Human Embryo Adoption

Biotechnology, Marriage, and the Right to Life

Edited by
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and
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With a foreword by Robert P. George

The National Catholic Bioethics Center
Philadelphia

The Westchester Institute for Ethics and the Human Person
Thornwood, New York
Nihil Obstat
Rev. Msgr. Francis A. Barsczewski, S.T.L.
Censor Librorum

Imprimatur
† Justin Cardinal Rigali
Archbishop of Philadelphia
June 30, 2006

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Cover design: Susan Naab
Cover photograph: W. S. Hwang / Corbis

The cover photograph shows one of the embryos that South Korean scientist W. S. Hwang claimed to have produced through cloning. Hwang’s cloning claim has been exposed as a fraud, but human embryos, such as this one, are routinely created by in vitro fertilization in efforts at assisted reproduction, and are sometimes designated for research in which they are deliberately destroyed.

Special thanks to Rebecca Robinson
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ISBN-10: 0-935372-50-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
p. ; cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
RG135.H855 2006
616.6’9206—dc22

2006031818
The editors are grateful to
Charlotte and Gene Zurlo
for helping to make this volume possible.
Thank you for your stewardship of initiatives
that bring the battle for a culture of life
to the world of ideas.
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Among the most valuable ways in which Catholic scholars working in the field of ethics and related disciplines serve the Church is by exploring important moral questions on which the magisterium has not propounded a definitive teaching. Often, debates among faithful scholars are necessary if the Church is to settle her mind on questions that, for now, remain unresolved. By developing and carefully examining the best arguments on competing sides of such questions, scholars place before the Pope and the bishops the considerations that properly inform their prayerful deliberation as they seek to formulate teachings to guide the consciences of those who would follow the way of the Lord Jesus.

Where an unresolved question is urgent, the contribution of Catholic scholars takes on a special importance. And few questions are more urgent today than that of heterologous embryo transfer for the sake of rescuing embryonic human beings who have been consigned to the limbo of cryopreservation in assisted reproduction clinics. These embryos are truly “the least of our brothers and sisters.” Conceived ex vivo by means that, in the judgment of the Church, violate their dignity, they have been subjected to the further injustice of being held in a frozen condition, de-
prived of an environment suited to their natural development into infancy and beyond. In many cases, these embryos will be left suspended between life and death more or less permanently—unless a woman volunteers to rescue the child by providing her womb for its nurturance and development.

Of course, if the rescuing woman is the mother of the child—someone who bears at least a measure of the responsibility for putting the embryo in its condition—most Catholic ethicists would say there is no moral wrong in the rescue. Indeed, many would insist that, other things being equal, the mother has an obligation, as a matter of strict justice, to rescue her embryonic child. But what if the mother won’t—or can’t? May another woman licitly volunteer to undergo procedures that would enable the embryo to implant itself in her womb? Would a woman’s choice to make herself pregnant with a child that is not the fruit of her own marital communion be immoral? Or could it, depending perhaps on the circumstances (such as whether she is married and has her husband’s consent and cooperation, and whether she intends to rear the child as her own son or daughter), be a laudable act of charity?

Faithful Catholic scholars are not of one mind on this question. All recognize that it is, for now, an open question inasmuch as the magisterium of the Church has not proposed a teaching one way or the other. Given the urgency of the issue, all desire a resolution as soon as possible so that faithful Catholics who are considering, or might consider, embryo rescue or adoption can choose a course of action in confidence that they are doing what is morally licit or declining to do what is illicit. And plainly the bishops, in their role as teachers of the faith, wish to provide sound teaching to ease the burden on the consciences of these Catholics. To assist them, the Westchester Institute and the National Catholic Bioethics Center bring together in this
volume of essays the writings of outstanding Catholic scholars who have reflected carefully on the morality of embryo rescue and adoption. Competing points of view are represented by some of the most thoughtful and incisive Catholic philosophers and theologians writing today. They present the most compelling arguments available for and against embryo adoption and rescue, and they engage each other’s arguments in a vigorous but unfailingly civil manner. As loyal sons and daughters of the Church, they do not set themselves above the magisterium, nor do they propose themselves as some sort of “parallel magisterium.” Rather, they place before the magisterium their arguments fully prepared to accept with gratitude the teaching of the magisterium whatever, in the end, it turns out to be. In a true Christian spirit, they argue for truth rather than victory. And they take a special joy in contributing to discussions that will, in the end, assist those who do teach with the sure guidance and authority of the Holy Spirit to propose a teaching that is true.

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