

REFLECTIONS

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Man Acting as God

Scientific advances, especially in the biological and medical fields, have allowed mankind to cure many diseases, extend life, and give comfort to the ill. They also have provided an Orwellian ability to create, genetically alter, and destroy life. Worldwide, 46 million children are aborted each year, a figure that exceeds the population of Spain. In contrast, to satisfy personal desires, more than 3 million babies are medically-conceived annually as a result of in vitro fertilization.

Man is not satisfied only with inducing conception or taking a life, he must also produce the perfect child. British doctors have developed a procedure, known as pre-implantation genetic haplotyping (PGH), to detect in embryos genetic disorders that could lead to any of some 6,000 diseases and heritable conditions. The test can distinguish not only embryos that may develop illnesses, but also ones that while remaining healthy are capable of transmitting altered genes that could cause diseases in their future offspring. Questionable embryos thus can be identified and rejected, and less problematic ones implanted during in vitro fertilization. This genetic screening is not about altering imperfect embryos, but about recognizing and destroying them.

Even after a child is born, people in the medical field are questioning whether it should live if it is not perfect. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics, an independent body in the UK, recommends that since children born before 22 weeks of gestation are unlikely to survive, intensive care should not be provided to them -- except as part of a pre-approved research study. Thus, economics trumps humanity, if there is not a material use for the child as a subject. The UK's Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecology has further proposed that doctors be allowed to let seriously disabled newborns die. Couched as pietistic concerns to put an end to a child's suffering, this position treats the handicapped infant as less desirable and makes the pediatrician an administrator of a death sentence. With each mal-applied advance, man is creating a society where human beings are worth having and loving only when they are wanted and only if perfect.

And how does society view these developments? Too often they are seen with cold, impersonal, callousness that substitutes economic, material or ego-centric interests for the human and spiritual. Minette Marrin, a columnist for London's *The Sunday Times*, wrote: "Nature is astonishingly cruel. Science, by contrast, has the power of mercy." She views the embryo as nothing but "a tiny collection of cells," an "infinitesimal scrap of tissue." The new PGH genetic screening approach, she writes, "is indeed playing God...But what on earth is wrong with humans playing God? I am all for it, especially as God doesn't seem to be doing it."

This shaper of public opinion ignores the fact that human life is sacred and inviolable, and endowed with a nobility rooted in a bond with the Creator. Pope Benedict XVI refers to the prevailing culture as one of death, an anti-culture "that makes of man a thing, so to speak, as it no longer considers him as person, with a personal love, with fidelity, but turns him into merchandise."

Life is the most fundamental of all human rights. To destroy it through abortion, neonaticide, mercy killings, euthanasia, or other means is an intrinsically moral evil. For too long, Catholics as a community have been silent on these issues. Often they are quieted by a fear of causing dissension, by political correctness, by the argument of a woman's choice.

As Archbishop Charles Chaput, in a recent address at St. John's University School of Law, exhorts us, "It's time for all of us who claim to be 'Catholic' to recover our Catholic identity...Pluralism in a democracy doesn't mean shutting up on inconvenient issues. It means speaking up -- respectfully, in a spirit of justice and charity, but also vigorously and without apologies...as his (our Lord's) witnesses on earth, not just in our private behavior, but in our public actions." The Archbishop further reminds us that, "In the long run, we serve our country best by remembering that we're citizens of heaven first. We're better Americans by being more truly Catholic -- and the reason why, is that unless we live our Catholic faith authentically, with our whole heart and our whole strength, we have nothing worthwhile to bring to the public debates that will determine the course of our nation."

To do anything less is to be unfaithful to our church, our country, and ultimately our God. Doing the right thing is hard. We must do more than preach against moral evils, we must work to counter them. We must know our faith, believe it with deep fervor as did the early Christians, and have the courage to live it, publicly as well as privately. We have an opportunity on January 22 to be a visible sign to our society that human life is not a matter of choice. Join your fellow Knights at the March for Life in Washington, DC, and be a public witness for the faith to help change the thinking and actions of our nation's people and leaders.



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