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From the Editor's Desk

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From the Editor's Desk



Embryonic Life and Euthanasia

As we continue to react to the modern developments on the medical-moral scene of the world today, it becomes quite evident that the world is divided into two camps, viz., those who place supreme value on the dignity and sacredness of the individual human life and those who place less value on the individual and more on society benefits to be derived from the exploitation of the individual. We see this dichotomy being played out in many of the ethical dilemmas on the medico-moral scene today. To focus their observations in a more concrete way, one only has to focus on embryonic life which is so much in the news today. More often than not, embryonic life is sacrificed in the name of scientific progress and knowledge, benefits to mankind and future generations, eliminating genetic diseases, and so on. Non-therapeutic fetal experimentation and its future benefits are urged upon us as the new "summum bonum". The individual embryonic life is trivialized and treated as a nonentity unworthy of our respect. Lip service is given to new embryonic life and its dignity, but in the long run, its life is not equal to our life.

In order to dehumanize embryonic life, this life is referred to as "pre-embryonic life" or pre-embryos. The phrase "pre-embryo" was coined by the Warnock Commission in order to allow for nontherapeutic fetal experimentation. By use of this term, it means to divest innocent human life of any intrinsic dignity and leave the field open for experimentation. The AMA recently adopted this term "pre-embryo" in its December, 1989 interim meeting. In its discussion, it linked pre-embryos with the abortion climate in the courts in this country. In effect, the freezing of embryos should be left up to the scientists, their disposition to the parents. The parents of the frozen embryos should decide whether they are to be brought to life through thawing and inserting them into the mother's uterus, given away to other infertile couples, or destroyed by thawing and

not used. These embryos are treated as objects, lacking any rights and subject to the whim of the parents. The linking of the embryos and abortion is a predictable outgrowth of the utilitarian ethic. As our readers will remember, all of this was predicted and condemned in "Donum Vitae". One bright spot in recent months was a judge's decision on the Tennessee case of the seven frozen embryos, in which the judge awarded custody rights to the mother. In his decision, the judge declared that the embryos had rights from the moment of conception and were not to be treated as property, but as individuals worthy of protection by the state. Whether this ruling will be sustained on appeal remains to be seen.

The same utilitarian philosophy is operating within the current euthanasia debate. As documented in the Netherlands, involuntary euthanasia is taking place. Once the license to kill is given, it is difficult to stop. Lives unworthy to be lived should be eliminated. This pernicious philosophy begun by the German medical profession is being acted out in these days and being actively promoted by influential bodies. The editorial stance of the supposedly impeccable *New England Journal of Medicine* has lost any credibility by its blatant backing of euthanasia. The *NEJM* has frozen out any opposition to its views on euthanasia.

It is a sad commentary that such prestigious medical bodies have forgotten about the dignity of the individual be it embryo, defective newborn or elderly patient in their adoption of the utilitarian ethic. The insidious influence of the utilitarian ethic has permeated the profession to its detriment. When physicians object to being compared to the German physician of the 1920s in their disregard for the dignity of human life, it may be well to point out to them that it is the same attitude they have now that the German medical profession had then as pointed out by Lifton's book on the Nazi doctors. When respect for the individual is surrendered, we are no different than the Nazi physicians. As we progress into the 1990s, we will see the movements with which individual dignity of human life will be further eroded. The medical profession as always will be held accountable when that day of reckoning occurs.

It will be a sad day when many recognize how they failed so miserably in defending the most defenseless of our human race. To say they didn't realize what they were doing will sound hollow when they are indicted before the courts of history and face the inscrutable evidence arrayed against them.

Our readers will note that the British Parliament is actively discussing the Human Fertilization and Embryology Research Bill at the present time. How Parliament decides this issue will have a profound effect throughout the world. The many ramifications of this bill, if enacted, are protean, as we are well aware. Such a debate has yet to take place in the United States except in a very peripheral way. So far, the federal government under Presidents Reagan and Bush, has held the line on federal funds for embryonic research, but this decision will be profoundly affected by what happens in Parliament. As the years fly by, the lessons

taught by the Church on the sacredness and dignity of human life come more sharply into focus. The verity of "Humanae Vitae", "Donum Vitae", and the Declaration on Euthanasia should serve as a beacon to those in darkness who are confused by the current medical-moral scene. It is difficult to maintain one's balance these days with the siren songs of utilitarianism. However, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Who is guiding our Church and its leader, Pope John Paul II, we need have no fear. Although we may not comprehend the changes of modern day, we may be assured that God, in His almighty power and wisdom, is with us and will guide us throughout this mortal coil.

— John P. Mullooly, M.D.

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