

Serving All and Sacrificing None

Ethical Stem Cell Research

A Pastoral Letter from the Roman Catholic Bishops of Wisconsin



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

When we deliberate about the pressing issues of our day, such as embryonic stem cell research, our Catholic tradition employs both reason and faith to help us arrive at moral truth and understanding.

Human reason, as perfected in natural law, leads us, as it did America's founders, to the self-evident truth that all people are endowed by their Creator with an inalienable right to life.

Our Catholic faith enhances this truth. We believe in a God Who so loves us that He created us in His own image to share His life now and forever. His love was such that He became one of us in Jesus and gave His earthly life so we may have eternal life.

In His ultimate "giving of self" for the good of others, the Son of God reveals to us who we truly are and how we can live most fully. He calls each of us to show a similar concern for every other human being, respecting the intrinsic worth of others and never using them as a means for our own benefit.

Today, when the marvels of science and technology present choices and questions never previously faced, His example and message are as relevant as they were in the time of the Apostles. Emulating His humanism so that we may become our best selves, 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.

This is not a matter of faith versus science, because one can be both faith-filled and scientific. Many scientists are people of deep faith and moral conviction. They recognize that faith and science, far from being mutually exclusive, in fact complement one another. Instead of asking, "Will we be religious, or will we be scientific?" they ask, "How can our scientific research best serve humanity? How can we best respect our human subjects in our 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.

This Catholic teaching is not an example of faith absent science, but rather faith supported by science. 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. We are persons because we are made in the image of God. We are persons whether our reasoning skills are developing or deteriorating, whether we are in the beginning stages of life or nearing life's end. 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.

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Faith also teaches us that the life span of any human being is not ours to determine. Whether one's life ends with a miscarriage or after many decades into adulthood is a decision left to God's providence.

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.

Some argue that people of faith overstep their proper place when they raise moral or ethical concerns about biotechnology. They maintain that the Church can believe whatever it wants as long as it does not impose its beliefs on others. We are not seeking to "impose" narrow doctrinal beliefs, but rather to "propose" reasonable standards for the protection of human life and dignity.

Furthermore, raising moral concerns is essential for genuine scientific progress. Consider the infamous biomedical case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Even after penicillin was discovered in 1947, medical researchers working for the U.S. Public Health Service in Tuskegee, Alabama, deliberately withheld the drug from infected African-American men—impoverished and mostly illiterate—without their consent, so that they could study the full progression of the disease. Today, no one would dispute that ethical standards were sorely lacking in the Tuskegee Study and that true scientific progress can be made only when those standards are securely in place.

We ask for the same consideration in the case of stem cell research. The Church supports stem cell research whenever it does not involve destroying human embryos. Adult stem cells found, for example, in the amniotic fluid, umbilical cord blood, bone marrow, and skin cells can be extracted without harming the donor, and they have already helped thousands of individuals suffering from serious ailments. The Church applauds the recent breakthrough in reprogramming adult skin cells to act like embryonic stem cells. All of these advancements demonstrate that the highest ethical standards can and must guide scientific progress.

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.

Therefore, 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.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



The Most Reverend Timothy M. Dolan
Archbishop of Milwaukee
Administrator of Green Bay Diocese



The Most Reverend Robert C. Morlino
Bishop of Madison



The Most Reverend Jerome E. ListECKi
Bishop of La Crosse



The Most Reverend Peter F. Christensen
Bishop of Superior