



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRESIDENT
OF THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL WEEKS OF FRANCE**

To Mr Michel Camdessus
President of the Social Weeks of France

1. "*Biology, Medicine and Society, What Will We Do With Man?*" is the theme you chose for the meeting of the *Social Weeks of France* this year, held in Paris from 23 to 25 November.

Today it is quite appropriate to approach the complex questions of bioethics in a new way by turning to specialists in the different branches of knowledge: scientific, technological, philosophical and theological. Indeed, it is good for our contemporaries, who are often troubled and bewildered by scientific progress and its ethical implications, to be informed about the possibilities offered by science and to have the means to form their consciences, with a view to making decisions that are in accord with the basic moral values that protect man's place at the centre of creation.

2. The Catholic Church appreciates and encourages biomedical research when it aims at the cure and prevention of illness, the alleviation of suffering and the welfare of human beings. She knows that "research ... provided it is carried out in a truly scientific way and does not override the moral laws, can never conflict with the faith..." (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 36). What's more, research enables us to discover the laws that regulate the workings of matter and of living beings, to observe the order inscribed in creation and to appreciate the marvels of the human person in his intelligence and in his body, to penetrate the mystery of the human person more deeply, for he reflects the light of the Word: "all things were made by Him" (Jn 1,3). In her desire to make us share in the meaning of the human person which she receives from our Saviour, the Church wants to contribute her part to the reflection of those who hold responsibility for the common good and who have to make serious decisions in this sector. Indeed, it does matter that science not reduce the human being to being an object but really serve the good of the person. Further, the Church is

aware of the tragic complexity of the painful situations of those who suffer and she is aware of the pressures exerted by powerful economic interests. The faithful of the Catholic Church and all people of good will are called to take part in the debate to defend human dignity. I therefore encourage you to persevere in your work with concern for the truth, thus presenting to our contemporaries clear elements for their reflection and decision-making.

3. By placing the human person and his inalienable dignity at the heart of your interdisciplinary process, you show the urgent need to marshal all the resources of wisdom and experience, of reason and science, to serve him better. The discoveries and changes that have marked the biomedical disciplines have shown that behind the striking progress that deals with the mystery of life itself, science is at times stunned by its own power and is tempted to manipulate man as if he were merely an object or matter. On account of this situation and because of the possibilities offered by science and technology, I express the wish that your conversations may contribute to a lucid analysis of what is at stake and of the consequences of the progress, opportunities and challenges for the human being and for humanity in general. Because of his intrinsic dignity, which includes his biological dimension, the human person can never be subordinate, as a means or instrument, to the species, to society or to the will of others even if they are his/her parents for human persons have an intrinsic value. This natural law truth is reinforced with the light of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word who, as the "new Adam ... fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22). Reason and faith enable Christians throughout history to defend the person, especially the weak, the vulnerable, the marginalized and unborn children. "There is no person, no human authority, no science, no medical, eugenic, social, economic or moral 'indication' that can exhibit or entitle anyone with a valid juridical capacity to dispose directly and deliberately of an innocent human life, that is, to dispose of it with a view to its destruction envisaged as a goal, or even as a means to attain an objective that may not in itself be at all illegitimate" (Pius XII, *Address to participants at the Congress of the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives*, 29 October 1951, n. 12).

4. Today the dignity of the human person is threatened, above all, at the critical phases of life, conception and natural death. A new temptation of taking over the right to define the minimum of humanity that makes a living creature a human being has arisen. As I recalled in the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, how can we forget that "from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother, it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth; it would never become human if it were not human already" (n. 60)? Modern genetics shows that from the very first instant "there is established the programme of what this living being will be: a person, this individual person with his characteristic features already well determined" (*ibid.*). This demands absolute respect for the human being who can never be considered an object or matter for experimentation from the stage of his being an embryo to the end of his life. Likewise, it is fitting to treat human germ cells with respect on account of the human patrimony which they bear.

5. Biomedical experimentation that does not have as its purpose the good of the subject entails inadmissible and discriminatory methods of selection. Indeed, the aim of any therapeutic initiative or research process must be the good of the being on whom it is carried out. Hypothetical benefits for humanity and for progress in research can in no way constitute a decisive criterion of moral goodness. Certainly such a criterion helps to weaken moral convictions about the human being and fosters the practice of discarding the persons affected by congenital handicaps who were subjected to a pre-implantation examination and an abusive use of prenatal screening. Many countries are committed to a selection of unborn children, that is tacitly encouraged and begin to practice a genuine eugenics and a deadening of conscience, that seriously discriminates against people with congenital disabilities and those who welcome them. Such a widespread attitude also leads to the emergence of a certain number of conjugal and family pathologies. Furthermore, such behaviour can only dissuade people from making the necessary efforts to discover new treatments and from accepting and integrating into society disabled persons since it reinforces in the disabled a strong feeling of abnormality and exclusion. I am grateful for the efforts of parents who accept a disabled child, showing their attachment to human life. One can only hope that society, which has the duty of fostering solidarity, will support and help the disabled. To develop a discriminatory practice with the help of prenatal screening, as well as to use and produce human embryos for experimentation and to obtain stem cells with the goal of destroying them, all constitute a serious attack on the absolute respect due to human life and to the infinite value of the human person, that is not tied to one's external features or on the ability to relate to other members of society. I am grateful to the Permanent Council of the Bishops' Conference of France for alerting public opinion and for helping to form consciences by publishing the document "*Essor de la génétique et dignité humaine*" (Scope of Genetics and Human Dignity).

6. The technological possibilities emerging in the field of bio-medicine call for political authority and legislators to get involved since this is an issue that goes beyond the scientific sector. It is the duty of the public authority "to act in such a way that civil law is regulated according to the fundamental norms of the moral law in matters concerning human rights, human life and the institution of the family" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on respect for human life in its origin and on the dignity of procreation, Donum vitae*, III, 3 March 2001). The legislator has to propose legislation that will protect people from arbitrary solutions that deny the dignity of the person and his basic rights. Legislative and political choices have to be oriented toward the good of persons and of society as a whole, and must not depend solely on the bidding of science, which in itself does not have the ability to draw up or establish a set of moral norms. The future of the human person and of humanity depends on the human capacity to subject debated bioethical questions to rigorous ethical examination without being afraid to challenge current scientific techniques.

7. The multiplication of interdisciplinary exchanges along with philosophical and theological reflection will foster the work of truth and respect for the mystery of the human being. They will expose temptations to base behaviour solely on scientific factors, on special circumstances, on the

pressure of public opinion, or the pressures of financial markets and special interests. Your ongoing dialogue with a spectrum of social partners can make it possible to re-establish the harmony between the goals of research and human values. One must build a society where each person has the place he is entitled to as a member of the human race and that does not depend on his work nor on his usefulness. It is especially in the periods when illness and suffering weaken and enfeeble human beings that it is fitting to perceive the value and meaning of each human life. Those who care for the sick in so many ways and who bring that indispensable attention and sensitive tenderness that assures them that, in the midst of a medical world increasingly governed by technology, they are full human persons are dedicated to this task in a wonderful way. The Church offers her esteem and gratitude to the medical and paramedical staff, to the chaplaincy teams and hospital visitors, to everyone who is committed to palliative care and support of the suffering, to researchers, philosophers and political leaders and to all those involved in this daily work at the service of the dignity of the individual. Their commitment and convictions are a most valuable source of hope.

8. May the work of the *Social Weeks* encourage everyone to reaffirm the greatness and value of each human life; for social life is not possible without it and true human progress is endangered! May it be a place to propose a better future, and may they help provide for everyone a contemplative vision that is brought forth by faith in the God of life, "it is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 83).

As I invoke Christ the King of the universe, to bring about the expansion of the civilization of love in the world, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, to the organizers, speakers and participants of the *Social Weeks of France*.

From the Vatican, 15 November 2001

JOHN PAUL II