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The Holy Father Condemns Artificial Insemination

Pius XII (Pope)

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Cover Page Footnote

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DEAR sons and daughters, your presence here around Us has a deep significance which causes Us great joy. First is the fact that 30 different nations are here represented even though the moats separating the nations, created in the pre-war, post-war, as well as the war years, have not yet, and by far, been filled in. Then there is the fact that you come to tell Us of the elevated thoughts that have guided your exchange of views in the sphere of medicine, and the fact that in this sphere you exercise more than a simple profession, but a real and an excellent ministry of charity.

All this most naturally assures you a most paternal reception by Us. You expect of Us, with Our blessing, some advice with regard to your duties, and We shall be pleased to give you some brief reflections on the obligations imposed upon you by the progress that medicine has made, by the beauty and the grandeur of its practice and by its relation with natural and Christian morality.

For many centuries, and especially during our own age, the progress of medicine is obvious. It is a progress certainly complex and embracing the most varied branches of theory and practice: progress in the study of the body and the organism, in all the physical, chemical and natural sciences; in the knowledge of medicines, their properties and their use; progress in applying to the art of healing not only the science of physiology but also of psychology; of the mutual actions and reactions of physics, and of morality.

Anxious not to disregard any benefits of this progress, the medical doctor is continually on the watch for all the means of curing or, at least, of relieving the ills and the sufferings of men.

The surgeon seeks to render less painful the operations that are required; the gynecologist does his best to reduce the pains of childbirth, without however endangering the health of the mother or the child and without risking a change in the feelings of motherly tenderness for the new-born child.

If the simple zeal for humanity, the natural love for one's fellowmen spurs and guides every conscientious medical doctor in his research, what is there that the Christian doctor will not do, when, moved by divine charity, he dedicates himself without sparing either his efforts or himself, for the good of those whom he rightly regards in faith as his brethren? He certainly rejoices wholeheartedly in the immense progress already made, and the results already obtained by his predecessors and continued today by his colleagues, with whom he joins to continue a magnificent tradition. He is justly proud of making his own contribution.

Never, however, does he consider himself satisfied; he is always looking to the future, to new distances to cover, to new advances to be made. He works enthusiastically both as a medical doctor, wholly dedicated to obtain alleviation for humanity and each individual, and as a scientist whom consequent discoveries give a taste of the joy of learning. He is as a believer and a Christian who, in the splendors he discovers in the new horizons that open before him, sees the greatness and the power of the Creator, the inexhaustible goodness of the Father, who, after having given the living organism so many resources for its development, its defense and in most cases for its spontaneous healing, leads him again to find in nature, inert or living, mineral, vegetable or animal, the remedies for bodily ills.

The medical doctor would not be corresponding fully to the ideal of his vocation if—while profiting from the most recent advances of the medical sciences and art—he used as a practitioner merely his intelligence and his ability, and if did not also make use (and We were about to say, above all) of his heart as a man, and of his loving tenderness as a Christian.

He is not working with "anima vili" with the lower nature undoubtedly; his ministrations are to bodies but to bodies animated with immortal and spiritual souls. By virtue of a mysterious but indissoluble bond between the physical and the moral, he acts

efficaciously on the body only when, at the same time, he is acting on the spirit.

Whether he be dealing with the body or the human being in its entirety, the Christian doctor will always have to beware of the fascination of science and the temptation of using his knowledge and his art for ends other than the care of the patients entrusted to him.

We thank God, however, that he will never have to defend himself against another temptation — and it is a criminal temptation — that of making the gifts hidden by God in the heart of nature to serve base interests, inadmissible passions and inhuman outrage.

Alas, We need not seek far, or go back far, to find concrete examples of these hateful abuses. For example, the disintegration of the atom and the production of atomic energy is one thing; but it is a different thing to use it for destruction beyond all control. The magnificent progress of the most modern techniques in aviation is one thing; but the wide employment of squadrons of bombers, without the possibility of limiting their action to military and strategic objectives, is quite another. It is one thing to engage in respectful investigation revealing the beauty of God in the mirror of His works, and His power in the force of nature; but it is quite another thing to deify that nature and its material forces through the denial of their Author.

What, on the contrary, does the medical doctor worthy of his vocation do? He dominates these same forces, these natural properties, in order to obtain from them healing, health, and vigor and often, what is even more precious, prevention of illness and preservation from infection and epidemics. In his hands the formidable power of radioactivity is harnessed and controlled for the cure of diseases resisting all other treatment. The properties of poisons, even the most virulent, serve for the preparation of the most efficacious medicines. Even the germs of infection are employed in all manner of ways in serotherapy and in vaccination.

Natural and Christian morality maintains, finally, everywhere its imprescriptible rights and it is from these, and not from any considerations of feelings or of materialistic and naturalistic

philanthropy that the essential principles of medical deontology (the science of duty or moral obligation) are derived: such as the dignity of the human body, the pre-eminence of the soul over the body, the brotherhood of all men, the sovereign domain of God over life and destiny.

We have already had many occasions to speak on a good number of special points regarding medical morality, but now We have here a question of the first order which, with no less urgency than other questions, requires the light of Catholic moral doctrine: it is artificial insemination. We could not allow this present opportunity to pass without indicating briefly the general outline of the moral judgment on this subject.

1) The practice of artificial insemination, when it is applied to man, cannot be considered exclusively, nor even principally, from the biological and medical viewpoint, while leaving aside the viewpoint of morality and law.

2) Artificial insemination outside marriage is to be condemned purely and simply as immoral.

In fact, the natural law and the positive Divine Law are such that the procreation of a new life may only be the fruit of marriage. Marriage alone safeguards the dignity of husband and wife—and in the present case, particularly of the wife—and their personal well-being. Marriage alone provides for the good and the education of the child.

Consequently, there is no possibility of any divergency of opinion among Catholics regarding the condemnation of artificial insemination outside marriage. A child conceived in such conditions is by that fact alone, illegitimate.

3) Artificial insemination in marriage with the use of an active element from a third person is equally immoral and as such is to be rejected summarily. Only the marriage partners have mutual rights over their bodies for the procreation of a new life and these are exclusive, non-transferable and inalienable rights. So it must be out of consideration for the child.

By virtue of this same bond, nature imposes on whoever gives life to a small creature the task of its preservation and education.

Between the marriage partners, however, and a child which is the fruit of the active element of a third person—even though the husband consents—there is no bond of origin, no moral or juridical bond of conjugal procreation.

4) With regard to the lawfulness of artificial insemination in marriage, it is sufficient for Us at present to recall the principles of the natural law: the simple fact that the desired result is obtained by this means does not justify the employment of that method itself; nor does the desire of the marriage partners—most legitimate in itself—to have a child, suffice to prove the lawfulness of a recourse to artificial insemination for the fulfillment of that desire.

It would be false to believe that the possibility of a recourse to that method would render a marriage valid between two persons who are unfitted to contract a marriage because of the impediment of impotency.

Moreover, it is superfluous to indicate that the active element can never be lawfully attained by acts that are contrary to nature.

Although one may not exclude “a priori” the use of new methods simply on the grounds that they are new, nevertheless, artificial insemination is something which must not just be regarded with extreme reserve, but must be utterly rejected. With such a pronouncement, one does not necessarily proscribe the use of certain artificial methods intended simply either to facilitate the natural act or to enable the natural act, effected in a normal manner, to attain its end.

Let it not be forgotten that the procreation alone of a new life, according to the will and the plan of the Creator, carries with it an amazing degree of perfection and the realization of intended aims. It is at the same time in conformity with the corporal and spiritual nature and the dignity of the marriage partners and with the normal and happy development of the child.

Your sincerely religious spirit and your present conduct, dear sons and daughters, are the pledge of your unflinching fidelity to all your duties as Catholic medical doctors and a pledge also of your desire to contribute by your example and your influence toward

encouraging among your colleagues and your pupils, among your patients and their families, the principles with which you yourselves are inspired. It is with this confidence that We give with all the effusion of Our paternal heart to you, to all those you represent here, to your families and to all those who are dear to you Our Apostolic Blessing.