



## Het menselijke genoom

**Address of his holiness Benedict XVI to the participants at the 20th international conference organized by the Pontifical Council For Health Pastoral Care on the theme of the Human Genome**



Pope Benedict XVI  
19 November 2005

Your Eminence, Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I address my cordial greeting to you all, with a special thought of gratitude to Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán for the kind greeting he has expressed on behalf of those present.

I offer a special greeting to the Bishops and priests who are taking part in this Conference as well as the speakers, who have certainly made a highly qualified contribution to the problems addressed in these days: their reflections and suggestions will be the subject of an attentive evaluation by the competent ecclesial bodies.

Placing myself in the pastoral perspective proper to the Pontifical Council that has sponsored this Conference, I would like to point out that today, especially in the area of breakthroughs in medical science, the Church is being given a further possibility of carrying out the precious task of enlightening consciences, in order to ensure that every new scientific discovery will serve the integral good of the person, with constant respect for his or her dignity.

In underlining the importance of this pastoral task, I would like first of all to say a word of encouragement to those in charge of promoting it.

The contemporary world is marked by the process of secularization. Through complex cultural and social events, it has not only claimed a just autonomy for science and the organization of society, but has all too often also obliterated the link between temporal realities and their Creator, even to the point of neglecting to safeguard the transcendent dignity of human beings and respect for human life itself.

Today, however, secularization in the form of radical secularism no longer satisfies the more aware and alert minds. This means that possible and perhaps new spaces are opening up for a profitable dialogue with society and not only with the faithful, especially on important themes such as those relating to life.

This is possible because, in peoples with a long Christian tradition, there are still seeds of humanism which the disputes of nihilistic philosophy have not yet reached. Indeed, these seeds tend to germinate more vigorously, the more serious the challenges become.

Believers, moreover, know well that the Gospel is in an intrinsic harmony with the values engraved in human nature. Thus, God's image is deeply impressed in the soul of the human being, the voice of whose conscience it is far from easy to silence.

With the Parable of the Sower, Jesus in the Gospel reminds us that there is always good ground on which the seed may fall, spring up and bear fruit. Even people who no longer claim to be members of the Church or even



those who have lost the light of faith, nonetheless remain attentive to the human values and positive contributions that the Gospel can make to the good of the individual and of society.

It is particularly easy to become aware of this by reflecting on the topic of your Conference: the people of our time, whose sensitivity, moreover, has been heightened by the terrible events that have clouded the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, easily understand that human dignity cannot be identified with the genes of the human being's DNA and is not diminished by the possible presence of physical differences or genetic defects.

The principle of "non-discrimination" on the basis of physical or genetic factors has deeply penetrated consciences and is formally spelled out in the charters of human rights. The truest foundation of this principle lies in the dignity inherent in every human person because he or she is created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gn 1: 26).

What is more, a serene analysis of scientific data leads to a recognition of the presence of this dignity in every phase of human life, starting from the very moment of conception. The Church proclaims and proposes this truth not only with the authority of the Gospel, but also with the power that derives from reason. This is precisely why she feels duty bound to appeal to every person of good will in the certainty that the acceptance of these truths cannot but benefit individuals and society.

Indeed, it is necessary to preserve ourselves from the risks of a science and technology that claim total autonomy from the moral norms inscribed in the nature of the human being.

There are many professional bodies and academies in the Church that are qualified to evaluate innovations in the scientific environment, particularly in the world of biomedicine; then there are doctrinal bodies specifically designated to define the moral values to be safeguarded and to formulate norms required for their effective protection; lastly, there are pastoral Dicasteries, such as the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care, whose task is to ensure that the Church's pastoral presence is effective.

This third task is not only invaluable with regard to an ever more adequate humanization of medicine, but also in order to guarantee a prompt response to the expectations by each individual of effective spiritual assistance.

Consequently, it is necessary to give pastoral health care a new impetus. This implies renewal and the deepening of the pastoral proposal itself. It should take into account the growing mass of knowledge spread by the media and the higher standard of education of those they target.

We cannot ignore the fact that more and more frequently, not only legislators but citizens too are called to express their thoughts on problems that can be described as scientific and difficult. If they lack an adequate education, indeed, if their consciences are inadequately formed, false values or deviant information can easily prevail in the guidance of public opinion.

Updating the training of pastors and educators to enable them to take on their own responsibilities in conformity with their faith, and at the same time in a respectful and loyal dialogue with non-believers, is the indispensable task of any up-to-date pastoral health care. Today, especially in the field of the applications of genetics, families can lack adequate information and have difficulty in preserving the moral autonomy they need to stay faithful to their own life choices.

In this sector, therefore, a deeper and more enlightened formation of consciences is necessary. Today's scientific discoveries affect family life, involving families in unexpected and sensitive decisions that require responsible treatment. Pastoral work in the field of health care thus needs properly trained and competent advisers.



This gives some idea of the complex and demanding management needed in this area today.

In the face of these growing needs in pastoral care, as the Church continues to trust in the light of the Gospel and the power of Grace, she urges those responsible to study a proper methodology in order to help individuals, families and society, combining faithfulness and dialogue, theological study and the ability for mediation.

In this, she sets great store especially by the contribution of all, such as you who are gathered here to take part in this International Conference and who have at heart the fundamental values that support human coexistence. I gladly take this opportunity to express to you all my grateful appreciation for your contribution in a sector so important for the future of humanity.

With these sentiments, I invoke from the Lord an abundance of enlightenment on your work, and as a testimony of my esteem and affection, I impart a special Blessing to you all.