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Vatican extends prolife agenda to biotechnology

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A cloned embryo shown at the blastocyst stage is pictured in an undated handout photo from Stemagen, a small biotech company in La Jolla, Calif.

In a resounding confirmation that the Catholic church's pro-life concern extends to the brave new world of biotechnology, the Vatican today issued a tough document condemning the freezing of human embryos, genetic engineering, human cloning, animal/human genetic hybrids, and a number of other procedures described as affronts to human dignity. The document also reiterates existing bans on embryonic stem cell research, in-vitro fertilization, and the "morning after pill."

In places, Vatican rhetoric is biting. The document charges that human cloning risks "biological slavery," that some biotech procedures reflect a "shameful and utterly reprehensible ... eugenic mentality," and that widespread practice of IVF, which typically involves the destruction of unused embryos, implies "blithe acceptance" of an "enormous number of abortions." Its concern is not merely laying out moral teaching but also shaping social and political debates, citing an "urgent need to mobilize consciences in favor of life."

Titled *Dignitas Personae*, the document was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with the approval of Pope Benedict XVI. It was presented this morning in a Vatican news conference.

Underlying its conclusions are several core principles, addressed not just to Catholics but "to all who seek the truth":

- "The human embryo has, from the very beginning, the dignity proper to a person." (Vatican officials said this marks something of an advance beyond previous church documents, which were more circumspect in referring to the embryo as a "person.")
- "Human life is always a good" and therefore "must be fully respected," irrespective of such considerations as "intelligence, beauty, health, youth and integrity."
- The origin of human life must be in "marriage and the family," including natural sexual intercourse, "which expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman."

Dignitas Personae is styled as a successor to *Donum Vitae*, a landmark 1987 document from the CDF on bioethics. The purpose of *Dignitas Personae* is to bring *Donum Vitae* up to date in light of biotech advances over the last 20 years, as well as to address some simmering questions in Catholic moral debate.

In broad strokes, *Dignitas Personae* ratifies positions already outlined by the Vatican in ad-hoc fashion during the last two decades, often by the Pontifical Academy for Life, in response to specific inquiries or legislative and scientific developments. Thus the rejection of cloning and animal/human hybridization, while new with respect to such authoritative texts, is not surprising to anyone who has followed recent Vatican thinking.

At a tighter level of magnification, however, the document contains several points likely to raise eyebrows in Catholic moral theology. Most cut in the direction of a restrictive posture on previously open questions, though they generally stop short of outright prohibitions. They include:

- A critical view of "embryo adoption," meaning allowing women and couples to bring someone else's frozen embryos to term.
- Caution about "Altered Nuclear Transfer," touted as a way of obtaining embryonic stem cells without creating an embryo.
- Potentially ambiguous language about the "morning after pill," which could affect the practice in Catholic hospitals of offering emergency contraception to rape victims – though a spokesperson for the U.S. bishops' conference told NCR that the document is not intended to address that question.
- Raising the bar on the morality of research involving biological materials obtained from aborted fetuses or human embryos.
- A more negative view of genetic interventions passed on to subsequent generations than was offered in a 1983 speech by John Paul II, which hinted that such therapy could, at least in theory, be justified.

Experts will also likely find *Dignitas Personae* noteworthy for what it does not contain.

Like *Donum Vitae*, the new document is exclusively concerned with beginning-of-life issues. It does not address end-of-life questions, such as withdrawing artificial nutrition and hydration from patients in a persistent vegetative state, or the growing debate over "brain death," in which some maintain that use of neurological criteria allows deeply disabled, but still living, patients to be artificially declared dead in order to harvest their organs.

Even within the cluster of beginning-of-life issues, there are a couple of notable absences:

- *Dignitas Personae* approves research with adult stem cells, but does not mention "induced pluripotent stem cells," a means of reprogramming adult skin cells into the equivalent of embryonic stem cells. The technique has been hailed as a scientific end-run around the debate over embryonic cells.
- It also does not address a means of assisted reproduction known as GIFT, or "gamete intra-fallopian transfer." Catholic moralists are divided over GIFT, which involves removing eggs from a woman and mixing them with the man's sperm, then reinserting them in the fallopian tube. Many experts regard it as the best example of a question left hanging by *Donum Vitae*.

All of this suggests that while *Dignitas Personae* has answered some questions, it has also left some open, and created still others.

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Within Catholic moral theology, rumblings about a successor document to *Donum Vitae* have circulated for years. The early consensus seems to be that on the major points, *Dignitas Personae* is not a shocker.

"There's nothing here that shouldn't have been expected," said John Berkman, a Catholic ethicist at the Dominican School of Theology and Philosophy in Berkeley, California. "It could almost have been published as an appendix to *Donum Vitae*, taking its principles and applying them to new technologies."

Paradoxically, many experts said *Dignitas Personae* is likely to create the greatest consternation among Catholics most inclined to embrace official church teaching.

"This document is probably not going to affect moderate or progressive theologians, or moderate and progressive Catholics in general," said Jesuit Fr. James Keenan at Boston College. Its impact, he said, will be most keenly felt among "conservative Catholics who have really been working within the principles of *Donum Vitae*."

Keenan said that prior to *Donum Vitae*, some conservative ethicists had argued in favor of "homologous" in-vitro fertilization, meaning the use of IVF by a married couple with their own biological materials, on the grounds of the church's traditional support for families and new life. Similarly, he said, some conservative moralists over the last 21 years have argued in favor of measures such as embryo adoption and altered nuclear transfer, who "may be as perplexed as some people were in 1987."

Berkman, however, said that generational change within Catholic moral theology may create a more receptive climate for *Dignitas Personae* than the one faced by *Donum Vitae* 21 years ago.

"There's an emerging group of theologians who are pro-life, but who don't want to be identified as ultra-conservatives," Berkman said. "They want to be faithful on issues such as abortion, but they want to put that teaching in a larger theological context." That group, he said, will be sympathetic to the aims of *Dignitas Personae*.

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Experts predict that initial reaction to *Dignitas Personae* will swirl around four points:

- Embryo adoption
- Altered nuclear transfer (ANT)
- The "morning after pill"
- The use of "illicitly obtained" biological materials

(John Allen is NCR senior correspondent.)

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