



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 15th GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

Consistory Hall

Saturday, 21 February 2009

*Your Excellencies,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Distinguished Academicians,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am particularly pleased to be able to receive you on the occasion of the 15th General Assembly of the [Pontifical Academy for Life](#). In 1994, my venerable Predecessor Pope [John Paul II](#) instituted it under the presidency of Prof. Jérôme Lejeune, a scientist, interpreting with farsightedness the delicate task the it would carry out in the course of the years. I thank the President, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, for his words introducing this meeting which confirm the Academy's important commitment to the promotion and defence of human life.

Ever since the mid-19th century when the Augustinian Abbot, Gregor Mendel, discovered the laws of the heredity of characteristics, for which he is considered the founder of genetics, this science has truly taken giant steps in the understanding of that language which is at the foundation of biological information and determines the development of a living being. It is for this reason that modern genetics has a particularly important place in the biological disciplines that have contributed to the wonderful development of the knowledge of the invisible architecture of the human body and the cellular and molecular processes that dictate its multiple activities. Science today has succeeded in revealing both the different hidden mechanisms of human physiology and the processes linked to the appearance of certain defects inherited from the parents. It has also revealed processes that make some people more exposed to the risk of contracting a disease. This knowledge, the result of intelligence and the efforts of countless experts, has made possible not only a more effective and early diagnosis of genetic diseases but also treatment destined to

relieve the sufferings of the sick and, in some cases even to restore the hope of recovering their health. Since the sequencing of the entire human genome became available, the difference between one person and another and between the different human populations has also become the object of genetic research. This has permitted us to glimpse the possibility of new achievements.

The context of research still remains very open today and every day new horizons, still largely unexplored, are disclosed. The efforts of the researcher in these most enigmatic and precious areas demand special support; for this reason, collaboration among the different sciences is a support that can never be lacking in order to achieve results that are effective and at the same time achieve authentic progress for all humanity. This complementarity allows one to avoid the risk of a widespread genetic reductionism which tends to identify the person exclusively in terms of genetic information and interactions with the environment. It must be stressed that man will always be greater than all the elements that form his body; indeed, he carries within him the power of thought which always aspires to the truth about himself and about the world. The words of Blaise Pascal a great thinker who was also a gifted scientist charged with significance spring to mind: "Man is only a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapour, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But, if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and he knows the advantage that the universe has over him; the universe, instead, knows nothing" (*Pensées*, 347).

Every human being, therefore, is far more than a unique combination of genetic information that is transmitted by his or her parents. Human generation can never be reduced to the mere reproduction of a new individual of the human species, as happens with any animal. The arrival of each person in the world is always a new creation. The words of a Psalm recall this with profound wisdom: "For it was you who created my being; knit me together in my mother's womb... my body held no secret from you when I was being fashioned in secret" (Ps 139[138]: 13, 15).

Consequently, if one wishes to enter into the mystery of human life, no branch of science must isolate itself, claiming to have the last word. Rather, it must participate in the common vocation to reach the truth, though with the different methodologies and subject matter proper to each science. Your Congress, however, analyzed not only the great challenges that genetics must tackle but also extended its Constitution to the risks of eugenics, certainly not a new practice and which in the past has been employed in unprecedented forms of authentic discrimination and violence. The disapproval of eugenics used with violence by a state regime or as the result of hatred for a race or a people is so deeply rooted in consciences that it was formally expressed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Despite this, still today disturbing manifestations of this odious practice that presents itself with various features are appearing. Of course, the eugenic and racial ideologies that humiliated man in the past and caused tremendous suffering are not being proposed again, but a new mentality is being introduced that tends to justify a different view of life and personal dignity founded on personal desires and individual rights. Hence there is a

tendency to give priority to functional ability, efficiency, perfection and physical beauty to the detriment of life's other dimensions which are deemed unworthy. The respect that is due to every human being, even bearing a developmental defect or a genetic disease that might manifest itself during life, is thus weakened while children whose life is considered not worth living are penalized from the moment of conception.

It is necessary to reiterate that every form of discrimination practised by any authority with regard to persons, peoples or races on the basis of differences traceable to real or presumed genetic factors is an attack on the whole of humanity. What must be strongly reaffirmed is the equal dignity of every human being by the very fact that he has been born. A person's biological, mental and cultural development or state of health must never become a discriminatory factor. On the contrary, it is necessary to consolidate the culture of acceptance and love showing real solidarity toward those who suffer. It must break down the barriers that society often builds by discriminating against those who are disabled or affected by pathologies, or, worse, even reaching the selection and rejection of life in the name of an abstract ideal of health and physical perfection. If the human being is reduced to an object of experimental manipulation from the very earliest stages of his development this means that biotechnological medicine has surrendered to the will of the stronger. Trust in science must not make one forget the primacy of ethics when human life is at stake.

I am confident, dear friends, that your research in this sector may continue with the due scientific commitment and attention that the ethical factor demands on such important and crucial matters for the coherent development of personal existence. This is the hope with which I desire to conclude this meeting. As I invoke upon your work an abundance of heavenly light, I impart with affection a special Apostolic Blessing to you all.

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