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## **BIOETHICS DISCUSSION GROUP**

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### **BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH ON HUMAN EMBRYOS IN VITRO**

The members of the Bioethics Discussion Group focused their efforts on this subject because of the discussions taking place on this theme in several European countries, the fact that there is a growing debate within the European Union, and the recent adoption by the Council of Europe of a Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine. This Convention includes Article 18, which takes no position on the admissibility of the principle of research on embryos in vitro, but contents itself in paragraph 2 with prohibiting the creation of human embryos for the purpose of conducting research on them.

For the Catholic Church, as soon as the egg is fertilised we are in the presence of an original life that is not that of the father, or of the mother, but a new human being that develops independently. Without becoming engaged in the definition of a philosophical status, the Church nevertheless calls for true respect for any human embryo, in the same way as for any person.

However, respect for a person does not imply renouncing biomedical research on that person. It is simply necessary to ensure consideration of the person's dignity and to avoid reducing the person to the status of an object and, in order to avoid this risk, surrounding it with appropriate protections and guarantees so that the person is recognised as such by the experimenter and the procedures used.

This implies, firstly, obtaining the person's consent, and secondly, taking into account the person's interests. It could never be acceptable for a person to be sacrificed in the general scientific or therapeutic interest, however elevated, or to be reduced to the status of a pure object of research.

These conditions cannot be satisfied when the person is unable to express a truly informed consent. The traditional ethical debate nevertheless recognises the legitimacy of certain research on minors and incapacitated persons, provided that consent is obtained from the persons legally authorised to speak in their name, and provided that the interests of the person are seriously taken into consideration. In principle, it would not be admitted that research has a direct therapeutic interest for the person in question.

International ethical declarations even go as far as stating that research with no direct therapeutic benefits, provided that it is important, which has to be scientifically applied to persons in the same category of age and disease, may be carried out on persons unable to

express themselves (young children, persons in a coma or with certain mental handicaps, etc.), and above all it must only involve minimal prejudice or risk.

The same reservations and requirements are valid with regard to human embryos. One does not necessarily have to renounce all research on them, but it is necessary to challenge any act that would compromise the integrity of the embryo or would result in sacrificing it. Under no circumstances would it be admissible to reduce it to the status of a pure object of experimentation.

The creation of human embryos for research purposes is therefore certainly unacceptable, as their very existence is due to the desire to use them as instruments and then destroy them. This prohibition is moreover quite rightly enshrined in the Council of Europe Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine.

New prospects are opening up in the biomedical field, in particular the use of human embryos in vitro, not only as an object of research, but also for therapeutic purposes. The scientific reviews nowadays frequently refer to “embryonic stem cells” and their culture in order to obtain stem cells that can be grafted. In reality, these “stem cells” are obtained by dissecting embryos in vitro, which then become sources of therapeutic material. Two remarks need to be made on this subject: firstly, the language of “stem cells” masks the use of human embryos and, secondly, the rules referred to above concerning research also apply to therapeutic uses (however important they may be). The human embryo must not be reduced to the status of a pure object of research.

NB: In this context, useful reference may be made to the following documents:

- **“The Declaration on procured abortion”** of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1974)
- **“Donum vitae”** of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1987)
- **“Evangelium vitae”**, Encyclical of Pope John-Paul II (1995)