

# The Wisdom of the Church Is in Her Silence, Too

*The Embryonic Ensoulment Debate: Father Pacholczyk Responds*

by **FATHER TADEUSZ  
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Discussions about the timing of embryonic ensoulment have generated intense discussion among Catholics for centuries. My letter on this subject in the June 1-7 issue of the Register has likewise resulted in intense discussion in a number of follow-up letters.

I pointed out that the Church has not defined when ensoulment/personhood of the early embryo occurs. This is clearly a disconcerting thought to some Catholics, who had supposed that the Church must have declared that the embryo receives its immortal soul from God right at fertilization.

Some of the letters attempt to shore up this uncomfortable situation by suggesting that ensoulment is likely to occur at fertilization even if the Church hasn't made up her mind on the matter.

Some go further and argue that the Church actually has made up her mind on the issue quite recently, in just the last few years. In reply to these letters, I would like to offer a few observations, which I hope will help clarify the discussion.

## What Documents Say ...

Several recent Church documents explicitly state that the question has not been definitively resolved. In addition to the critical passage from the "Declaration on Procured Abortion" of 1974, which I quoted in my first letter, we find further confirmation in the "Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation," which took up the matter in 1987:

"Certainly no experimental datum can be in itself sufficient to bring us to the recognition of a spiritual soul; nevertheless, the conclusions of science regarding the human embryo provide a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of this first appearance of a human life: How could a human individual not be a human person? The magisterium has not expressly committed itself to an affirmation of a philosophical nature, but it constantly reaffirms the moral condemnation of any kind of procured abortion. This teaching has not been changed and is unchangeable."

This passage is important because it reveals the Church's great caution and nuanced language in addressing the question of the timing of personhood/ensoulment, coupled with her resolute firmness regarding the moral condemnation of any violation of embryonic human life.

Notice the phrasing: "... the conclusions of science ... provide a valuable indication." The Church is quite cognizant of how good biology will dovetail with the philosophical discussion of personhood and even impinge on the theological question of ensoulment.

The document sees in the findings of science a "valuable indica-

tion" (not a definitive indication, not a proof) that a personal presence might exist from the beginning. Refusing, however, to say outright that it is so, the document instead ventures to muse further on the matter by offering a reflective question: "How could a human individual not be a human person?"

Even after such a leading question, however, the document is quickly circumspect as it homes in on the essential bottom line: "The magisterium has not expressly committed itself to an affirmation of a philosophical nature ..." This fundamental statement directly reiterates the opening point of my letter, which stressed that "the Church has never definitively stated when the ensoulment of the human embryo takes place. It remains an open question."

## ... and Don't Say

Father Anthony Zimmerman suggests in his letter that somewhere between 1974 and 2003 the Church made up her mind about the timing of ensoulment. He states, "In his letter, Father Tadeusz cites correctly the Church document of 1974; but this is 2003!" He goes on to argue: "The Church, not yet sure of itself in 1974, is now certain."

He suggests the Catechism of the Catholic Church addresses the issue in section 364. This is not correct. Section 364 discusses neither embryos, ensoulment nor the latter's timing explicitly but rather discusses only the reality that exists ("body and soul but truly one") after ensoulment has already transpired. Section 364 prescinds entirely from the details of the timing of ensoulment of the human embryo. Moreover, if we were to glance ahead just a few paragraphs to section 366, where the action of ensoulment is explicitly discussed, we would see that although God's activity of creating the spiritual soul is briefly mentioned, once again there is no specification of the particulars of the timing.

Think how simple it would have been to put in just three words: "God ensouls zygotes." But the Catechism never does so, nor has any authoritative magisterial teaching in the Roman Catholic tradition ever done so anywhere in 2,000 years of her history.

In fact, if we examine a different section of the Catechism, section 2270, we find once again a very precise and carefully nuanced formulation, reminiscent of the various other Church documents I have already referred to:

"From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person." Again, the moral affirmation about rights is firmly stated without ever declaring that the human being at the first moment of his existence is already a person.

The rights of the person accrue to the embryonic human because if he is not yet one, he is about to become one, in virtue of the core biological truth that he is a being that is already human. That is to say, he already possesses an inter-



(Images.com illustration)

nal code for self-actualization and is an organism with an independent and inherent teleology to develop into a human adult, and is physiologically alive and genetically human.

## What the Pope Says ...

But it doesn't stop there. Even more recently, in 1995 (two years after the Catechism was issued), the Holy Father, writing in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life) stated the following:

"Furthermore, what is at stake is so important that, from the standpoint of moral obligation, the mere probability that a human person is involved would suffice to justify an absolutely clear prohibition of any intervention aimed at killing a human embryo. Precisely for this reason, over and above all scientific debates and those philosophical affirmations to which the magisterium has not expressly committed itself, the Church has always taught and continues to teach that the result of human procreation, from the first moment of its existence, must be guaranteed that unconditional respect that is morally due to the human being in his or her totality and unity as body and spirit: '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."

It is significant how careful and precise the Holy Father is here, writing in an encyclical, an instrument intended for widespread dissemination throughout the Church and, indeed, to "all people of good will."

He again notes: "[O]ver and

above all scientific debates and those philosophical affirmations to which the magisterium has not expressly committed itself." The Church in one document after another has explicitly refused to commit herself to the particulars of the timing of personhood/ensoulment of the embryo. Yet she has never hesitated to promulgate the firm and unalterable ethical and moral teaching that specifies how zygotes and embryos are to be respected and treated, with the respect that is due to persons, even if they might possibly not yet be persons.

Hence Father Zimmerman's attempt to close the door on the possibility of non-personal human beings is premature. He suggests that between 1974 and 2003 there was some shift in the way the Church evaluates the question of when ensoulment occurs. At least as of 1995, the date of *Evangelium Vitae*, there was not any monumental shift of this sort. Father Zimmerman surely realizes how, in the arena of large and disputed questions in the history and development of dogma, the Church thinks in terms of centuries, not years or even decades. The Church invariably moves slowly and with great care in deciding these matters.

## ... and Doesn't Say

What about the comments addressed by the Holy Father to the scientists of the Pontifical Academy of Life? Father Zimmerman refers to an address by the Pope to the academy on March 1, 2002 (which was actually delivered Feb. 27). By quoting only pieces of the passage, and by making rather liberal use of ellipses, Father Zimmerman ends up leaving out several important modifiers that become crucial to a prop-

er understanding of the meaning of the passage. The full and uncut text of what the Holy Father stated is as follows:

"The Church affirms the right to life of every innocent human being and at every moment of his existence. The distinction sometimes implied in international documents between 'human being' and 'human person,' so as to limit the right to life and to physical integrity to persons already born, is an artificial distinction, without any scientific or philosophical foundation: Every human being, from the moment of his conception until the moment of his natural death, possesses an inviolable right to life and deserves all the respect owed to the human person."

In this passage the Holy Father is stressing precisely what I stressed as the central point of my letter — namely, that the distinction between human being and human person may never be used in such a manner as to justify the violation of prenatal human life. In other words, there is no philosophical or scientific basis for making a distinction between rights that accrue to the human being and those that accrue to the human person, primary among which is the right to life.

What the Holy Father does not do here is to make a pronouncement that human beings and human persons are always absolutely coterminous.

Rather, he again shifts the discussion to focus on the key ethical affirmation that every human being "deserves all the respect owed to the human person." Clearly, the Pope could have chosen to phrase it differently, e.g.: "Every embryonic human being is a person, and therefore deserves respect," but he didn't, and in no official Church teaching that I am aware of has the Church ever phrased it that way, because that is not how she typically reasons about this complex and important matter.

## Pro-Life Error?

It can be tempting to ignore these subtle nuances in what the Church is teaching when she makes declarations on the subject of the ensoulment/personhood of the embryo. I think many of us in the pro-life movement are guilty of having done just that in the interests of strengthening our own arguments on behalf of protecting

embryos and fetuses.

While the intention here might be good, it is never truthful to suggest to others that the Church has formally defined something that she in fact has not.

I am convinced there is enormous wisdom in the Church's hesitancy to declare that zygotes are ensouled with an immortal, rational soul. She is deeply sensitive to the complexities of human embryonic development, not to mention the conceptual conundrums raised by strikingly novel methods of making embryos, including parthenogenesis, cloning, twinning and chimerization.

The Church is also quite aware of the challenges involved in trying to philosophically explicate the primordial reality of personhood. She always insists, nevertheless, in an absolute way on the moral and ethical affirmation, without trying to oversimplify the reasons for that affirmation. She refuses to jump to quick and easy conclusions about zygotic or embryonic ensoulment. I think it was Einstein who once remarked that, "Everything should be made as simple as possible — but no simpler!"

Above all, it is important that we as pro-life Catholics not put words into the mouth of the Church. Since she has never definitively declared the exact moment when God infuses the immortal soul into the early embryo, we should not misrepresent the state of affairs to others in a way that makes it appear that she might have defined this question.

The Church's nuanced and careful approach to the matter must be our own as we submit in obedience to her patient and attentive consideration of the matter. One day in the future, it may in fact be the case that the Church will declare that zygotes are ensouled by God, but for the moment it is not so, and it would not be honest for us to suppose or otherwise give the impression that she really does teach in this way.

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