

## Diocesan Committee on Bioethics, Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong

### Response to Consultation on the Manual for Centres on Licensing and The Code of Practice on Reproductive Technology & Embryo Research

The Diocesan Committee on Bioethics of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong was formed in June 2005, comprising lay representatives of various Catholic medical and healthcare professional organizations, to communicate with the curia to make timely and appropriate response on healthcare issues, especially in the field of medical ethics. In its terms of reference, the Committee has been charged with making known the position of the Catholic Church on bioethics issues. It is in the discharge of this duty that the Committee responds to this consultation exercise.

#### **Preamble**

1. The Committee recognises the incomparable worth of the human life from conception right through to its natural end. Much of what is involved in reproductive technology as well as the entire field of embryo research fails to recognize this principle and is thus unacceptable.

#### **Reproductive Technology**

2. Reproductive technology seeks to alleviate infertility by applying medical advances to assist human conception, whether within or outside the woman's body, and to help the resultant pregnancy to end in the birth of a healthy baby. In and of itself, the aims "would seem to be at the service of life and ... are frequently used with this intention," but often the techniques employed "actually open the door to new threats against life."  
(1)
3. But first let us examine the underlying problems which reproductive technology seeks to alleviate as well as its implications which follow from the application of reproductive technology to this problem. The basic underlying problem is that of sub-fertility and infertility. Without in any way diminishing the suffering caused to those who are infertile, one may ask whether reproductive technology is the only answer. "It must not

be forgotten however that, even when procreation is not possible, conjugal life does not for this reason lose its value. Physical sterility in fact can be for spouses the occasion for other important services to the life of the human person, for example, adoption, various forms of educational work, and assistance to other families and to poor or handicapped children.”(2)

4. The Church teaches that the “various techniques of artificial reproduction .... are morally unacceptable, since they separate procreation from the fully human context of the conjugal act”(1). Some may argue that this does not apply to those who are not members of the Catholic Church. However, the application of reproductive technology to circumvent infertility has implications on the dignity and the worth of not only the child so conceived, but of all children in general.

### **Children - from precious gifts of marriage to objects of desire**

5. The Church has consistently taught throughout the ages, children are the precious gift of marriage as well as the purpose and blessings of marriage. St Augustine of Hippo wrote “the blessings of matrimony ... offspring, conjugal faith and the sacrament” (3). Pope Leo XIII taught that “a high and noble purpose of marriage is ‘bringing forth of children for the Church’” and that children are “‘fellow citizens with the saints, and the domestics of God’ ...born and brought up for the worship and religion of the true God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” (4) More recent Popes have taught “amongst the blessings of marriage, the child holds the first place”(5), that children are “the supreme gift of marriage and contribute in the highest degree to their parents' welfare” (6) and “the very institution of marriage and conjugal love are ordained to the procreation and education of children, in whom they find their crowning.” (2)
6. No couple however has a right to a child. “A true and proper right to a child would be contrary to the child's dignity and nature. The child is not an object to which one has a right, nor can he be considered as an object of ownership: rather, a child is a gift, the supreme gift and the most gratuitous gift of marriage, and is a living testimony of the mutual giving of his parents. For this reason, the child has the right, as already mentioned, to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his parents; and he also has the right to be respected as a person from the moment of his conception.” (7)
7. The application of reproductive technology to the problem of infertility reduces the child from a precious gift to an object of desire. This is consistent with the general attitude of society towards children whereby those unwanted are got rid of by abortion whilst

others seeking children when they find it difficult to conceive would employ extraordinary means to achieve their purpose. The Committee re-iterates that the value of a human life “cannot be made subordinate to any judgement ...by other men” (8) and repeats Pope Pius XII’s reminder to parents that children “a talent committed to their charge by God, not only to be employed for their own advantage” (9).

### **Devaluation of human life**

8. Another problem with reproductive technology is that it “reduces human life to the level of simple "biological material" to be freely disposed of.”(1) The rate of post-fertilization failure remains high and exposes embryos to the risk of death. More embryos than needed are thus created in compensation and these spare embryos are stored for future use. The storage of embryos is a hazardous procedure, with a risk that these embryos perish in the process. Spare embryos surviving defrosting can then be used for therapy (but up to a limit of three live birth events) and then they will be destroyed or used for research. These all remain unacceptable in and of themselves even without considering the devaluation of all human life such procedures bring about. Embryos have thus acquired a status lower than that of the slaves of yesteryears.
9. The position of the Church on prenatal diagnosis was eloquently summarized by Pope John Paul II: “Prenatal diagnosis, which presents no moral objections if carried out in order to identify the medical treatment which may be needed by the child in the womb, all too often becomes an opportunity for proposing and procuring an abortion”, (1) the latter of which we do not accept. The same applies to pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), which is but a specialized form of prenatal diagnosis.
10. We note that society seems “to accept life only under certain conditions and rejects it when it is affected by any limitation, handicap or illness.” (1) and we condemn this attitude. The Church teaches that “the value of a man's life cannot be made subordinate to any judgement of its quality expressed by other men” (8). Pope John Paul II reaffirmed “strongly that the intrinsic value and personal dignity of every human being do not change, no matter what the concrete circumstances of his or her life. A man, even if seriously ... disabled ... is and always will be a man, ... retain [his] human dignity in all its fullness.” (10)

### **The case against saviour siblings**

11. We regard the special case of PGD with HLA tissue typing as particularly worrisome.

This procedure is geared towards the generation of saviour siblings. The creation of saviour siblings devalues life of all children by implying that in certain cases, a child can be a means to an end, and not a life with own intrinsic worth. In this case, the right to life of the embryo depends not only on its freedom from serious illnesses, but also on its tissue type compatibility with its diseased older sibling. We categorically reject the imposition of any conditions to an embryo's right to life.

12. We welcome the fact that the code has asserted that "the welfare of the child is of paramount importance" (11), and that it has argued that the position is less problematic "if the child was wanted for his/her own worth," and but that "the child's dignity might be violated" "if PGD was solely applied for the purpose of creating a child donor of stem cells for an existing sibling" (12). However, since the Council will review such applications on a case by case basis with a view to approval certain cases, we must disappointingly concluded that the Council sees no fundamental objection to the creation of saviour siblings, something which our Committee wholeheartedly rejects.

### **Embryo Research**

13. There are a number of basic problems with embryo research which the Committee feels are unacceptable. The embryos, however created, are to be destroyed before the appearance of the primitive streak, which is taken to occur at 14 days post conception. This destruction of human life is deplored. Some of the research may involve interventions which pose risks to the embryos. In the postnatal world, consent by the subject or by a person in loco parentis allows the weighing up of risks and benefits. For embryo experimentation, this is suspended. The Committee notes the restrictions set on the scope of research but concludes that these do not justify the exploitation of the human life that is the embryo.

### **Embryonic stem cell research**

14. A special mention must be made on the subject of embryonic stem cell research. The extraction of stem cells from embryos cause their death, and however promising the research maybe, the Committee emphasizes that nothing can justify the killing of innocent human beings – the embryos. Although again the Code did mention that the use of adult stem cells may be substituted for embryonic stem cells, we feel that it does not go as far as to ban all embryonic stem cell research, for which there seem to be no adequate justification.

15. The argument for embryonic stem cell research is that it holds great promise for curing diseases. But adult stem cells are already used for curing diseases and claims about the number of diseases already being treated and cured by using adult stem cells range from 50 to 100. Locally we already have a centralized publicly-funded adult stem cell bank, namely the Centralized Cord Blood Bank of the Hospital Authority's Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service. Yet there is not even one such claim for embryonic stem cells. With this in mind, we would seriously question whether research involving the destruction of human life is the way to go when similar research without such a problem is already yielding results.
  
16. The position of the Church on this matter is unequivocal. Extraction of stem cells from human embryos is unacceptable. (13) Recent statements have also confirmed this position. Cardinal Trujillo, President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family, told *Famiglia Cristiana* magazine: "Destroying an embryo is the equivalent of abortion."(14) The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community stated "The use of human embryos for research purposes, i.e. their destruction or the research with stem cells derived from these embryos is not acceptable. Furthermore there is no necessity to undertake this research; according to experts, adult stem cells and stem cells from the umbilical cord, offer an alternative path with interesting and real perspectives for therapy." (15)

### **Conclusion**

17. The Committee emphasizes the incomparable worth of the human life from conception right through to its natural end. Much of what is involved in reproductive technology as well as the entire field of embryo research fails to recognize this principle and is thus unacceptable.
  
18. Reproductive technology reduces the child from a precious gift to an object of desire. It reduces human life in the form of embryos to the level of simple "biological material" to be freely disposed of. Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis galvanizes Society's attitude to accept life only under certain conditions and rejects it when it is affected by any limitation, handicap or illness, and thereby diminishes the dignity of all human beings. The possibility that the Council might consider approving applications for saviour siblings is particularly rejected as this places another condition to the right of the embryo to life – namely its suitability to be a transplant donor for an older diseased sibling. This particular assault on human dignity is singled out for particular condemnation and we urge the Council to ban such practice.

19. Embryo research sacrifices the life of the embryo for knowledge and the Committee finds this unacceptable. The need for embryonic stem cell research is also questioned since adult stem cell therapy is already available even here in Hong Kong.

The Diocesan Committee on Bioethics,  
Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong

References:

1. Evangelium Vitae (Acta Apostolica Sedes (AAS) 87(1995), 401-522), No. 14
2. Familiaris Consortio, No. 14 (AAS 74 ( 1982) 96)
3. St Augustine, De Bono Conjugali, Cap. 24, No 32.
4. Arcanum Divinum (ASS 12 (1879/80) 388-391), No. 10
5. Casti Connubi (AAS 22 (1930), 562-592), No.11
6. Humane Vitae (AAS60 (1968), 481-503), No. 9
7. Donum Vitae (AAS 80 (1988) 70-102), Section II, No.8
8. Speech Of John Paul II To The International Congress on Life Sustaining Treatments And Vegetative State, Saturday 20 March 2004, No.6
9. Casti Connubi (AAS 22 (1930), 562-592), No.15
10. Speech Of John Paul II To The International Congress on Life Sustaining Treatments And Vegetative State, Saturday 20 March 2004, No.3
11. see Code of Practise, Appendix 3, Ethical Guidelines on Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis, No 1(b)
12. ibid, No 9
13. see Declaration on The Production and The Scientific and Therapeutic Use of Human Embryonic Stem Cells, Pontifical Academy for Life, 25 August, 2000
14. BBC News Report, 8 July 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/5158760.stm>
15. “Set Back for the Protection of Embryos: The European Union faces a Major Bioethical Challenge” Statement of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community on the 7th Framework Research Programme of the European Union, 25 July 2006.