

WORLD & NATION

Vatican experts debate when human life starts

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — When the landmark encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, restated the church's condemnation of abortion in 1968, it seemed clear to all that the fetus was indeed a nascent human being — a position that has been held from the time of early church councils.

But as the recent debate over cloning and stem cells illustrates, defining what is human life is becoming more difficult.

Vatican officials from Pope John Paul II down have strongly defended the embryo's right to develop, saying the mere probability a human person is involved is enough to rule out an embryo's suppression.

To emphasize the point, one Vatican official, Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, has lately spoken about Jesus' incarnation as beginning with the stages of embryo and even zygote, when the nuclei of egg and sperm cells fuse.

But in late December, the Vatican's experts appeared momentarily disoriented by one of the latest developments on the bio-genetic front: a technique that, according to some researchers, manages to transplant human cell nuclei in a cloning process without creating a human embryo.

The process, called somatic cell nuclear transfer, or SCNT, is important because it can grow human stem cells, which experts believe could help heal a host of diseases.

The Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, initially praised SCNT, saying the news that it did not produce an embryo was an "extremely positive element."

But at virtually the same moment, other bishops and Vatican experts disputed the claim of SCNT, saying there was no guarantee that this type of cloning would not produce a developing human life.

Nearly a week later, the Vatican newspaper ran a 3,000-word article on the issue, written by the top two officials of the Pontifical Academy for Life. Their ethical verdict on SCNT: It's too soon to say.

"The moral judgment on whether or

not such research is licit ... remains suspended because of a lack of identification of the material, or physical object, of the action," said the article.

In other words, a very basic question remains unanswered about the product of SCNT: Is this human life?

Vatican officials said that as long as doubt exists, there remains a moral obligation to refrain from experimenting with this type of process. They did not exclude the possibility that SCNT could be shown to work without creating even a "single-cell" embryo. But they said the burden of proof was on researchers to demonstrate this without using human cell transfers.

As genetic research focuses more on the earliest stages of human development, uncertainty about when an individual comes into existence has been thrown into high relief, even among some theologians.

Salesian Father Norman Ford, an Australian expert on health ethics, believes it is difficult to claim that the first two or four cells formed by a zygote constitute an "organized human individual." He tends to accept the 14-day period of embryonic development as the starting point for individual identity — though in practice he gives the young embryo the "benefit of the doubt", as church teaching requires.

Redemptorist Father Brian V. Johnstone, a moral theologian at Rome's Alfonsiana University who has closely followed the stem-cell debate, says theologians may be taking a wrong path when they peg their arguments on such detailed scientific data.

"If we're asking whether we have any certainty of the point at which we can say a human individual is present, as far as I can see, we don't know," he said.

"The next question is: What is the significance of not knowing?" he said.

He said that, from an ethical point of view, it is less important to define the precise moment when a human individual comes into existence and more important to consider the implications and consequences of destroying any embryo.

Father Johnstone acknowledged that, unlike the fetus, the status of the embryo — including those of one or few cells — is the subject of doubt in the minds of many, including ordinary Catholics. This uncertainty can create problems in accepting the church's teachings, he said.

But he pointed out that the church has lived with this type of uncertainty before. For centuries, he said, it was generally accepted that "ensoulment" of the human being did not occur until after 40 or more days of fetal development. Despite that margin, however, the church did not teach

that destroying an early-stage embryo was acceptable, he said.

The church today does not take an official position on when the human soul is present. But *Donum Vitae*, a 1987 instruction by the Vatican's doctrinal congregation, said that "unconditional respect" is due to the human being "from the moment the zygote has formed."


Father Johnstone said basic human intuition about life issues tends to support the church's view that embryos deserve the benefit of the doubt about their right to life.



Reuters/CNS

Aristide returns

Jean-Bertrand Aristide is sworn in as president of Haiti Feb. 7 in Port-au-Prince. Aristide, a former Catholic priest known to champion Haiti's poor, stands with former President Rene Preval (left) and Senate President Yvon Neptune.




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