Perspective

Mass Pre-Embryo Adoption

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On August 1, 1996, due to the expiration of the five-year preservation limit provided by British law for unclaimed and legally unusable frozen embryos, 3,300 embryos were thawed and discarded.[1] In Italy the news of this impending event triggered many reactions among scholars as well as the general population. In Massa, a little town in Tuscany, a most unusual response arose. Two hundred women banded together and asked to carry out a prenatal adoption. Their purpose in making this request was to avoid what they believed to be mass infanticide. Many of the women were married and already had children. They belonged to a local Catholic association. Nonetheless, their reaction was their own response to numerous appeals to respect life by the Catholic Church worldwide and by Italian Catholic thinkers especially.

The proposal by the women of Massa was immediately criticized by the official Catholic world.[2] The *Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican daily newspaper, reported the remarks of theologian Gino Concetti: "These couples deserve all our admiration, but their choice is not provided for in the teachings of the Magisterium of the Church. If we accept it, it would make a breach and embryo production would become an endless chain."[3] Adriano Pessina, philosopher of morals at the Catholic University in Milan, was even more explicit: "Stop the machines; let those frozen embryos die in the cold limbo of technological tyranny. If we allow their implantation, we will be accepting that it is morally decent to divide the act of union and the act of procreation" (a reference to Vatican theology of sex in marriage as a singularity of union and procreation).[4]

However, this opinion about doing away with the embryos is not universally shared by the Catholic hierarchy and commentators. Cardinal Ersilio Tonini agreed with efforts to adopt the embryos in order to prevent them from being destroyed. He was joined in that position by the president of the Italian National Bioethics Committee, Francesco D'Agostino, who remarked, "The British position that envisions the suppression of the redundant embryos five years after their production, cannot be justified easily and rationally. It is 'embryocide,' since there is no respect for embryos considered as human life."[5]

Such a discrepancy among Italian Catholics on a respect for life issue is a new occurrence in bioethics, where traditionally any disparate opinions were usually presented by secular thinkers critiquing what they considered to be a solid phalanx of unified Catholic thinking. This made it appear that Catholic bioethics thinking was a unified front as measured against the pluralism of our age. At the very least the debate about the disposal of frozen embryos demonstrates that such unanimity among Catholics is not the case. Technological capacity has the troubling ability (in the view of many) to divide community opinion because

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it forces us to question assumptions we have made about human good and correct conduct.

The Massa adoption proposal represents a truly difficult dilemma. The Magisterium argues that the embryo is a human being, and even a human person. Thus, the Bioethics Committee of the Catholic University in Rome states that "from conception, one has a human person."[6] This position is derived from the teachings of the Church, most recently reaffirmed in 1987 by the Congregation of the Faith in its "Instruction" where it stated that: "from the moment of conception the life of every human being must be absolutely respected because humans are on earth the only creatures 'God wanted for himself' and the spiritual soul of every person is 'immediately created by God' (Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 1950)."[7,8] Pope John XXIII put it this way, "Human life is sacred because from its very beginning it involves God's creative action."[9] According to this traditional line of reasoning, no one in any circumstance is justified in directly destroying the life of any innocent human being. The consequence of this position is that "the human being must be respected, as a person, from the very first instant of his existence."[10] Such respect means that one cannot destroy the embryos, and it also means that one should not cooperate with the entire process of creating and storing such embryos either, as the women of Massa would be doing if they had successfully adopted the embryos slated for destruction.

For the Magisterium of the Church whether frozen embryos are human persons is almost beside the point. "When the ovum is inseminated a new life begins, which is not that of the father or the mother, but a new human being developing on its own. . . . From insemination the adventure of a new human life starts." Further,

> of course, no experimental data can per se be enough to reveal a spiritual soul. In any event, the scientific results of research on human embryos offer precise indications for recognizing an individual presence from the very first signs of human life; how can an individual not be a human person? Therefore the fruit of human procreation from the first instant of its existence, that is, from the formation of the zygote, demands unreserved respect as is due to the human being in its bodily and spiritual entirety.[11]

The Vatican Instruction continues in the same vein, drawing specific rights from the assumption of personhood from the moment of conception:

> The human being has to be respected and treated as a person from its very conception and from then on, it is entitled to an individual's rights, among which is the inviolable right to life of every innocent human being. . . . Since it must be treated as a person, the embryo will have to be defended in its integrity, cared for and cured as much as possible, like every other human being in the sphere of provision of care.[12]

Not only is there a conflict for a traditional line of reasoning about respecting the life of frozen embryos, there is also a conflict among experts about the proper interpretation of embryology and cellular development. This challenge would dispute the conclusion that discarding the embryos at such an early stage is equivalent to infanticide, although it certainly would be "embryocide," and the discharge of a developing form of human life. Lay thought is well-represented in the Italian debate, as it is throughout the developed world. Physician members of the Bioethics Council in Milan, such as gynecologist Carlo Flamigni, share the theory that

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> the beginning of human individual life, a prerequisite for acknowledging the person as such, does not coincide with insemination, but occurs at a later stage of development. The elements supporting the post-zygotic theory of human individuality, also defined as the gradualist theory, are based on a series of biological indices referring to the formation of the embryo's own structure and its connection with maternal tissues. The appearance of the primitive streak marks the completion of a unitary organized structure, no longer separable into completely undifferentiated individualities (or cells), that communicates with the mother's organism.[13]

Objections to the theory of the zygotic origin of human life include the fact that it does not give a sufficient account of the integrated cell function at the moment of the first cellular division. Yet the argument of genetic expression of individuality is refuted by considering that a program of complete development involves the sequential and concerted working of all genes that trigger complex morphological processes, not just the primitive activation of some genes in the first cellular division. As Caullery notes: "In the initial totipotency of the cells derived from the zygote's first divisions and in the gradual loss of this character [through successive divisions and more organizational complexity], by keeping the faculty of generating more individuals by fission, you can see indications of non-determination of the individuality of the conceived being."[14,15]

As can be seen, then, the willingness of the Massa women to adopt the embryos opened a more ample discussion within the leadership of the Catholic Church. Much has been learned about early zygote development that may lead to a more refined notion of the 'individual' up for adoption. Yet it must be said that whether or not such an 'individual' human entity is a person may not make a difference in the respect that is owed to the newly created human being.

Notes

1. Boulton A. Britain poised to extend storage of frozen embryos. *British Medical Journal* 1996;312:10.
2. De Bac M. Guerra sull'adozione di embrioni. *Corriere della Sera, Rome* 1996;Jul 27:15.
3. La Rocca O. Adottare no gli embrioni, è lite tra teologi e cardinali. *La Repubblica, Rome* 1996;Jul 27:22.
4. See note 3, La Rocca 1996.
5. See note 3, La Rocca 1996.
6. Quotation from a paper presented by Monsignor E. Sgreccia at the meeting of the Comitato Nazionale di Bioetica, Rome, 1995.
7. Pius XII. *Humani Generis* AASS 1950;42: 575.
8. Paulus VI. *Professio Fidei* AA 1968;60:436.
9. John XXIII. *Mater et Magistra*, Encyclical, 1961.
10. *Magisterium of the Church*. Milano: edizione Paoline, 1987:n. 123, 9–10.
11. See note 10, *Magisterium of the Church* 1987:12–3.
12. See note 10, *Magisterium of the Church* 1987:12–3.
13. Flamigni C. *La Scienze* 1996;88:58–66.
14. Caullery M. et al. *Individualité*. Paris: Felix Alcan, 1933.
15. See note 13, Flamigni 1996.

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