



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE**

Tuesday, 24 February 1998

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. In extending my greeting to you all, ordinary and corresponding members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to your President, Prof. Juan de Dios Vial Correa, for his courteous words. I also greet your Vice-President, Bishop Elio Sgreccia, who generously labours on behalf of your prestigious institution. I welcome the occasion to express my satisfaction with what the Academy has been doing, since it began its work, to fulfil its task of promoting and defending the fundamental value of life.

2. I am pleased that your fourth general assembly has focused on the theme: *“The Human Genome: Human Personhood and Future Society”*. In the human mind’s marvellous progress in coming to know the universe, the stage reached in recent years in the genetic field is particularly interesting, since it is leading man to a discovery of the deepest secrets of his own bodily nature. The human genome in a way is the last continent to be explored. In this millennium now drawing to a close, so full of tragedies and achievements, people have come to know each other and in some ways have grown closer as a result of geographical explorations and discoveries. Human knowledge has also made important advances in the world of physics, to the point of recently discovering the structure of atomic particles. Through the knowledge of genetics and molecular biology, scientists can look with the penetrating gaze of science into the inner fabric of life and the mechanisms that characterize individuals, thus ensuring the continuity of living species.

3. These advances increasingly reveal the Creator’s greatness, because they allow man to discover the intrinsic order of creation and to appreciate the wonders of his body, in addition to his intellect, which to a certain extent reflects the light of the Word through whom “all things were made” (*Jn 1:3*). In the modern era, however, there is a strong tendency to seek knowledge not so much for admiring and contemplating, as for increasing power over things. Knowledge and power are interwoven more and more in a mentality that can imprison man himself. With regard to knowledge of the human genome, this mentality could lead to interference with the internal structure of human life itself with a view to subduing,

selecting and manipulating the body and, ultimately, the person and future generations. Your Academy for Life has done well, then, to reflect on the discoveries being made about the human genome, thus intending to base its work on an anthropological foundation which rests on the very dignity of the human person.

4. The genome appears as the organizing, structural element of the body in both its individual and hereditary traits: it indicates and conditions membership in the human species, the hereditary link and the biological and somatic marks of individuality. It has a determining influence on the structure of physical existence from the dawn of conception until natural death. It is on the basis of this inner truth of the genome, already present at the moment of procreation when the genetic inheritance of the father and the mother are united, that the Church has taken upon herself the task of defending the human dignity of every individual from the very start of his existence. Anthropological reflection, in fact, leads to the recognition that, by virtue of the substantial unity of body and spirit, the human genome not only has a biological significance, but also possesses anthropological dignity, which has its basis in the spiritual soul that pervades it and gives it life. Therefore, it is unlawful to carry out any intervention on the human genome unless it is aimed at the good of the person, understood as a unity of body and spirit; nor is it lawful to discriminate between human subjects on the basis of possible genetic defects discovered before or after birth.

5. The Catholic Church, which considers man redeemed by Christ as her way (cf. Encyclical *Letter Redemptor hominis*, n. 14), insists that the recognition of the dignity of the human being as a person from the moment of conception also be guaranteed by law. Furthermore, she asks political leaders and scientists to promote the good of the person through scientific research aimed at perfecting appropriate treatments that are feasible and without disproportionate risks. This is possible, as scientists themselves acknowledge, in therapeutic interventions on the genome of somatic cells, but not on the genome of germinal cells and that of the premature embryo. I feel an obligation here to express my concern over the spread of a cultural climate which is steering prenatal diagnosis in a direction that is no longer one of treatment for the sake of better accepting the life of the unborn, but rather one of discrimination against those who do not prove healthy in prenatal examination. At the current time there is a serious disproportion between diagnostic possibilities, which are progressively expanding, and therapeutic possibilities, which are scarce: this fact raises serious ethical problems for families, who need to be supported in welcoming newborn life, even when it suffers from some defect or malformation.

6. In this regard, it is necessary to denounce the rise and spread of a new selective eugenics, which leads to the suppression of embryos and fetuses suffering from any disease. Sometimes baseless theories about the anthropological and ethical difference of the various developmental stages of prenatal life are employed: the so-called “progressive humanization of the foetus”. Sometimes an appeal is made to a mistaken idea of the quality of life, which should — it is said — prevail over the sacredness of life. In this regard, we cannot fail to ask that the rights proclaimed by the conventions and international declarations on the protection of the human genome and, in general, on the right to life be enjoyed by every human being from the moment of fertilization, without any form of discrimination, whether related to genetic imperfections or physical defects, or to various stages of the human being’s development. Therefore, it is urgently necessary to reinforce the legal bulwark in view of the immense diagnostic possibilities brought to light by the project of sequencing the human genome.

7. The more that knowledge and the power to intervene grow, the greater must be the awareness of the values at stake. I therefore hope that the conquest of this new continent of knowledge, the human genome, will mean the discovery of new

possibilities for victory over disease and will never encourage a selective attitude towards human beings. In this regard it would be very helpful if international scientific organizations would make sure that the desired benefits of genetic research are also made available to developing nations. This will prevent a further source of inequality between nations, also given the fact that enormous financial resources are invested in research of this sort, resources which, according to some, could be allocated first and foremost for the relief of curable illnesses and of the chronic poverty of so many human beings. What seems certain from now on is that future society will conform to the dignity of the human person and to equality between nations, if scientific discoveries are directed to the common good, which is always achieved through the good of each individual and requires everyone's cooperation, especially that of today's scientists.

As I invoke God's assistance on your work, for an ever more incisive and effective service to the fundamental cause of human life, I cordially bless you all.

© Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana