

## VATICAN ISSUES NEW DOCUMENT ON BIOETHICAL QUESTIONS

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On February 22, 1987, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) published "Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation" (*Donum vitae*). This instruction addressed certain "biomedical techniques which make it possible to intervene in the initial phase of the life of a human being and in the very processes of procreation." Its aim was to assess these procedures in terms of their "conformity with the principles of Catholic morality." *Donum vitae* rests on two moral principles:

- "The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life." (no. 4)
- "The origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and in the family, where it is generated through an act which expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman. Procreation which is truly responsible vis-à-vis the child to be born must be the fruit of marriage." (no. 6)

In the last twenty years, medical science has made considerable advances. In his letter introducing "Instruction on Certain Bioethical Questions" (*Dignitatis personae*), Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the CDF, notes that "this technological progress has provided new possibilities in the area of treatment, but has also given rise to problems which were not explicitly treated" in *Donum vitae*. This new instruction, formulated with the assistance of the Pontifical Academy for life, was approved by Pope Benedict XVI and released on December 12, 2008. It is the church's updated assessment of new bioethical advances. It raises the "urgent need to mobilize consciences in favor of life."

Since the instruction seeks to assist in the formation of conscience on bioethical concerns, it is to be received by Catholics "with the religious assent of their spirit." (no. 37)

"Instruction on Certain Bioethical Questions" is divided into three parts. The first part recalls certain anthropological, theological and ethical elements relating to human life and procreation. The second part addresses specific issues regarding procreation. And the third part examines some new therapeutic possibilities involving the manipulation of human embryos and the human genetic patrimony.

Several core principles drive the instruction's conclusions:

- From the beginning of its existence, the human embryo has the dignity of a human person. This point is a singular advance over previous church teaching. Now the embryo is referred to as a "person" with full human rights.
- Human life must be respected under every circumstance.
- Procreation must take place in marriage and be the result of natural sexual intercourse. The instruction is strongly critical toward the widespread practice of *in vitro* fertilization and especially its typical destruction of unused embryos, which is named a "blithe acceptance" of an "enormous number of abortions."

The instruction teaches that techniques that respect the foundational principles are morally permissible. Others are not. Specific and controversial issues are carefully assessed, for example, the deliberate destruction of embryos, freezing embryos, freezing oocytes (eggs), the reduction of embryos, preimplantation diagnosis, new methods such as the morning after pill and RU-486, gene therapy, human cloning, the therapeutic use of stem cells, and attempts at hybridization (mixing animal and human genetic elements). When addressing the question of infertility, the document encourages and supports adoption.

The instruction emphasizes a “great ‘yes’ to human life” (no. 1) by affirming all science and medicine that is ethically pursued. This “yes” extends to fertility treatments that “overcome or correct pathologies and succeed in re-establishing the normal functioning of human procreation,” to the therapeutic use of non-embryonic stem cells, and to the intrinsic worth, value and equality of every human being from conception to natural death.

“Instruction on Certain Bioethical Questions” should be welcomed by Catholics and others concerned about human life as it advances the church’s bioethical assessment of current issues important to society. While some of the concerns dealt with will seem remote to many readers, for example, human germ line therapy and altered nuclear transfer, other issues are of immediate pastoral and ethical import, for example, the use of the morning after pill or RU-486, or the possibility of adopting frozen embryos. The instruction is very helpful in revisiting the church’s authentic teaching about marriage, the family, and procreation. A proper understanding of these seminal issues is of paramount importance in today’s culture and in a proper formation of one’s conscience.

While the instruction offers a useful and pastorally relevant moral evaluation of the most current bioethical issues facing contemporary society, it also offers a challenge to those who find no moral difficulty in dissociating procreation from the personal context of the conjugal act. The statement “the desire for a child cannot justify the ‘production’ of offspring” (no. 16) offers a strong objection to those who employ *in vitro* fertilization techniques to resolve infertility problems. Conscientious readers will be unsettled by the recognition that “the thousands of abandoned [frozen] embryos represent a situation of injustice which in fact cannot be resolved.” (no. 19)

Some will conclude that the instruction is merely a “no” to modern scientific techniques and advances. However, the instruction wisely replies, “Behind every ‘no’ in the difficult task of discerning between good and evil, there shines a great ‘yes’ to the recognition of the dignity and inalienable value of every single and unique human being called into existence.” (no. 37)