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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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DO WE REALLY WANT TO GO THERE?

Elections have consequences. Obviously. In the presidential campaign of 2008 both candidates spent most of their time laying before the American people how the country would be different depending on who won. On one issue, however, Senator Obama and Senator McCain were in complete agreement. With regard to federal funding of embryonic stem cell research, neither supported the restrictions to that funding that had been put in place by President Bush in August 2001, and both stood ready to authorize federal funding for research on embryos already created in laboratories and fertility clinics as a part of the fertility treatment known as “*in vitro* fertilization” (or IVF).

Thus, right up until March 9, 2009, when President Obama signed an Executive Order on the federal funding of embryonic stem cell research (ESCR) everyone who had been paying attention to this question believed that no matter who won the presidency the Bush restrictions would be replaced with new regulations that would allow federal funds to flow into research on embryos already in existence, created for fertility treatment, and only on such embryos. The March 9 Executive Order, however, goes well beyond what had been promised by Senator Obama (and Senator McCain) during the campaign. To understand the new rules and the radically different situation we are now in, we need to review the science and the legal situation. This is not an easy read, but it cannot be avoided. Everybody pays federal taxes of one kind or another, and so everybody is involved in this question. We begin with the law, which is actually the easier of the two to follow.

There is a crucial distinction between that which is legal and that which is funded by the federal government. Any activity that is not prohibited by law can be done legally, but not all legal activities are financially supported by federal government dollars. Federal money, because it is taken from everyone by taxes and spent according to decisions made by elected officials, always involves politics, and so also involves the moral sensibilities of the citizens. Generally speaking, scientific research is thought to be in everyone's interest and is therefore worthy of taxpayer support. If, however, the majority of citizens believe that a certain kind of research is morally repugnant, then that sentiment will over time percolate up to the Congress and the President, and federal money will simply not be appropriated or allowed for such research. That does not mean that such research cannot go forward – if it is legal, it can be funded by private sources, businesses, and non-governmental foundations – it only means that public money, and by clear implication public moral support, will not be extended to it.

All of the things mentioned below, and some of them are quite ghastly, are legal in the United States. They are legal because *Roe v. Wade* and subsequent decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court have made abortion legal from conception right up to the birth of the child. If an embryo or fetus can be killed outright, which is what abortion does, then it can also be used for medical and scientific research even if it is destroyed in the process, which is what ESCR routinely does. But the legality of this research does not mean that it has a right to a federal subsidy, and in

2001 President Bush severely restricted the flow of money for ESCR. He did not ban it outright, but limited it to research committed to using only those stem cell lines already then in existence. His reasoning was that although embryos had been destroyed in developing those lines, that damage had been done and no human life would be saved by refusing to fund research that used them. Going forward, however, the government and the citizens would not underwrite the further taking of human life, the destruction of human embryos that is a part of ESCR.

Turning from the legal to the scientific world, we must begin with the fact that not all stem cell research is *embryonic* stem cell research. Stem cells come from several sources, only one of which is the human embryo. But what is a stem cell? The human body has about two hundred different types of cells, different cells for different organs and different functions. The human person, with all its different organs and cell types, began life as a single *totipotent* cell, the fertilized ovum, from which the whole organism would eventually be formed. In the initial growth of that organism, and in the repair and regeneration of tissues afterwards, *pluripotent* cells (stem cells) have a key role to play. A pluripotent stem cell is a “primitive” cell capable of becoming any one of a range of different types of cells. Such cells can be manipulated by scientists in the lab to become a specific type of cell that can be used to treat specific diseases, defects, or injuries.

Where do we get human stem cells? Human embryos are one source. Embryonic cells are not, just as they are, stem cells, but if you take cells from an embryo (which in the normal course destroys that embryo) then you can artificially induce pluripotency in a lab culture. Such cells have an extremely high pluripotency, they are very plastic and can be made to grow into just about any body cell type. This makes them highly prized in scientific research, but it comes with a downside. Their ability to grow into anything makes them prone to just grow and grow, grow without any controls or brakes, and when that happens you’ve got not usable

cells but cancerous tumors. The tendency of fully pluripotent stem cells, which embryonic stem cells are, to form tumors has so far proven to be an intractable problem, which is why there is not a single treatment or therapy, not one, that makes use of embryonic stem cells.

Embryos are *not* the only source of stem cells, and this needs to be kept in mind. Alas, we are not helped much here by the press, most of whose members either ignorantly or dishonestly seem bent on getting us all to believe that “stem cell” and “embryonic stem cell” are equivalent terms. They aren’t. Other sources of stem cells are adult tissue (fat and skin cells seem to work best), the umbilical cord, umbilical cord blood, and placental tissue. As with embryonic cells, these cells are not “naturally” pluripotent but can be made so in the lab. They differ, however, from embryonic stem cells in two important respects. First, with regard to ethics, research on embryonic stem cells is a horror to anyone who knows that human life begins at conception, while the same research on stem cells from these other sources is not problematic. And second, with regard to the usefulness of the cells, these non-embryonic stem cells are less plastic, more stable and much less prone to produce tumors, and so can be used and are used in a large number of therapies that right now are treating patients and helping them.

Of course, this relative cellular stability also has a downside, and non-embryonic stem cells are not fully pluripotent, that is, they are more restricted as to the different types of cells they can be made to become. Thus it was a major breakthrough in November 2007 when two research teams, one at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and the other at the University of Kyoto in Japan, developed a procedure for bringing about full pluripotency in adult cells. By inserting four DNA-transcription factors into the adult cell, they were able to “turn back the clock” and run the cell back to a fully pluripotent state. These induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells have all the plasticity of embryonic stem cells. They have the same tendency to produce tumors as embryonic stem cells, and so iPS cells right now have the same

research and application disadvantages, but there is no ethical issue in their production. Obviously, this is a very new line of research, but it is also very promising.

If you want to do ESCR, where do you get the human embryos and what can you do with them once you have them? Legally, it's pretty much anything goes and so there are a lot of options. One obvious source and a source already much used in ESCR that was ineligible for federal funding before March 9, is fertility clinics that offer clients IVF. The Catholic Church has long condemned IVF, not out of a Luddite hatred of all modern technology but because it constitutes a most grave assault on the dignity of the human person, the integrity of the procreative process, and even the lives of those so conceived. In most IVF the medical technician produces many more embryos than the number of children the couple actually wants. The failure rate of these clinics is huge, so they want lots of "spare" embryos for the repeated efforts usually necessary to induce a pregnancy. Once the woman is pregnant or once they have given up trying to make her so, the remaining embryos may be kept frozen for a while, but sooner or later they are usually discarded. A couple can choose to volunteer their embryos for scientific research. This has the psychological advantage of taking a bit of the sting out of acquiescing in the killing of their own offspring – it is, after all, for scientific research and for the greater good – and it provides a large supply of embryos for experimentation. It is this source, denied federal funding by President Bush's guidelines, that both Senator Obama and Senator McCain agreed must become eligible for government financial support.

As rich as the IVF "mine" of embryos may be, if the scientific community really wants to get into ESCR research in a big way, it will not be enough. If they need more than what is available from the fertility clinics, they can of course produce their own by using volunteer sperm bank donations and egg donors and doing their own IVF operations. And they can clone. Indeed the prospect of the cloning of human

embryos has the greatest potential for producing a steady stream of high quality embryos for ESCR. This is, for most people, a very different thing from using embryos produced by IVF in fertility clinics. Those embryos are a byproduct of efforts to produce a baby. But now we are talking about embryos produced for the sole purpose of being the subjects of scientific research. And since the result of ESCR is always the same for the embryo – it ends up dead – now we are talking about creating embryos to destroy them. Even people in denial about human life's beginning at conception are uneasy with the notion of mass producing human embryos via IVF or cloning, all of which are going to die. Remember, all of this is legal under U.S. law right now. But do we really want to encourage it? Do we really want to pay for it? Is this how we'd like to see our tax dollars put to work?

As of March 9, 2009 the door to the federal funding of all of this may be swinging open. And this was the surprise. In his remarks prior to signing the Executive Order, President Obama made reference to one specific type of cloning. He said, "And we will insure that our government never opens the door to the use of cloning for human reproduction. It is dangerous, profoundly wrong, and has no place in our society, or any society." This is strong language, but in the context of ESCR it is off the point. "Cloning for human reproduction" is cloning to create an embryo that will be implanted in a woman's womb and that will develop, be born, and live a full life. The cloning that is so useful to ESCR, however, is not *reproductive* cloning at all – it is cloning to create an embryo that will be destroyed during the research. By mentioning reproductive cloning and by pointedly not ruling out non-reproductive cloning, the president has clearly not shut the door on funding the latter.

This is not over. The director of the National Institutes of Health has four months to develop guidelines for the implementation of the Executive Order and no money is spent on anything that is not first authorized by Congress. Still, we are not where we want to be, or even where we thought we'd be, on this question of human life.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.



MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

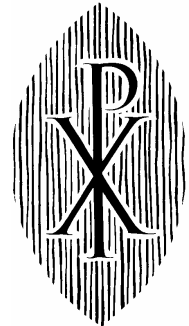
Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*