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A call to action

Bishop Jugis, Bishop Burbidge call on N.C. Catholics to fight embryonic stem-cell research legislation

by KEVIN E. MURRAY

editor

CHARLOTTE — Bishop Peter J. Jugis is asking Catholics in the Diocese of Charlotte to learn more about embryonic stem-cell research and to join him in defeating pending legislation that will likely recommend state funding.

Both Bishop Jugis and Bishop Michael F. Burbidge of Raleigh have sent joint letters to all pastors in North Carolina urging them to acquaint their parishioners with the Catholic Church's teachings on stem-cell research, especially those aspects that violate the church's moral teaching.

The letters were sent with a three-part document on the teaching on stem-cell research, written in "an easily understood manner by a committee of Catholic doctors, scientists and theologians," to be included in parish bulletins distributed at Masses the weekends of Jan. 13-14, 20-21 and 27-28.

The inserts are titled "Introduction to the Ethics and Science of Stem Cell Research," "Myths and Facts of Stem Cell Research" and "A Call to Action."

In their letter, the bishops asked their pastors "to help us both educate and mobilize the Catholics in our state regarding the issue of stem-cell research so that Catholics will understand the issues connected with it and will act, when legislation is proposed, to voice their opposition to embryonic stem-cell research and any proposal to fund it using taxpayer dollars."

Over the past two years, a House health subcommittee of the N.C. General Assembly has been studying House Bill 632, the Stem Cell Research Health and Wellness Act, which would provide taxpayer funding for embryonic stem-cell research within North Carolina.

"Human life is precious and we should not destroy innocent human life at any stage, including the beginning embryonic state," said Bishop Jugis.

Bishop Jugis and Bishop Burbidge stated that the voices of the more than 400,000 Catholics in North Carolina "can make a difference on behalf of the unborn."

Federal funding criticism

Richard Doerflinger, deputy director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, recently criticized the House passage Jan. 11 of a bill expanding federal funding of stem-cell research that involved the destruction of human embryos, but expressed confidence that an expected presidential veto of the "misguided and unethical legislation" would stand.

Doerflinger said that the 253-174 vote indicated that there were not enough votes to override the veto that President George W. Bush has promised.

The bill now goes to the Senate for a vote; if it passes there, it will be sent to the White House for action by Bush.

But Doerflinger said both houses of Congress should turn their attention "to stem-cell research that poses no moral problem — constructive research that is already beginning to help patients with dozens of conditions in clinical trials."

"Unlike embryonic stem-cell research, research using stem cells from adult tissue, umbilical-cord blood, amniotic fluid and other sources is showing enormous promise and is likely to produce new treatments for patients now living," he added.

Noting that most Americans prefer stem-cell research that takes place "without harming or destroying human life at any stage," Doerflinger said, "the truly statesmanlike approach to this issue would be to take up this challenge, supporting medical progress that all Americans can live with."

Before the vote, Philadelphia Cardinal Justin Rigali, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, urged House members to "consider the fundamental moral line" they would cross if they approved H.R. 3, the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2007.

Cardinal Rigali called it a "sad reality" that other forms of stem-cell research have received inadequate funding and attention while there has been "an exaggerated and almost exclusive focus on destructive embryo research in the political and policymaking arena."

"Even the national cord-blood stem-cell bank that Congress approved a year ago, which could benefit many thousands of Americans immediately, has received minimal funding," he said.

Other forms of stem-cell research made news Jan. 7 based on a report from scientists at Wake Forest and Harvard universities that said the amniotic fluid surrounding a child in the womb can be the source of medically useful stem cells.

"The federal government has never taken the crass utilitarian approach of forcing taxpayers to support the direct killing of innocent human life, at any stage of development, in the name of progress," said Cardinal Rigali.

Contributing to this article was David Hains, Frank Morock and Catholic News Service.

Educating N.C. Catholics

Parishes in the dioceses of both Charlotte and Raleigh are expected to run a three-part bulletin insert Jan. 14, 21 and 28 on the Catholic Church's teaching on stem-cell research.

Part one, "Introduction to the Ethics and Science of Stem Cell Research," explains the church's teaching on the sacredness of human life, an explanation of stem cell science, the important distinction between embryonic stem cells and adult stem cells, and the moral issues involved with embryonic research.

Part two, "Myths and Facts of Stem Cell Research," explores the falsehoods reported by proponents of embryonic stem-cell research and provides factual information on related issues such as cloning.

And part three, "A Call to Action," advises Catholics in both dioceses to be prepared to be called to action by Bishop Jugis and Bishop Burbidge "to help defeat this legislation." Catholics will be asked to contact their representatives to voice concerns and objections to taxpayer funding of embryonic stem cell research.