



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
PROMOTED BY THE GYNECOLOGY AND OBSTETRICS CLINIC
OF THE UNIVERSITY "LA SAPIENZA" IN ROME**

Monday, 3 April 2000

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am happy to have this opportunity to welcome you to the Vatican on the occasion of your International Congress. I thank Professor Cosmi for his kind words on your behalf, and I assure you of the interest with which the Holy See follows developments in your field of competence.

Let me first say how pleased I am with the Convention theme: "*Fetus as a Patient*". With its focus upon the fetus as the subject of medical intervention and therapy, your Congress considers the fetus in its full human dignity, a dignity which the unborn child possesses from the moment of conception.

2. In recent decades, when the sense of the humanity of the fetus has been undermined or distorted by reductive understandings of the human person and by laws which introduce scientifically unfounded qualitative stages in the development of conceived life, the Church has repeatedly affirmed and defended the human dignity of the fetus. By this we mean that "the human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life" (Instruction *Donum Vitae*, 79; cf. Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, 60).

3. The fetal therapies now emerging in the medical, surgical and genetic fields offer new hope of saving the lives of those suffering from pathologies which are either incurable or very difficult to treat after birth. They thus confirm the teaching which the Church has upheld on the basis of both

philosophy and theology. Faith in fact does not diminish the value and validity of reason; on the contrary, faith sustains and illuminates reason, especially when human weakness or negative psycho-social influences lessen its perspicacity.

In your work therefore, which should always be based upon scientific and ethical truth, you are called upon to reflect seriously on certain proposals and practices emerging in the technologies of artificial procreation. In my Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, I noted that the various techniques of artificial reproduction, apparently at the service of life, actually open the door to new attacks on life. Apart from the fact that they are morally unacceptable, since they separate procreation from the fully human context of the conjugal act, these techniques have a high rate of failure. And not just failure in relation to fertilization, but failure affecting the subsequent development of the embryo, which is exposed to the risk of death, generally within a very short space of time (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 14).

4. A case of special moral gravity, often deriving from these illicit procedures, is so-called "embryonic reduction", or the elimination of some fetuses when multiple conceptions take place at the one time. Such a procedure is gravely illicit when multiple conceptions occur in the normal course of marital relations, but it is doubly reprehensible when they are the result of artificial procreation.

Those who resort to artificial methods must be held responsible for illicit conception, but whatever the mode of conception – once it happens – the child conceived must be absolutely respected. The life of the fetus must be protected, defended and nurtured in the mother's womb because of its inherent dignity, a dignity which belongs to the embryo and is not something conferred or granted by others, whether the genetic parents, the medical personnel or the State.

5. Distinguished guests, you are specialists in accompanying the wondrous and delicate beginnings of human life in the mother's womb. Therefore, you know best how Catholic moral teaching strengthens and supports a natural ethic, based upon respect for the inviolability of every human life. Catholic moral teaching sheds a guiding light on questions connected with the delicate process of life's dawning, so full of hope and rich in promise for later life, and a field now ripe for the marvelous discoveries of medical science. I trust that your work will always be inspired by a clear recognition of the dignity proper to every human being, each of whom is an incomparable gift of the creative love of God.

Today I wish to pay tribute to your scientific discoveries and the ways in which you apply them to protecting the life and health of the unborn child. I invoke upon you and your work the unfailing help of Almighty God, and as a pledge of divine assistance I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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