

Life Insight

A Publication of the USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities ¶ Vol. 18, No. 4 November – December 2007

Statement by Cardinal Justin Rigali Chairman of the USCCB Committee for Pro-Life Activities on the Recent Stem Cell Breakthrough

Studies published this week in the journals Cell and Science offer new hope for advancing stem cell research and therapies while fully respecting the dignity of human life.

Scientists in Japan and Wisconsin used four genes to “reprogram” ordinary adult human cells, creating “induced pluripotent stem cells” (iPS cells). James Thomson, head of the Wisconsin team and the founder of human embryonic stem cell research, says these cells “meet the defining criteria” for pluripotent human embryonic stem cells, “with the significant exception that the iPS cells are not derived from embryos.”

Thus the goal sought for years through failed attempts at human cloning – the production of “pluripotent” stem cells that are an exact genetic match to a patient – has been brought within reach by an ethical procedure. This technology avoids the many ethical landmines associated with embryonic stem cell research: it does not clone or destroy human embryos, does not harm or exploit women for their eggs, and does not blur the line between human beings and other species through desperate efforts to make human embryos using animal eggs. Ian Wilmut, head of the team that cloned “Dolly” the sheep, now says he is abandoning efforts at human “therapeutic cloning” to pursue this adult cell reprogramming avenue instead, because it is technically superior as well as “easier to accept socially.”

I am grateful today for scientists who took up the challenge of finding morally acceptable ways to pursue stem cell research, and for government leaders who have encouraged and funded such avenues. This advance reminds us once again that medical progress and respect for human life are not in conflict; they can and should support and enrich one another for the good of all.

“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” New Guidance from the Catholic Bishops

Since 1976, Catholic bishops of the United States have released statements, commonly called “political responsibility” or “faithful citizenship” statements, in the fall preceding presidential election years. Their aim has been to enable Catholics to better “evaluate policy positions, party platforms, and candidates’ promises and actions in light of the Gospel and the moral and social teaching of the [Catholic] Church in order to help build a better world.”¹

These statements were never intended to be, or to replace, the voter guides distributed by advocacy groups, which highlight the candidates’ adherence (or lack thereof) to the group’s focused agenda. Indeed they could not, for the simple reason that the Catholic Church has always been concerned about a multitude of issues within the following broad areas: protecting human life; fostering conditions that allow humans to flourish, such as ensuring freedom, peace, a just and impartial legal system, and opportunities for education and work; providing care for the most vulnerable members of society; and being wise stewards of the earth’s resources.

Past statements have sometimes been criticized for being too long or too detailed or for failing to show how each issue of concern is rooted in basic moral principles. Taken together, these rather trivial deficiencies have allowed some candidates and their partisans to mislead voters. Some have, for example, “cherry picked” issues to show their fidelity to Catholic teaching and wrongly interpreted moral theological language in self-serving ways.

This year, the bishops were determined to take a hands-on approach in writing “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.” In a broadly collaborative effort, they squarely address the questions that have nagged Catholic voters (for example, can a Catholic in good conscience

ever vote for a pro-choice candidate?) and they provide guidance that is precise, clear and virtually immune from misinterpretation. Spin by news media, of course, we will always have with us, as two headlines attest – “Bishops: Abortion isn’t voters’ only issue” and “Catholic Bishops Vote for Document Saying Abortion Should Guide Voting.” (In fact both headlines are true as far as they go, and both ignore an aspect of the document.)

The bishops readily acknowledge that their responsibility in building a just society does not include endorsing or opposing candidates or telling people how to vote. Their primary role is instead “to teach fundamental moral principles that help Catholics form their consciences correctly, to provide guidance on the moral dimensions of public decisions, and to encourage the faithful to carry out their responsibilities in political life” (no. 15).

Early in the statement, they warn against two opposing “temptations” in public life that “can distort the Church’s defense of human life and dignity.” The first temptation is “moral equivalence” that treats issues as diverse as abortion and minimum wage policy, for example, as equally weighty. The bishops repeatedly emphasize that “the direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed” (no. 28). The second temptation is to think that the Church cares about only one issue, dismissing or ignoring *all* other serious threats to human life and dignity. The bishops explain that the Church cares about the dignity of the human person in a wide variety of ways, while noting that not every individual can be actively involved in each of these concerns.

The statement helpfully distinguishes between actions that are intrinsically evil, that is, those that are “so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons” and can never be condoned (no. 22), and positive policy initiatives that foster human dignity and the common good. In the category of intrinsically evil actions, the statement names abortion, euthanasia, destructive research on human embryos, human cloning, genocide, torture, racism and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or

war. The intentional destruction of innocent human life as in abortion is said to have a preeminent place among these concerns. Positive policies would enhance respect for life, strengthen families, ensure quality education, and provide healthcare for the poor, for example.

In paragraphs 34 through 38 of “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” the bishops give concrete guidance to Catholic voters. These passages were crafted with great care and lest some of the precision be lost in paraphrasing them, they are quoted below:

“[34...] A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter’s intent is to support that position. In such cases a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil. At the same time, a voter should not use a candidate’s opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity.

“35. There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.

“36. When all candidates hold a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, the conscientious voter faces a dilemma. The voter may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods.

“37. In making these decisions, it is essential for Catholics to be guided by a well-formed conscience that recognizes that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. These decisions should take into account a candidate’s commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. In the end, this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching.

“38. It is important to be clear that the political choices faced by citizens not only have an impact on general peace and prosperity but also may affect the individual’s salvation. Similarly, the kinds of laws and policies supported by public officials affect their spiritual well-being.”

Additional guidance is offered in the section of the statement that follows on seven key themes in Catholic social teaching:

“41. Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic teaching to examine candidates’ positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace, and they should consider candidates’ integrity, philosophy, and performance. It is important for all citizens “to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation. ...

“42. As Catholics we are not single-issue voters. A candidate’s position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter’s support. Yet a candidate’s position on a single issue that involves an intrinsic evil, such as support for legal abortion or the promotion of racism, may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support.”

“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” includes much more of interest to voters -- summaries of teaching on seven key issues of concern to the Catholic Church and an enumeration of ten goals for political life which could be the starting point for personal or group reflection. A very brief summary of the statement will be printed for parish distribution.

One hopes that lay Catholics, who typically makeup 25% of the national electorate, will give as much careful attention to reading this statement as the bishops gave in writing it. Imagine what could happen if at least one-fourth of voters cast their ballots on the basis of moral principles. It’s so crazy, it just might work!

¹ “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: a Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Nov. 14, 2007 (no. 5), available at <http://www.usccb.org/bishops/FCStatement.pdf> .



High Court and Hollywood Discover the Unborn Child’s Humanity

Historians may remember 2007 for different reasons. But for me it was the year when both the U.S. Supreme Court and Hollywood discovered the humanity of unborn children and the existence of abortion alternatives. One need only revisit the Court’s past abortion opinions and the movie industry’s usual approach to abortion to appreciate the radical course correction this past year.

Beginning with *Roe v. Wade*, the Court has deftly danced around the reality of what abortion does to unborn children. Words like kill, destroy, and even “take the life” are all but absent from majority opinions. In *Roe*, abortion meant only “a woman’s decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy.”

For the next 35 years, the Court bloodlessly described choice, procedures and “potential life.” Even when dealing with the appalling reality of partial-birth abortion in 2000, the Court’s majority resorted to sanitized expressions, like calling the baby’s skull “fetal calvarium” and referring to tearing off the child’s limbs as “disarticulation.” But throughout the *Gonzales v. Carhart* decision of April 2007, which upheld the federal partial-birth abortion ban, the Court calls abortion “killing” and identifies the fetus as an infant and an unborn child. No longer is abortion treated as a minor, morally unproblematic surgery like removing a mole. It is a decision “fraught with emotional consequence,” “a difficult and painful moral decision.” And the State has “an interest in ensuring so grave a choice is well informed,” even if such knowledge may encourage some women “to carry the infant to full term.” There’s an *alternative* to abortion? Who knew?

For the typical treatment of abortion in movies recall “Fast Times at Ridgemont High,” “Dirty Dancing” and that paean to noble, selfless, misunderstood abortion providers “Cider House Rules,” and its British counterpart “Vera Drake.” The message here is that young women need abortions and providers help them, often at great personal risk.

Fast forward to 2007 where we find four movies dealing with unplanned, problematic pregnancies among three single females and one

woman married to a brute. The outcome? Four births and two adoption plans.

Only one (“Bella”) could be considered a pro-life, pro-family film. Its motif is that every human has God-given dignity and deserves to be respected and loved, whether an unborn child, an immigrant family, or the usually unseen kitchen and waiting staff at restaurants.

The message of “Juno” is complicated by factors I can’t disclose without spoiling the plot. Yet the undeniable humanity of Juno’s unborn child is captured through the baby’s kicking and through Juno’s reflection on a clinic protester’s comment: “Your baby has fingernails.”

“Waitress” (showing an adulterous affair) and “Knocked Up” (assuming promiscuity is the norm) are not ideal vehicles to illustrate the human dignity of children before birth. But they do send a vital message to the movie-going public: If you’re facing an unexpected pregnancy, don’t let panic drive you to an abortion clinic. Don’t accept abortion as the only answer to your problem. Being pregnant for nine months won’t destroy your life; but abortion will destroy the life of another human being. Look around. Your family or friends or caring strangers will help you through it.

This, too, is a message given by many bishops in the United States including, most recently, Baltimore’s new archbishop, Edwin F. O’Brien. At his October installation Mass he pledged:

“No one has to have an abortion. To all of those in crisis pregnancies, I pledge our support and our financial help. Come to the Catholic Church. Let us walk with you through your time of trouble. Let us help you affirm life. Let us help you find a new life with your child, or let us help you place that child in a loving home. But please, I beg you: let us help you affirm life. Abortion need not be an ‘answer’ in this Archdiocese.”

This is a message we *all* can live by!

*Life Insight** is a publication of the
USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities
3211 Fourth St., N.E.
Washington, DC 20017-1194
Phone (202)541-3070; Facsimile (202)541-3054
www.usccb.org/prolife
Made possible through the generosity of
the Knights of Columbus

*The materials contained within are intended for use by Catholic dioceses and organizations, and permission is not required for reproduction or use by them. All other uses must be authorized. For re-prints, questions or comments contact Susan E. Wills, at the above address.