

The Gift of Life **Joseph F. Jarmoluk**

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Two millennia ago, three wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to a stable in Bethlehem to bestow upon the baby Jesus tokens of his unique future roles as King and Savior to those who would come to know and believe in Him. Today, Christians celebrate the anniversary of Jesus' birth. If we have the true spirit of Christmas, we will welcome Jesus back into our hearts and rededicate our lives to Him and His teachings.

When Christians contemplate the wonder of the birth of God as man, we cannot help but ask ourselves whether we, in keeping with those ancient wise men, are welcoming and revering the many lives God creates and sustains in our own times. Sadly, if we are honest with ourselves, the answer is disquieting. To be sure, there are far too many people, both here and throughout the world, who unjustly lack the necessities of life.

More fundamentally, can we say that, in allowing legalized abortion and, more recently, the destruction of human embryos in stem-cell research, we are respecting God's creation of human life?

Over the many centuries since Jesus' birth, many of God's children have been hurt and killed because their oppressors, motivated by racism, misguided by religious zealotry, colonialism, territorial ambitions and countless other causes, thought that their victims' lives were expendable. We now look back with horror and disgust, wondering how so many could have been so deluded as to think such awful deeds were justified.

As enlightened citizens of 21st century America, we can condemn, for example, the genocidal crimes of Nazi Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge and today's Darfur region of Sudan without fear of sensible dissent.

The same cannot be said of abortion and of experimentation with embryos.

We must ask ourselves whether our sacrifice of the lives of unborn babies to uphold women's "right to choose" is morally different from Hitler's slaughter of millions of Jews in pursuit of the "master race," Stalin's slaughter of millions of dissenters in pursuit of a proletarian paradise, Pol Pot's extermination of Cambodia's intellectuals and bourgeois "enemies of the people" in pursuit of communist purity, or Sudan's tribal slaughter in pursuit of tribal hegemony. Are our ends worthier? Do we think that such worthier ends justify our means?

If embryos are human beings, then the same questions must be asked before we allow their use in stem-cell research.

All people of good sense and goodwill hope and pray for advances in medical science that will cure illnesses and alleviate the suffering of those who are afflicted with many painful and debilitating forms of illness and injury. Stem-cell research appears to offer great promise to do so. But some are so eager to encourage stem-cell research that they will not listen to the voices of caution that point out the moral differences between the use of adult stem cells and the use of embryonic stem cells. While adult stems can be obtained without damage to any person, embryonic stem cells can be obtained only through a process that destroys the human embryo from which they are taken.

No matter how noble or worthy the objective of the research, these factual and moral questions must be first asked and answered: Is a human embryo a human being? Is it right to destroy an embryo in order to cure another living person?

Science teaches us that, from the moment of conception, a fertilized human egg is a unique combination of the DNA of the mother and father. Left to develop naturally, it will become a unique person. But, is it, from that moment on, human?

Many scientists, based upon their scientific understanding alone, have argued this is so. The Catholic Church teaches so. Many theologians and thinkers of various religious traditions so insist.

While some others say this is not the case, many others say they cannot be sure. Unless we can answer with certainty that the embryo in the petri dish is not a human being, are we not risking making a deadly mistake if we use and destroy that embryo in pursuit of some medical advance?

This Christmas, let us open our eyes to the beauty of God's creation in the world around us and in the gift of every human life.

This writing was sent to the editors of local and national newspapers