

The Dignity of a Person

By Kimberly Baker

In a February 13 meeting with members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Pope Benedict said, “The questions of bioethics often place the reminder of the dignity of the person in the foreground.” The Church’s attention to bioethics continues to keep pace with ever-new advancements in medical science. One of the more recent major documents from the Vatican on bioethical issues is *Dignitas Personae (The Dignity of a Person)*. Issued in 2008 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Personae* is an essential “follow-up” to its predecessor, *Donum Vitae (The Gift of Life)*, from 1987.

Dignitas Personae explores new issues in the area of reproductive technologies over the past 20 years. The first part discusses anthropological, theological, and ethical aspects of human life and procreation. The second section addresses new problems concerning procreation; it analyzes techniques for assisting fertility, the problem of *in vitro* fertilization, and the treatment of embryos in such procedures. The third and final section discusses new treatments which involve the manipulation of the embryo or human genetic material: gene therapy, human cloning, the therapeutic use of stem cells, animal-human hybrids, and the use of human “biological material” of illicit origin.

As medical advancements become more complex, important questions arise regarding their benefit to the human condition and especially their respect for human dignity. If these two elements are lacking, then such advancements cannot truly be considered scientific progress.

An example of a recent endeavor which fails on both counts is embryonic stem cell research. It fails to respect human dignity because it involves the destruction of thousands of innocent human beings at the embryonic stage as these stem cells are harvested. It has failed so far to provide tangible benefits because embryonic stem cells cannot be uniformly differentiated to become a single type of cell or tissue, they have a high likelihood of being rejected after transplantation, and they often cause tumors in the very areas they were meant to heal. There has yet to be published a successful treatment in humans using embryonic stem cells.

In contrast, adult stem cell research is both morally acceptable and medically successful. There is no destruction of human embryos, since these cells are taken from already-born human beings and other legitimate sources, such as umbilical cords and placentas. Adult stem cells easily differentiate into specific types of cell or tissue, they do not cause transplant rejection (especially when patients receive stem cells from their own cells and tissues), and they do not cause tumors. Thanks to adult stem cell research, there have been documented benefits in clinical trials for

approximately 80 conditions, including multiple sclerosis, heart disease, diabetes, and several types of cancer.

Church teaching reaffirms that all medical research should be not solely for utilitarian purposes or special interests, but at the service of humanity in accord with human dignity. To reverse this noble ideal, to place the human person at the service of medical advancement, is to gradually erode the dignity of the person, paving the way for a de-humanized society that uses people as objects for personal gain.

For more information about *Dignitas Personae*, go to:

www.usccb.org/comm/Dignitaspersonae/index.shtml

Kimberly Baker is a staff assistant for the Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. For more information on the bishops' pro-life activities, please visit www.usccb.org/prolife.