

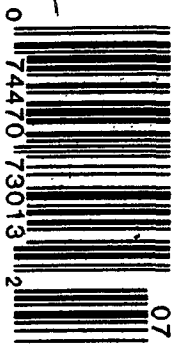
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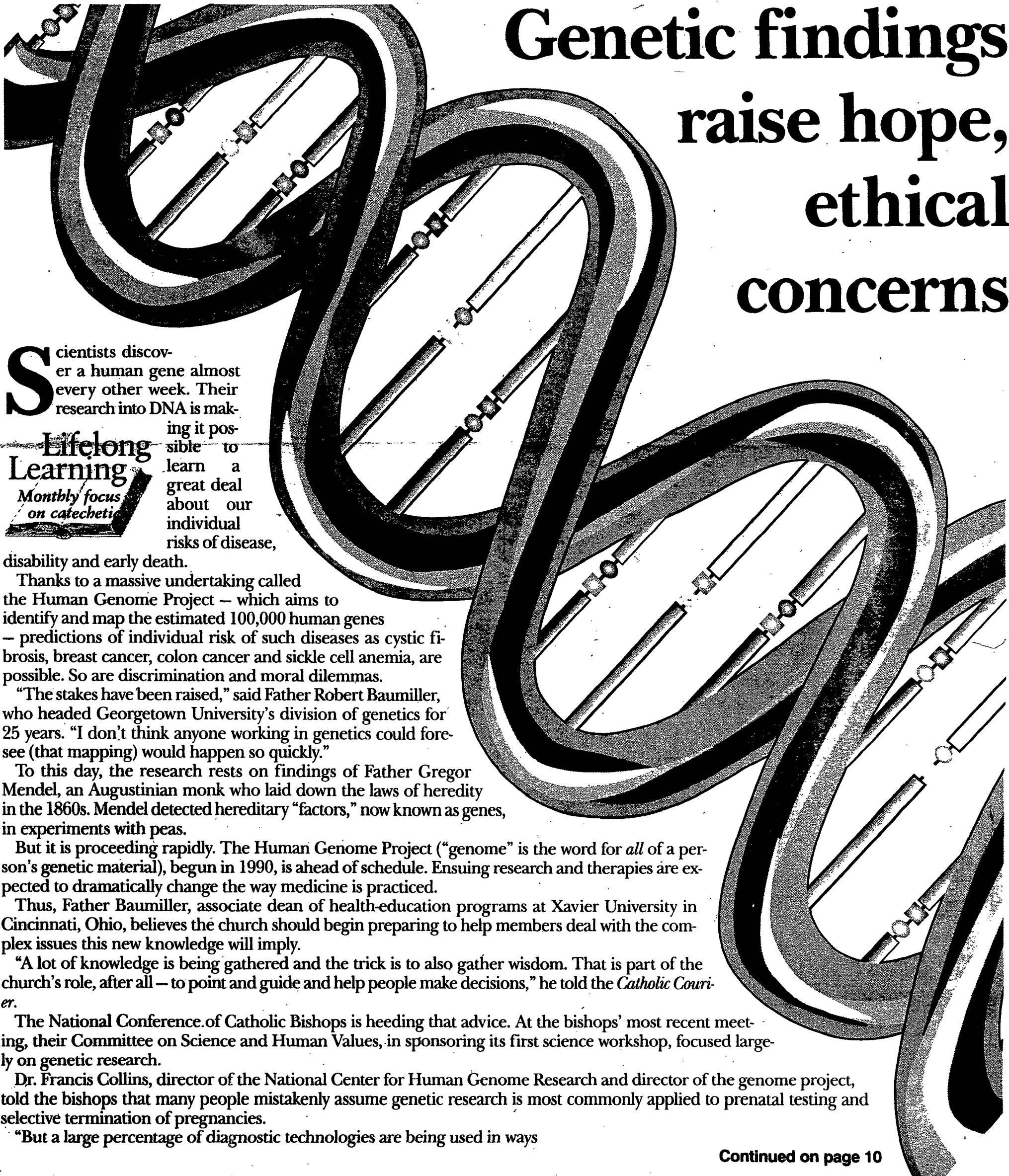
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Genetic findings raise hope, ethical concerns



Scientists discover a human gene almost every other week. Their research into DNA is making it possible to learn a great deal about our individual risks of disease, disability and early death.

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Thanks to a massive undertaking called the Human Genome Project — which aims to identify and map the estimated 100,000 human genes — predictions of individual risk of such diseases as cystic fibrosis, breast cancer, colon cancer and sickle cell anemia, are possible. So are discrimination and moral dilemmas.

"The stakes have been raised," said Father Robert Baumiller, who headed Georgetown University's division of genetics for 25 years. "I don't think anyone working in genetics could foresee (that mapping) would happen so quickly."

To this day, the research rests on findings of Father Gregor Mendel, an Augustinian monk who laid down the laws of heredity in the 1860s. Mendel detected hereditary "factors," now known as genes, in experiments with peas.

But it is proceeding rapidly. The Human Genome Project ("genome" is the word for *all* of a person's genetic material), begun in 1990, is ahead of schedule. Ensuing research and therapies are expected to dramatically change the way medicine is practiced.

Thus, Father Baumiller, associate dean of health-education programs at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, believes the church should begin preparing to help members deal with the complex issues this new knowledge will imply.

"A lot of knowledge is being gathered and the trick is to also gather wisdom. That is part of the church's role, after all — to point and guide and help people make decisions," he told the *Catholic Courier*.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops is heeding that advice. At the bishops' most recent meeting, their Committee on Science and Human Values, in sponsoring its first science workshop, focused largely on genetic research.

Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Center for Human Genome Research and director of the genome project, told the bishops that many people mistakenly assume genetic research is most commonly applied to prenatal testing and selective termination of pregnancies.

"But a large percentage of diagnostic technologies are being used in ways

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