



Over genetica en eugenetica

To the participants of the Pontifical Academy for Life conference “New Frontiers of Genetics and the Danger of Eugenics”



21 february 2009

Pope Benedict XVI

Lord Cardinals, Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and Priesthood, Illustrious Academicians, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am especially pleased to receive you on the occasion of the 15th ordinary assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life. In 1994 my venerable predecessor, Pope John Paul II, instituted this body under the presidency of a scientist, Professor Jérôme Lejeune, understanding with foresight the delicate work that it would have to undertake over the course of years. I thank the president, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, for the words with which he wished to introduce this meeting, confirming the Academy's great dedication to the promotion and defense of human life.

From the time that the laws of heredity were discovered in the middle of the 19th century by the Augustinian abbot Gregor Mendel, who has been considered the founder of genetics, this science has truly taken giant steps in understanding the language at the basis of biological information, which determines the development of a living being. It is for this reason that modern genetics occupies a place of special prominence in the biological disciplines, which have contributed to the prodigious development of the knowledge of the invisible architecture of the human body and the cellular and molecular processes that preside over its multiple activities. Today science has arrived at revealing the recondite mechanisms of human physiology as well as the processes that are linked to the appearance of certain defects that are inheritable from parents along with processes that make some persons more susceptible to contract an illness. This knowledge, the fruit of the genius and toil of countless scholars, make it possible to more easily arrive at not only a more effective and early diagnosis of genetic maladies, but also to create therapies to alleviate the contraction of illnesses and, in some cases, to restore, in the end, the hope of regaining health. Moreover, from the time that the whole sequence of the human genome became available, the differences between one person and another and between different human populations have also become the object of genetic investigations, which allowed a glimpse of the possibility of new conquests.

Today the area of research still remains open and every day new horizons, in a large part unexplored, are disclosed. The work of researchers in such enigmatic and precious areas requires a special support; the cooperation between different sciences is a support that can never be lacking if results are to be arrived at that are effective and productive of authentic progress for the whole of humanity. This complementarity makes it possible to avoid the danger of a genetic reductionism that would identify the person exclusively with his genetic information and his interaction with his environment. It is again necessary to emphasize that man is greater than all of that which makes up his body; in fact, he carries with him the power of thought, which is always drawn to the truth about himself and the world. The words of Blaise Pascal, who was a great thinker as well as a gifted scientist, return: “Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapor, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But



even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he is able to know that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe, however, knows nothing of this” (“Pensées,” 347).

Every human being, then, is much more than a singular combination of genetic information that is transmitted to him by his parents. The generation of man can never be reduced to the mere reproduction of a new individual of the human species, as is the case with all other animals. Every appearance of a person in the world is always a new creation. The words Psalm 139 recall this with deep wisdom: “You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb ... My very self you knew; my bones were not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret” (13, 15). If we want to enter into the mystery of human life, then it is necessary that no science isolate itself, pretending to have the last word. Rather, the common vocation to arrive at the truth — according to the different methodologies and contents proper to each science — must be shared.

Your conference, in any case, does not only analyze the great challenges that genetics is held to face; but it also extends to the dangers of eugenics, which is certainly not a new practice and which in the past has been the cause of real forms of discrimination and violence. The disapproval of eugenics used with violence by a regime, as the fruit of the hatred of a race or group, is so rooted in consciences that it found a formal expression in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Despite this, there are appearing in our days troubling manifestations of this hateful practice, which present themselves with different traits. Certainly ideological and racist eugenics, which in the past humiliated man and provoked untold suffering, are not again being proposed. But a new mentality is insinuating itself that tends to justify a different consideration of life and personal dignity based on individual desire and individual rights. There is thus a tendency to privilege the capacities for work, efficiency, perfection and physical beauty to the detriment of other dimensions of existence that are not held to be valuable.

In this way the respect that is due to every human being — even in the presence of a defect in his development or a genetic illness that could manifest itself in the course of his life — is weakened, and those children whose life is judged unworthy of being lived are punished from the moment of conception.

It is necessary to reemphasize that every discrimination exercised by any power in regard to persons, peoples or ethnic groups on the basis of differences that stem from real or presumed genetic factors is an act of violence against all of humanity. What must be forcefully reemphasized is the equal dignity of every human being according to the fact itself of having life. Biological, psychological or cultural development or state of health can never become an element of discrimination. It is necessary, on the contrary, to consolidate a culture of hospitality and love that concretely testifies to solidarity with those who suffer, razing the barriers that society often erects, discriminating against those who are disabled and affected by pathologies, or worse – selecting and rejecting in the name of an abstract ideal of health and physical perfection. If man is reduced to an object of experimental manipulation from the first stage of development, that would mean that biotechnologies would surrender to the will of the stronger. Confidence in science cannot forget the primacy of ethics when human life is at stake.

I hope that your research in this sector, dear friends, will continue with due scientific care and the attention that ethical principles require in matters that are so important and decisive for the fitting development of personal existence. This is the wish with which I would like to conclude this meeting. As I invoke copious heavenly light upon your work, I affectionately impart to all of you a special apostolic blessing.

Translation by Joseph G. Trabbic