

Priest reflects on bioethics in light of science and theology



Father Matthew Temple, a Carmelite priest who teaches cell biology and bioethics at Nazareth College, believes that science and theology are complementary disciplines.

Says document reveals Church's dual roles

By Teresa A. Parsons

Father Matthew Temple contradicts the traditional wisdom that religion and science are antithetical disciplines.

A Carmelite priest and assistant professor of biology at Nazareth College, he earned a doctorate in genetics from Georgetown University in 1977. In 1982, he completed theological studies at Catholic University of America and was ordained in the Carmelite order.

He has chosen to continue working as both a theologian and a geneticist because he believes each field has much to offer the other.

That belief has been both aptly demonstrated and sorely tested by the Vatican's "Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation."

The document, released March 10 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has been blasted for stubbornly blocking the path of scientific progress and, alternately, hailed for boldly asserting countercultural values in areas rife with potential for abuse.

Father Temple believes that in its role as teacher and prophet, the Vatican had no choice but to propose guidelines that counter prevailing cultural trends, and to address them to civil and political leaders as well as to Roman Catholics.

"(The document) takes a risk by proposing objective truths about being human, not just Roman Catholic," he said. "In this document, the Church moves from the level of one human being's responsibility for another."

"It may be naive and unrealistic to expect governments to use this as a basis for their laws," he added, "but the Church has no choice but to put out that demand."

From his uncommon vantage point, Father Temple is more aware than many theologians or scientists of the real-life dilemmas posed by emerging medical technologies.

Researchers now know, for instance, that fetal adrenal glands transplanted to adults can relieve the symptoms of Parkinson's disease. They have not yet determined what should be considered a legitimate source for those fetal cells.

"Can you do anything with fetal embryonic cells for the benefit of other humans?" Father Temple wondered.

Given that in-vitro fertilization will continue even without the Church's approbation, doctors and technicians are also debating what to do with surplus or abnormal embryos.

"Is medicine prepared and morally equipped to make decisions about pre-implantation zygotes?" Father Temple asked.

If implanted, abnormal embryos would likely result in severely deformed human beings or miscarriages, he observed. If such embryos are not implanted, he wondered, will they be destroyed or allowed to die?

Meanwhile, as in-vitro procedures become more efficient, more surplus embryos are likely to be produced, Father Temple said.

The Vatican document, on one hand, prohibits the freezing or destruction of these spare human embryos. On the other hand, it stipulates that regardless of how a child is conceived, it must be "accepted as a living gift of the divine Goodness and must be brought up with love."

One possible response might be pre-natal adoption. "We find post-natal adoption praiseworthy," Father Temple said. "Can our adoption ethics be used to safeguard and promote the gestation and birth of human embryos, with dignity, into a loving marriage?"

As a result of these questions and many others, Father Temple believes that in-vitro



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Although he's currently between research projects, Father Temple specializes in cytogenetics. He wrote his doctoral thesis on prenatal diagnosis and the Catholic moral tradition.

fertilization is likely to remain among the scientific issues most troubling for theologians.

He finds the document's prohibition of the procedure "entirely consistent" with previous Church teaching. At the same time, the document expresses genuine concern for the pastoral implications of the procedure's prohibition.

While acknowledging the suffering of parents unable to bear children, the instruction ranks their desires as secondary to the embryo's intrinsic value as a human being. In other words, Father Temple said, children must not be considered as objects to fulfill their parents' needs, but rather as individuals who are valuable in and of themselves.

During two years spent working as a genetic counselor at Georgetown, Father Temple confronted evidence of the need to establish and affirm such priorities.

"I encountered some parents who seemed to be acquiring their value systems from Ralph Nader," he said. Not only were they seeking guarantees that they would bear a child without defects, he observed, but they were already outlining their expectations for the fetus's performance, educational and otherwise.

"They took a consumerist approach toward childbearing, and culture supports that," he said. "The document is supporting

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