begins at conception. It's sacred and must be preserved from that moment until the moment of natural death.

As Pope Benedict XVI said, "The underlying truth is that each person is meant to exist. Each person is God's own idea."

### **Pending Legislation**

Last month, two stem cell bills of major significance came before the House in Washington, D.C. One, the Stem Cell Therapeutic and Research Act, would establish a national umbilical cord blood bank where researchers could study adult stem cell therapies. The other, the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act, would allow federally funded researchers to use discarded embryos from fertility clinics to develop new stem cell lines. Both bills passed. President Bush supports the first; he promised to veto the second. It's easy to see why.

He supports the cord blood bill because it allows researchers to avoid the ethical quandary involved with embryonic stem cells, since adult stem cells aren't harvested from human embryos. The Church could easily support this bill.

Further, adult stem cell research is a field that has already yielded proven therapies. 57 diseases — including leukemia, Hodgkin's disease and other forms of lymphoma and sickle cell disease — have been successfully treated with stem cells extracted from umbilical cords.

## EMBRYONIC STEM CELL THERAPY NOT SUCCESSFUL

On the other hand, embryonic stem cell research has yet to produce a single therapy, even though researchers in countries such as Israel, China, Great Britain and South Korea enjoy increased funding and scientific license that ignores the moral and ethical aspects that concern us. Yet the secular media has been tardy reporting on these successes, while touting the “promise” of standard embryonic stem cell research.

Meanwhile, embryos exploited in standard embryonic research will not experience the idea which God intended for them. They’ll never undergo birth and live to enjoy the brilliant colors of a morning sunrise, the azure blues of the cloudless heavens at mid-day, or the salmon pinks and purples of a beautiful sunset — all the work of God, the master of all painters, on that great canvas we call a sky.

NOTE: Again, Paula Glover edited my column, though not severely. She removed several paragraphs which I had included to clarify this complex issue for people, thus clouding the explanation somewhat. Then, because she did that, she had to paragraph more frequently to fill the allotted space. She also has distorted the attribution paragraph at the end. The column ran in the June 20, 2005 issue.