

WORLD & NATION

Use of human embryos 'not morally acceptable'

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Decisions in the United States and Britain paving the way to therapeutic use of human embryos drew sharp condemnation from the Vatican and U.S. pro-life experts.

The debate focused on using embryos to obtain therapeutic stem cells, which can be used to treat diseases. Church leaders said that because the embryos are destroyed in the process, the techniques were immoral, unnecessary and, in the United States, illegal as well.

Vatican and U.S. Catholic leaders emphasized that the church has no moral objection to stem-cell research using adult cells, which they said was a valid and overlooked alternative to the use of embryos.

Addressing a conference of medical experts in Rome Aug. 29, Pope John Paul II said therapeutic methods that involve the use and destruction of human embryos were "not morally acceptable, even when their proposed goal is good in itself."

"Science itself points to other forms of therapeutic intervention which would not involve cloning or the use of embryonic cells, but rather would make use of stem cells taken from adults," the pope said.

"This is the direction that research must follow if it wishes to respect the dignity of each and every human being, even at the embryonic stage," he said.

In the United States, the National Institutes of Health issued guidelines Aug. 23 that lifted a moratorium on embryonic stem-cell research. In England, the country's chief medical officer recommended in mid-August that scientists be allowed to obtain stem cells by cloning human embryos.

Stem cells are undifferentiated cells that replicate repeatedly, producing cells that can form various body tissues. Scientists believe they hold promise in treating a variety of diseases, especially the degenerative diseases of age.

In a seven-page statement issued Aug. 24, the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life said the production and use of human embryos to harvest stem cells amounts to viewing a human life — the embryo — as "a simple accumulation of cells" rather than a subject with rights.

"As a 'human individual,' it has a right

to its own life; and, therefore, any intervention which is not for the good of that embryo is a detrimental act to that right," the statement said.

Removal of stem cells irreparably damages the embryo, making the process "a seriously immoral act and, therefore, gravely prohibited."

The Vatican said it was immoral for scientists to use embryonic stem cells even if the scientists had not removed the cells from the embryo themselves, because a "close material cooperation in the production and manipulation of human embryos" was involved.

In an interview with Vatican Radio Aug. 24, Bishop Elio Sgreccia, vice president of the pontifical academy, criticized the U.S. decision on stem-cell research and said it represented a "yielding to the pressures of the industries that want to commercialize human material."

The NIH guidelines stated that only "excess" frozen embryos created for fertility treatment can be used, and that no monetary or other inducements were allowed to donors. It said donors must be informed that the embryos will not survive the stem-cell derivation process.

President Bill Clinton praised the NIH decision and said research on stem cells, obtained from frozen embryos slated for destruction at fertility clinics, offers "potentially staggering benefits."

But Richard Doerflinger, associate director for policy development in the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, said that under the guidelines, the U.S. government "for the first time in history ... will promote research in which developing human embryos are destroyed."

"The Clinton administration has ignored the moral objections submitted by tens of thousands of Americans during the NIH's public comment period, compounding the problem by forcing conscientiously opposed taxpayers to support this immoral research," he said.

Disputing the legality of the research, Doerflinger argued that the funding of a program in which human embryos are harmed or destroyed is prohibited by federal law.

"The new guidelines seem to circumvent the law, by telling researchers how to obtain and destroy live human embryos if they wish to receive a stem-cell research



Nancy Wiehede/CNS

At pope's tomb

A woman and girl pray at the tomb of Pope John XXIII below St. Peter's Basilica Aug. 25. He is to be beatified along with Pope Pius IX in St. Peter's Square Sept. 3.

grant. This bookkeeping trick is, to say the least, an exercise in hypocrisy," he said.

Doerflinger also disputed the claim that embryonic stem-cell research is needed for new medical advances. He said such a claim has been disputed by numerous breakthroughs in adult stem-cell research and other alternatives.

He said that in recent days NIH-funded researchers announced they can produce "a virtually limitless supply" of new nerve cells for transplants from patients' own bone marrow stem cells.

"This approach overcomes the ethical and immunological concerns associated with the use of fetal tissue," he said.

Doerflinger said Catholic officials will explore "all avenues in Congress and elsewhere" for reversing the guidelines so medical research will again "be guided by sound moral principles."

Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua of Philadelphia said the Catholic Church was not opposed to adult stem-cell research or stem-cell research on umbilical cords because these procedures do not endanger life.

"Embryonic stem-cell research, however, requires the killing of embryonic human life and is therefore totally repre-

hensible and unacceptable. ... Must we end one human life attempting to benefit another?" Cardinal Bevilacqua's statement asked rhetorically.

Several other church and pro-life leaders criticized the NIH decision:

Virgil C. Dechant, head of the Knights of Columbus, called the guidelines "deeply flawed and deceptive" and said they encourage "the taking of human life in its earliest form."

The Virginia-based American Life League stated the new guidelines "sanction the killing of innocent human beings. These guidelines sanction murder."

Douglas Johnson, president of the National Right to Life Committee, quoted a 1966 federal law known as the "Dicksey Amendment," which prohibited federal funding of any "research in which a human embryo or embryos are destroyed, discarded, or knowingly subjected to risk of injury or death."

Gary Bauer, former Republican presidential candidate and chairman of the Campaign for Working Families, called on congressional leaders "to put an immediate stop to this latest attempt to use taxpayer money to fund this procedure" when final appropriation bills come up in the fall.

Vatican document, Cardinal Ratzinger decry term 'sister churches'

By John Norton
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Addressing what it called common misuses of the phrase "sister churches" in ecumenical dialogue, the Vatican's doctrinal congregation issued a document stressing the Catholic Church's unique identity as "mother" of all particular churches.

The document said clarification was necessary because an ambiguous use of the phrase, putting the Catholic Church on equal footing with other churches, had become "prevalent in contemporary writings on ecumenism."

The four-page document, accompanied by a letter from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was signed June 30 and distributed to the heads of bishops' conferences.

Catholic News Service obtained a copy of the letter and the document Aug. 23.

The document said the expression "sister churches" could only be properly used as a way of describing the relationship between local Catholic churches, like "the church of Rome," and non-Catholic churches.

But the Catholic Church as such could not be described as a "sister church," it said.

"The one, holy, catholic and apostolic universal church is not sister but 'mother' of all the particular churches," the document said.

"This is not merely a question of terminology, but above all of respecting a basic truth of the Catholic faith: that of the unity of the church of Jesus Christ. In fact, there is but a single church, and therefore the plural term churches can only refer to particular churches," it said.

"Consequently, one should avoid, as a

source of misunderstanding and theological confusion, the use of formulations such as 'our two churches' because it might seem to imply that there is more than one church of Christ, it said.

The document also said that Catholic use of the phrase "sister churches" could only apply to "those ecclesial communities that have preserved a valid episcopate and Eucharist," like the Orthodox churches.

In his letter, Cardinal Ratzinger said the

FCC petition against Madalyn O'Hair still making rounds

By Christopher Gaul
Catholic News Service

BALTIMORE — Given a copy of the petition from one of her bridge-club friends, Mary Iglehart Taylor Duke liked what she read and promptly signed the document.

Other copies of the petition began circulating at Duke's parish, the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, and even the rector, Msgr. Robert A. Armstrong, was tempted to sign one.

But, it's a hoax.

It involves a rumor that simply won't die — about a fictitious proposal before the Fed-

eral Communications Commission to limit or ban religious programming on television and radio.

The rumor first began to circulate in 1975 that Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the widely known Baltimore atheist who was instrumental in taking prayer out of public schools, was trying to get the FCC to ban the broadcast of Sunday worship services.

Claiming that O'Hair's "group" is also "campaigning to remove all Christmas programs, Christmas songs and Christmas carols from public schools," the anonymous petition asks signers to mail their protest to the FCC in Washington.

Msgr. Armstrong considered signing one of the petitions but decided to call the archdiocesan chancery office first to check out its authenticity.

Msgr. W. Francis Malooly, the chancellor, informed the rector that the petition was a baseless hoax.

At the same time, a chain e-mail has been floating around the Internet for the past several months insisting that the FCC is forcing CBS to take the popular "Touched By An Angel" series off the air because it mentions the word "God."

"This is a new variation of an old hoax" said the program's producers.