

## COMMENTS ON INSTRUCTION ON RESPECT FOR HUMAN LIFE IN ITS ORIGIN

I remember the day that Rome issued its new “Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origins and on the Dignity of Procreation” because I heard a news brief on a local rock ‘n’ roll station, WBCN, which made me smile.

The reporter said that a “shocking new statement” had been issued by the Vatican which condemned the “miracles” of modern technology in the area of artificial procreation. How the Vatican bans...forbids...condemns test-tube babies, surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination, etc...

The irony is, the Vatican’s logic is neither shocking nor new, the only thing that is clear is WBCN radio does not fully understand the Catholic Church. For Catholic teaching neither bans nor forbids any biomedical technique. Much less does it condemn any baby, be it test-tube, surrogate motherhood or artificial insemination. And the Church is very unlikely to ever condemn legitimate miracles.

First, the document is not at all shocking if one is informed about the issues involved. For active, interested Catholics, it’s rather a relief to hear the Church’s prophetic voice on the dilemmas of the post Modern age. That voice comes to us as a call to truth amid confusion and turbulent social change. It’s the voice of a Mother nurturing her children. It’s also a voice crying out in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the Lord.” If the Church doesn’t call attention to the moral dimension of scientific progress, will anyone else? The Vatican is not trying to regulate people’s behavior by imposing rules.

Ethical questions naturally arise when babies are produced in laboratories and embryonic humans are used in experiments. But we can as a society or as a believing community assume that whatever can be done may be done, or that people have a right to use every technique or conduct every experiment that will serve their purposes – even when their purposes are excellent.

The Vatican and its leaders see their job as bearing witness to the truths taught by humankind for its own well-being and happiness. The news brief should have said “The Catholic Church’s new document explains why...draws a conclusion that ...certain biomedical techniques violate human rights or otherwise offend human dignity and family relationships.

This difference between giving orders and giving reasons is vital. Orders often lead us to rebel and often seldom make us think. The Catholic Church is challenging us to stop and think about biomedical technology. To respond to this challenge by saying, “Why, you can’t tell us what to do” is to evade the responsibility to look before we leap into the brave new world.

The document is not all that earth shaking. The reasoning behind the instruction is anything but new, in fact, some people have complained that it is the same old party line. And they’re correct. In this case the “same old party line” is the fundamental dignity of marriage and the human person. This certainly is an ancient policy of the Church. But just because it is ancient does NOT mean that it’s antiquated or ineffectual. Basic human truths never become outdated.

The dignity of the human person has been proclaimed by the Church again and again simply because the world needs to hear it again and again. The post-Christian era poses more challenges to this basic truth than any other age before it. Therefore, the Church must constantly re-assert it as the guiding principle of all politics, all economics, all science – and most especially bio-genetics, which involves the very future of the species.

But the church does not ask that everything it considers immoral or flawed to be outlawed. Rather, it argues that the law should protect fundamental human rights, marriage and family relationships. So, the

document does criticize artificial insemination on ethical grounds, even when the husband's semen is used, but the document does not suggest that this technique be outlawed.

Human dignity has to be protected for all living human individuals. The Church wants to see caution used in biomedical activities that use and destroy embryonic human life. The risk would be treating very small human individuals as non-persons – so one may do with them as one pleases. The embryonic speck in the petri dish is a living human individual and thus should be treated with full human dignity.

Some people will criticize Rome for overstepping its competence by dabbling in the world of science. But moral reflections should cover every human endeavor, and that's PRECISELY the business of the church. This century provides more than enough proof of how technical knowledge can be misused. Science is a neutral take. It can never give us a qualitatively better life, a purpose to live or salvation. Unfortunately, too many people now place their trust in modern technology as a kind of idol. But there's no such thing as "secular" redemption.

To say that modern technology produces "miracles" is a common, but important, misunderstanding of the word. A "MIRACLE" is an extraordinary event manifesting the supernatural power of God. Scientific discoveries may be marvels, but they are purely natural. Something that COULD be classified as a miracle is the beginning of human life. The conception and birth of a child is an occurrence which brings an undeniable sense of the presence of God. The parents of a child act as co-creators, not Creators. God is the giver of all life and God is the one who sustains everything in being. The Vatican document reminds us of our truth and encourages a sane and healthy humility on our part. It also underscores the intimate connections between love, sexual expression and procreation.

The document stresses that children conceived within marital intercourse come as God's gift, and their personal equality with their parents should be fully respected. The child conceived by biomedical techniques comes to be as a product, and so is regarded as an object, unequal in personal dignity to those who help make it.

The document shows the equal personal dignity of every human individual is essential to the commonly held Judeo-Christian tradition. Babies produced by biomedical techniques are plainly regarded as objects when they are destroyed when they do not meet specifications or are bought and sold, and is the Baby M case.

So, to disagree with the news department of WBCN; No, the Roman document on artificial procreation is neither shocking nor new. And the criticism that it has and will evoke from the lukewarm isn't new either. The news brief I heard on the radio ended with the opinion of a pro-choice advocate who claimed that most Catholics would read this instruction with the same attitude of disdain that they had for Human Vitae.

Question: How many of these people have actually read Human Vitae? And how many will ever bother to read this most recent document?