



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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STEM CELL RESEARCH MUST SERVE ALL, SACRIFICE NONE BISHOPS SAY

Wisconsin's Roman Catholic Bishops have issued a pastoral letter strongly affirming the value of scientific research and endorsing the practice of stem cell research when it does not involve the destruction of human embryos.

John Huebscher, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), explained that this educational effort is not tied to any pending legislation or policy proposal. Rather, it reflects the bishops' commitment to advancing science wherever it upholds human life and dignity.

The letter reminds Catholics that "we are called to harness new developments at the cutting edge of science in ways that respect the dignity of all human life, especially in its most vulnerable stages."

"Today, when the marvels of science and technology present choices and questions never previously faced, [Christ's] example and message are as relevant as they were in the time of the Apostles."

"As Catholics, we are called to respect and love all human life. But we have a special duty towards the most vulnerable persons in our midst – the embryo and the unborn child, the chronically ill and the poor, the prisoner and the refugee. In doing so, we reveal the essence of our humanity and of our Christian faith."

The bishops emphasize that religious faith is not opposed to science. They note a person can be "both faith-filled and scientific."

"This Catholic teaching is not an example of faith absent science, but rather faith supported by science," they observe. "It is scientists who have demonstrated that the single cell, or zygote that results from fertilization, contains the complete genetic information necessary for the development of a unique human being. It is scientists who have shown us that human development is a continuous, uninterrupted process, from zygote, embryo, fetus, infant, child, to adult."

"Faith builds on these scientific facts by acknowledging that our Creator endows our human nature with an innate dignity that does not depend on our size, beauty, intelligence, wealth, or

any other attribute,” they write. “Human life is ultimately a gift of God, of which each of us is a steward. And it is a gift that began and developed for all of us in exactly the same way.”

The bishops acknowledge that not all Catholics agree that the Church should oppose embryonic stem cell research.

“We know many struggle with official Catholic teaching that a small group of cells invisible to the naked eye deserves the same protection as the life of a baby in the womb, a child in the crib, or a person sitting next to us in church. Yet, consider how often physical appearances deceive us, and how shortsighted our initial impressions can be,” they write.

The bishops also say they understand concerns that opposition to embryonic stem cell research will delay or hamper efforts to cure fatal and debilitating illnesses.

“Like you, we fear crippling injuries and chronic disease, and we have experienced the anguish of seeing a loved one suffer. We long for the day when scientists can find treatments and cures for these conditions. But we cannot agree with those who suggest that respecting the inviolability of a human embryo devalues the lives of the ill and infirm because it may deny them a treatment or a cure. On the contrary, when we value vulnerable life in one context we strengthen the case for valuing it in others.”

The bishops reaffirm past support for stem cell research using “adult stem cells” because it does not require the destruction of human embryos. They observe that such stem cells have already helped some individuals suffering from serious ailments.

The bishops also applaud the recent breakthrough by scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and elsewhere of successfully “reprogramming” adult skin cells to act like embryonic stem cells.

In addition to the letter, the bishops have authorized other educational materials, including a Questions and Answers publication and a 14-minute DVD to help inform parishioners on the science and ethics of stem cell research. They are sharing these with Catholic parishes and institutions across Wisconsin as part of a long-term educational effort.

The bishops conclude their letter by stating that, “We encourage all of you to study the educational materials that accompany this letter, seek out additional scientific information, and engage our fellow citizens in truth and love during this vital civic conversation over stem cell research. May we together strive to use our scientific knowledge in ways that serve all and sacrifice none.”

Contact: John Huebscher at 608-257-0004.