



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE***

*Clementine Hall
Saturday, 26 February 2011*

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood
Brothers and Sisters,*

I welcome you with joy on the occasion of the annual Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life. I greet in particular the President, Bishop Ignacio de Paula, and thank him for his courteous words. I address my cordial welcome to each one of you! During these days of work you have treated topics of important timeliness, which profoundly call into question contemporary society and challenge us to find ever more adequate responses for the good of the human person.

The topic of post-abortion syndrome — that is, the grave psychological distress experienced by women who have had recourse to voluntary abortion — reveals the irrepressible voice of the moral conscience and the most serious wound it suffers every time that human action betrays the innate vocation to the good of the human being, to which it bears witness.

In this reflection it would be useful also to focus attention on the at times obscured conscience of the fathers of children who often leave pregnant women on their own. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the moral conscience is that “judgement of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed” (n. 1778).

Indeed it is a duty of the moral conscience to discern good from evil in the different situations of life, so that, on the basis of this judgement, the human being may freely turn towards goodness.

To those who would like to deny the existence of the human moral conscience, reducing its voice to the result of external conditioning or to a purely emotional phenomenon, it is important to reaffirm that the moral quality of human action is neither an extrinsic or optional value, nor is it a prerogative of Christians or believers; rather it brings together every human being.

It is through the moral conscience that God speaks to every person and invites him to defend human life at every moment. The profound dignity of the moral conscience and the reason for its inviolability is inherent in this personal bond with the Creator.

The human being in his wholeness — mind, emotions, will — fulfils his vocation to the good in his conscience, so that the choice of good or evil in the concrete situations of life ends by profoundly marking the human person in every expression of his being. The whole person, in fact, is injured when his action is contrary to the dictates of his conscience. Yet, even when man rejects the truth and goodness that the Creator proposes to him, God does not abandon him but, precisely through the voice of his conscience, continues to see him and to speak to him so that he will recognize his error and open himself to divine Mercy which can heal any wound.

Doctors in particular cannot fail in the grave duty to defend from deception the conscience of many women who believe abortion is the solution to family, financial and social problems or those that relate to their baby's health. Especially in the latter situation the woman is all too often convinced, at times by doctors themselves, that abortion is not only a morally licit choice, but is even a "therapeutic" action that is only right, in order to prevent the child and his family from suffering and from being an "unjust" burden on society.

Against a cultural background characterized by the eclipse of the sense of life, in which the common perception of the moral gravity of abortion and of other kinds of attacks on human life, special fortitude is demanded of doctors so that they may continue to assert that abortion resolves nothing but kills the child, destroys the woman and blinds the conscience of the child's father, all too often ruining family life. This duty, however, does not only concern the medical profession and health-care workers. The whole of society must defend the right to life of the child conceived and the true good of the woman who will never, in any circumstance, be able to find fulfilment in the decision of abortion.

It will likewise be necessary, as your work has shown, to provide women who having unfortunately already had an abortion are now experiencing the full moral and existential tragedy of it. Many dioceses and volunteer organizations offer psychological and spiritual support for full human recovery. The solidarity of the Christian community cannot dispense with this type of co-responsibility.

In this regard I would like to recall the invitation addressed by Venerable John Paul II to women who have had an abortion: "The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced

your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child. With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life" (Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, n. 99).

The moral conscience of researchers and of the entire civil society is also closely involved in the second topic, which is the subject of your work today; the use of umbilical cord banks, for clinical and research purposes. Medical and scientific research is a value, hence a commitment, not only for researchers but for the whole civil community. From it stems the duty to promote ethically effective research by institutions and the value of solidarity of individuals in taking part in research that aims to further the common good. This value and the need for solidarity are very clearly highlighted in the case of the use of umbilical cord stem cells. These are important clinical applications and promising research at the scientific level, but their implementation relies heavily on generosity in donating umbilical cord blood at the moment of birth, and on updating structures to enable women giving birth to donate this blood if they so wish.

I therefore invite you all to become champions of a true and conscious human and Christian solidarity. In this regard, many medical researchers rightly view with perplexity the ever increasing number of private banks for the preservation of umbilical cord blood for the exclusive use of individuals.

In addition to lacking true scientific superiority with regard to cord donation this option — as your Assembly's work shows — undermines the genuine spirit of solidarity that must constantly motivate the search for the common good to which science and medical research ultimately aspire.

Dear brothers and sisters, I renew the expression of my gratitude to the President and to all the Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life for the scientific and ethical value with which you carry out your commitment to serving the good of the human person. I hope that you will keep ever alive the spirit of authentic service that makes minds and hearts sensitive to recognizing the needs of our contemporaries. I cordially impart the Apostolic Blessing to each one of you and to your loved ones.

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