

COLUMNISTS

Cloning controversy calls for clarity

What's the matter with cloning? A private bio-tech firm in Massachusetts announced Nov. 25 that it had successfully cloned a human being. The "success" part may be a bit exaggerated in light of the fact that after only a few cell divisions, the life that had been there ceased. Technically speaking, cloning refers to the technique of nuclear transfer: removing the nucleus of a cell, and replacing it with the nucleus of another cell. Reproductive cloning refers to removing the nucleus of a female egg, or ovum, and replacing it with the nucleus of a cell taken from an already living human being.

In ordinary reproduction the female ovum contains only half the genetic material necessary for the creation of a new human being. The second half is to be supplied by the sperm. The two "halves" together complete the genetic coding necessary for the production of a new human.

In cloning, this natural process is altered. In reproductive cloning, an already completed genetic package taken from one person replaces the incomplete nucleus of the egg. It is allowed to develop into a new human being who is genetically identical to the person from whom the cell nucleus was taken.

Obvious benefits from this procedure might seem elusive at this point. Still, we can name a few. One might be that persons who are infertile could actually "reproduce," since their genetic make-up would now be able to be passed on to a new human being. Another benefit might be that persons known for a particular genetic aptitude could be replicated. Imag-



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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ine several individuals identical to Michael Jordan being born in every generation. Think of the benefit to the NBA alone!

This same sort of benefit has already been realized in non-human cloning and genetic engineering. Better livestock and plants have been produced and the agricultural industry has enjoyed considerable benefit from this.

A third positive consequence that could result from human cloning might be that human beings could clone themselves so that transplant organs would be readily available in case their own organs become diseased. Perhaps a method might be designed that would enable only individual organs to be generated from this process. This could have great therapeutic benefit.

The Massachusetts company assured us that the cloning they intend to do will be used for therapy only and not for eugenics or reproduction. Eugenics refers to improving an individual's genetic structure, or possibly even improving the human gene pool itself. Therapeutic genetic interventions are those directed at healing a disease or abnormality. As ethicists have

pondered the morality of genetic intervention over the years, eugenics has been named the more problematic of these two uses. Thinkers in these fields are far more skeptical about efforts to "improve" humanity or improve a single human being through genetic intervention than they are about actually healing a disease condition. If cloning could be used to grow only particular organs, for example, these new and genetically compatible organs could be used to replace diseased ones through transplant therapy.

But there are many ethical problems associated with human reproductive cloning. Some emerge from the scientific side and others from the realm of social, cultural and religious thought. Scientifically, ethicists acknowledge that wide use of this procedure would stand to reduce some of the genetic variety present in the human gene pool. Replicating existing human beings reduces the "newness" that we associate with every new human being, and might possibly render the whole race more susceptible to developing disease conditions in the future. Scientists admit that the procedure is still not "safe" in terms of our capacity to sustain the life of those created through this method.

From the philosophical side, concern about the destruction of embryos emerges. If we believe that life begins at conception, the cloned cell would in fact be human life. At the moment, this procedure results in the death of many embryos. The question of family integrity is raised as well. Children who are related in the same way to both parents constitute

the very definition of a family. The Catholic Church has already rejected the prospect of heterologous (using sperm or egg from a donor who is not part of the couple) artificial insemination or in-vitro fertilization since this technology uses the genetic material of only one parent. In the church's mind, this introduces an uneven relationship between the child and one parent. This could invite conflict and dissension to affect the relationship of the couple and the family unit itself. Cloning would certainly have this effect as well.

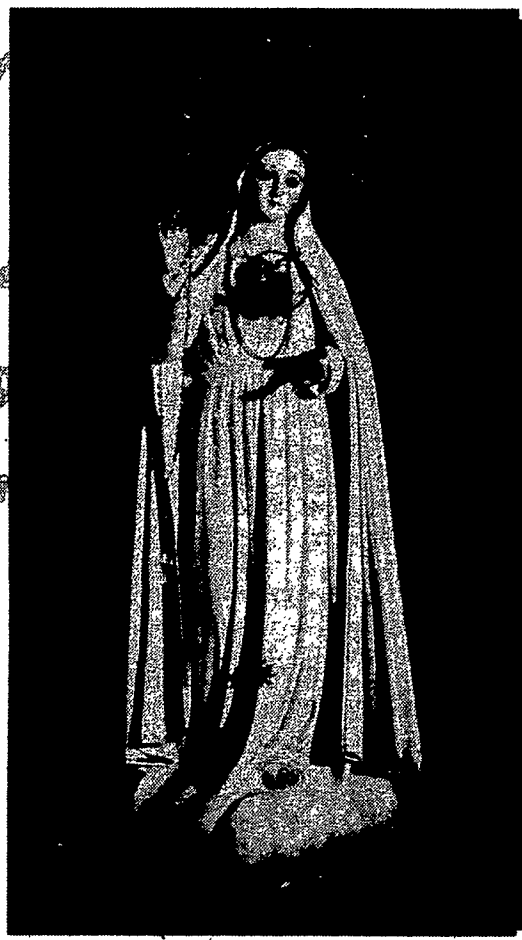
Cloning would also raise the possibility that children could be viewed and treated not as ends in themselves, but as objects for the treatment of another's illness, or for another purpose not their own. This could cheapen human life and erode the dignity of the person. As Catholics, the rejection of the morality of cloning also relates to a 1987 document (*Donum vitae*) dealing with human reproductive technologies. In that document the church rejected both in-vitro fertilization and most forms of artificial insemination because in those procedures procreation takes place apart from the act of sexual intercourse. Cloning would fall under this same censure. This article does not settle the debate about cloning, and individual church pronouncements against it will not end the conversation that will proceed in the days ahead. Clarity about the arguments and technology can only help all of us to appreciate what is actually at stake.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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