

WORLD & NATION

Theologians ponder if clones have souls

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The Bible talks of God breathing into Adam's nostrils, making human life part of his creation. It recounts how God later made Eve and told the couple to be fruitful and multiply.

The "Catechism of the Catholic Church" says that since then God has been directly infusing each human being generated by its parents with an immortal soul.

What does this mean now that the possibility of cloning opens the door to producing human beings without fertilization? Do they have souls? If so, when does the soul enter these bodies that were never conceived through the fusion of a sperm and an egg?

A starting point in seeking answers is that Catholic officials have clearly condemned human cloning as immoral while also noting that any beings thusly created would be fully human.

The Vatican has taken the lead on the matter with a statement issued the day after an announcement by Advanced Cell Technology in Worcester, Mass., that its scientists had cloned the first human embryo. The Nov. 26 Vatican statement said that it is "beyond doubt ... that here we find ourselves before human embryos and not cells." Human life was found "in the first

instant of existence of the embryo itself," it said.

Several theologians specializing in bioethical issues consulted by Catholic News Service said that if human cloning is successful it would produce beings with souls, equal in dignity and rights with human beings created through fertilization. The fact fertilization is missing would not basically change church teaching, although it would require a rethinking and recasting of terminology to take the new biological developments into account, they said.

There are already many cases where humans are created in ways judged immoral by the church but in which the human status of the people produced is clearly recognized, said John Haas, president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Boston. He cited pregnancies resulting from adultery, in-vitro fertilization and artificial insemination.

"The public should begin discussing how we can protect the rights of these human clones," Haas said.

Father Thomas Kopfensteiner, theology professor at Fordham University in New York, said that a human clone would be like a twin of the original human being, with its own soul and personhood.

"No one says that twins are the same person," said Father Kopfensteiner, a priest of the St. Louis Archdiocese.



Nancy Wiehede/CNS

Prayer for life

A young woman sits on the floor with other worshippers at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington Jan. 21 during the annual Vigil for Life. The annual Mass draws an overflow crowd to the shrine on the night before the March for Life, the annual demonstration objecting to the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision that legalized abortion across America.

However, theologians point out that the issue of when the soul enters the body is not so clear cut and has historically been left open-ended.

The "Catechism of the Catholic Church" says: "The church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God — it is not 'produced' by the parents — and also that it is immortal."

Haas said that "the common teaching of theologians is that the soul is infused at conception, but this has never been defined by the church." The term "immediately" refers to God as the direct cause of the infusing of the soul and does not refer to time, he added.

A key arguing point is: At what precise time can a cell or a group of cells be defined as a unique human person?

Articles in the Catholic Encyclopedia note that some historically important theologians using the biological data of their times — such as St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century — held that the human soul was not infused until weeks after conception when the fetus had become well-

formed. One article said that St. Thomas believed that the embryo goes through "a succession of forms, the embryo first having a vegetative soul and later a sensitive one, before the human soul finally arrives."

Thomas Shannon, religion and social ethics professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Mass., holds that the soul might not be infused until about two weeks after conception.

"What modern developmental biology says is that the early embryo doesn't become individualized until about two weeks," he told CNS. Prior to that the cells can become any body part, he said. The early embryo would have a moral standing but it would not be as high as that of a human person, he said.

"Until you have an individual you still don't have a person," said Shannon.

But Father Kopfensteiner and Haas hold that the human soul is present from conception. The entire genetic package is there from the very beginning, he said. "There is no distinction between human life and personhood at conception."

Bioethics panel begins

By Patricia Zapor
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The new President's Council on Bioethics is taking a cautious, deliberative approach to its mandate to help shape the nation's conscience on matters such as human cloning, stem-cell research and other bioethical matters.

The council's 18 members spent the opening day of their first meeting Jan. 17-18 politely attempting to define where their discussion of bioethics may lead. In one session, the panel even used a Nathaniel Hawthorne short story, "The Birthmark," as the basis for a discussion about the consequences of using science in pursuit of human perfection.

"It has been a long time since the climate and mood of the country was this hospitable for serious moral reflection," said the council chairman, Dr. Leon R. Kass, a bioethicist on the University of Chicago faculty. Since the Sept. 11 terrorism, "a fresh breeze of sensible moral judgment, clearing away the fog of unthinking and easy-going relativism, has enabled us to see evil for what it is," he said.

In his opening remarks, Kass said the greatest dangers of the biological revolution arise from principles that are central to the contemporary American self-definition: "devotion to life and its preservation; freedom to inquire, invent or invest in what-

ever we want; a commitment to compassionate humanitarianism; and the confident pursuit of progress through the mastery of nature, fueled by unbridled technological advance."

He noted that the council has very few members who are trained in bioethics, so the panel comes together not as experts in the field, but as a group of people who recognize the importance of the issues that arise when biology, biotechnology and the human way of life intersect.

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