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Dignity and Love

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In December 2008, the Holy See released a new document dealing with bioethics called “Dignitas Personae.” This “instruction” from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the old Office of the Holy Inquisition), was previously headed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. The letter is offered up not only for Catholics, but for other people of good will who use reason and have a respect for natural law. It could have important consequences for public policy, if taken seriously.

It is doubtful if the document will have that appeal, for it is a continuation of the negative approach that is so characteristic of the post Vatican II Church. Even the current pope, Benedict XVI (Ratzinger), observed wistfully to some Germany newspapermen that the Church just seems to say no to everything. Indeed one of the members of the current Congregation after this instruction was issued observed the same thing. Catholic leaders are often just unable to present the joys of Christianity, unless it is the joy of obedience to the hierarchy. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Instruction says, “the fundamental principle expresses ‘a great yes’ to human life.”

A goal of the report aims to end debate about bioethics in a variety of areas, especially on the increasing use of in vitro fertilization. In a section called clumsily “Anthropological, theological and ethical aspects of human life and procreation,” the paper is based on two fundamental principles:

That person hood begins at the very moment of conception and that from that same moment one’s rights as a person must be recognized.

That the origins of human life have their authentic context in marriage and in the family.

The Church’s greatest theologians, Augustine and Aquinas, believed that life or ensoulment did not begin at conception but much later. Aquinas, in fact, was arguing for the 12th week or so. Modern Catholic bioethicists like Rev Tad Pacholczyk of the National Catholic Bioethics Center suggest that we know much more about biology than they did in the 4th or the 13th centuries. Obviously that is true; our sonograms show very early primitive images of life. But few embryologists would argue that person hood begins at the moment of conception. The Church’s difficulty is that it doesn’t know when life really begins in a spiritual sense (not a biological sense), so it takes the most extreme position—just to play it safe.

That position is very much tied up with the old Aristotelian view of potentiality being linked directly to actuality. Because something has the potential to become actual down the road, means that *might be* is equal to *is*. Yet the very evidence we have is that Mother Nature (that is the natural order of things) tells a very different story. Probably a majority of fertilized eggs being implanted in the uterus are miscarried, many without the knowledge of the potential mother. It is more difficult to come to term than we realize. Would God have ordained that most “people” should die in the first two weeks?

In vitro fertilization involves harvesting (and often freezing) fertilized eggs, and then implanting them in infertile women. Most of those procedures involve women and their husbands wanting to have a child—not a “designer” baby as some superficial critics on EWTN have argued. Those

couples can not conceive, it is not that they are ordering a blue eyed potato head as Raymond Arroyo incredibly put it on television to an approving Father Tad Pacholczyk (who should know better). These are people who definitively want to have children. They are clearly working for life.

The Congregation has problems with the excess fertilized eggs, which eventually die off. To the Congregation, it is abortion by another name since they insist life begins at conception. What do we do then with the 400,000 fertilized eggs currently in the US alone? The Congregation cannot think of a "licit" way to deal with the matter. Father Tad insists that couples have moral obligation to spend thousand of dollars to keep them frozen, but he does not know himself how viable they are. He lamely suggests that we should experiment with chimps to see how long eggs last! It is sort of a reverse Darwinism.

The second reason the Congregation has problems with in vitro fertilization is that it only recognizes reproduction in the "authentic context of marriage," that is, in the traditional sex act. Where that view comes from theologically is unclear, but it represents the confusing state of Vatican sexology, popularized by the uniformed "theology of the body" laid out by the beloved John Paul II. In 127 talks over the years that pope sought to lay out a series of regulations on sexuality similar to his book on the matter. But the pontiff's work is unrealistic and woefully inadequate in understanding sexual relationships.

Unfortunately the Congregation is moving toward replicating the disastrous results encyclical of Pope Paul VI on birth control. That pope disregarded the view of his advisory committee of theologians, bishops and lay people regarding the idea of birth control. There have been some recent popes (oddly enough, not the traditional Pius XII) who retain a fixation on the anatomical aspects of human sexuality. Thus, the only true way to reproduce is straightforward married sex.

It is for this reason that the Congregation opposes in vitro fertilization. It opposes surrogacy as well. Yet Genesis tells us how Abraham, whose wife Sarah could not get pregnant, engaged in surrogacy the only way they could then—by using Sarah's servant girl.

When Louise Brown, the first test tube baby, was born in Britain, reporters asked the Cardinal Patriarch of Venice, Alberto Luciani, later Pope John Paul I, what he would say to the baby. His gentle response was "Welcome to the world." A very different response comes from the Sacred Congregation today. Now over 30 years later Louise Brown had a baby of her own—born the usual way. As William Neaves has written, "Using IVF to complete the family circle of couples otherwise unable to have children is an unmitigated good."