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Why Human Cloning Is Immoral

FR. WILLIAM SAUNDERS

With all of the news about Dolly the ewe and cloning, how should we deal with this issue as Catholics?

Dolly the ewe certainly did make international headlines. Dr. Ian Wilmut, the Scottish scientist responsible for this research and technique of cloning, took an ovum from an ewe, sucked out the nucleus with its unique DNA, and then fused the ovum with a cell (with its own DNA) from the donor. This technique produced an ewe named Dolly, which was genetically identical to the original donor. The question then arises, "If this can be done with animals, why not human beings?" While we may have the technology "to do" something, we do not necessarily have the moral mandate "to do" that something. Therefore, we must hold to some basic truth principles. (The most thorough teaching concerning this subject is the "Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation" [Donum Vitae], issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1987 with the approval of Pope John Paul II.)

We must always remember with what, or rather with whom, we are dealing when we speak of reproduction—a child. The Catholic Church has continually asserted that a human being must be respected as a person from the moment of conception, the very first instance of existence. Each person is made in the image and likeness of God and thereby has an inherent dignity beyond the rest of creation. The "Declaration on Procured Abortion," stated, "From the time that the ovum is fertilized, a new life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. To this perpetual evidence . . . modern genetic science brings valuable confirmation. It has demonstrated that, from the first instant, the program is fixed as to what this living being will be: a man, this individual-man with his characteristic aspects already well determined. Right from fertilization is begun the adventure of human life, and each of its great capacities requires time . . . to find its place and to be in a position to act" (No. 12-13). Moreover, we believe that almighty God creates and infuses an immortal soul, which truly gives each of us that identity of one made in His image and likeness.

Therefore, we must respect the unborn child as a person whose life is sacred and whose rights must be protected. A child has the inviolable right to life from the moment of conception until natural death. A child has the right to be respected as a person from the moment of conception. A child has the right to be "the fruit" of the conjugal love of his parents, who are united in marriage:

"The transmission of human life is entrusted by nature to a personal and conscious act and as such is subject to the all-holy laws of God: immutable and inviolable laws which must be recognized and observed" Pope John XXIII, "Mater et Magistra"). Finally, a child has the right to be born. Each of us has the responsibility of guarding these rights for the defenseless child. Never must we slip into thinking that anyone has the right to a child at any cost, or that a child is like a piece of property to be had ("Donum Vitae," II,8).

Based upon these rights of the child, the Church provides the following moral teaching which specifically addresses the issue of cloning and actions related to its technique:

— Procedures designed to influence the genetic inheritance of a child, which are not therapeutic, are morally wrong. To try to correct a genetic disorder, such as cystic fibrosis, is morally permissible, whereas to manipulate the genetic structure to produce human beings selected by sex or some other quality is wrong. Attempts to produce a "breed" of humans through cloning, twin fission, or parthenogenesis outside the context of marriage or parenthood is immoral. These manipulations violate the personal dignity of the human being and attack his integrity and identity. (Donum Vitae, I,6.)

— Any production of human beings for the sake of experimentation, research, or the harvesting of organs is morally wrong. Such actions reduce a human being to simply disposable biological material. (Cf. Donum Vitae, I,5.)

— Any medical research or observation which jeopardizes the health or life of the unborn child is morally wrong. (Cf. Donum Vitae, I,5.)

The danger with cloning is that we easily lose sight of the dignity of the person, and the sanctity of the act of conjugal love in marriage. We slip into a selfish vision of creating our own kingdom, instead of striving to live in God's kingdom. When Dolly made the headlines, the Wall Street Journal printed an article entitled, "Who Will Cash in on Breakthrough in Cloning?" The answer was "the company who holds the technique." From a purely monetary point, the whole market of organ harvesting becomes a reality.

For example, think of a past situation, forerunner to this issue: In 1991, Anissa Ayala, a 19-year-old suffering from leukemia, received a bone marrow transplant from her 13-month-old sister, Marissa, who was purposefully conceived to be a bone marrow donor. While still in the womb, physicians analyzed Marissa's tissue and determined that she would be an acceptable donor for her older sister. The moral question underlying this act included, "What if her tissue had not been compatible with that of her sister? Would she have been aborted, and would the parents then try to conceive another compatible donor?" Dr. Robert Levine at Yale University School of Medicine commented, "It seems to me that when a primary motive for conceiving a child is to produce tissue or an organ, we are getting very close to seeing this new being as a means to another end." With cloning, the morality becomes more blurred because we could produce another person like ourselves, harvest the organ (even while in the womb or partially born, as is legal in our country), and then destroy the remainder. Moreover, organ harvesting is just one avenue for cloning to proceed. What about developing a master race or even a master army?

Another faith dilemma concerns the soul. Even if we can clone a human being, we cannot "clone" the soul. While two people may be genetically identical, their souls make them unique, even totally different in personality. We have to ask also, "If reproduction is taken out of the ordinary means as God has designed, does He have to infuse a soul?" Maybe cloning would only produce humanoids or androids — soulless replicas of human beings that could be used as slaves. The answer to these questions themselves could be like opening Pandora's box.

I truly fear what will become of this technology. "Hello, Dolly" could mean "Goodbye, Humanity." The situation is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden story: The technology is there, but do we dare use it and risk paradise? Perhaps Huxley's Brave New World or Wells' Island of Dr. Moreau are not so much pieces of fiction but prophecy.

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THE AUTHOR

Father William Saunders is dean of the Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College and pastor of Our Lady of Hope Parish in Sterling, Virginia. The above article is a "Straight Answers" column he wrote for the *Arlington Catholic Herald*. Father Saunders is also the author of *Straight Answers*, a book based on 100 of his columns and published by Cathedral Press in Baltimore.



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