

Stem cell expert: Research does not have to harm life

By PETER FINNEY Jr.

Father Tadeusz Pacholczyk, director of education at the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, is one of those rare priests who is as comfortable comprehending the big picture – the meaning of life and the natural law – as he is explaining the microscopic picture – the mysteries of embryonic life and neuroscience.

Because of his plentiful theological and scientific degrees, the letters behind his name resemble an optometrist's eye chart. In essence, the priest-scientist is conversant in two totally different languages that often defy simultaneous translation.

"Science is a language, like Greek or Latin," said Father Pacholczyk, who will deliver a public lecture on "Stem Cells and Cloning: Understanding the Scientific Issues and the Moral Objections" Nov. 20 at 7 p.m. at Notre Dame Seminary. "In order to speak that language, you have to invest considerable time and energy to become fluent. If one can speak both languages (science and theology), one can be of great service to the mission of the church."

Father Pacholczyk (pronounced pah-HOLE-chick), a priest of the Diocese of Fall River, Mass., earned a doctorate in neuroscience from Yale University and did post-doctoral work at Harvard. He also holds four bachelor's degrees – in chemistry, biochemistry, molecular and cellular biology, and philosophy. He also spent years in laboratory research.

THE church's goal in debating the morality of embryonic stem cell research should be to use both scientific fact and the Gospel message

"in a way that hits people between the eyes," Father Pacholczyk said.

"Science is such an enormous power within our midst," Father Pacholczyk said. "We need to properly assess what it is that science offers us so that we end up using it if it is for the good and not allow it to be the power that tramples or destroys."

In his public lectures, Father Pacholczyk says he tries to simplify the language so that everyone can understand the basic moral dilemmas involved in the research.

"These issues are complex, and that can be used as a way to hide certain essential dimensions," Father Pacholczyk said. "But the ethical and moral issues are not exceedingly complex."

There is vast evidence that research on what is called "pluripotent" stem cells can be carried out "without violating the integrity of any embryo," Father Pacholczyk said.

A group of Japanese scientists recently published a paper detailing how they took an adult stem cell, treated it with chemicals or gene products and made it "go backward so it became more primitive and more powerful and indirectly became a pluripotent stem cell," Father Pacholczyk said. "No embryos were involved anywhere."

ANOTHER approach, tested recently in mice, has been to use germ cells and transmute them into pluripotent stem cells.

Father Pacholczyk said a recent misrepresentation of the scientific research by Advanced Cell Technology in Worcester, Mass., illustrates the danger involved in accepting secular media reports about new



FATHER Tadeusz Pacholczyk, the U.S. church's foremost expert on embryonic stem cell research, says the language of science is daunting but the moral issues are clear. (CNS photo by Gregory L. Tracy, The Pilot, Boston)

advances.

The press release indicated the research was done by taking one cell from an eight-cell human embryo, leaving seven cells behind that could "continue to grow as an embryo and become a baby," Father Pacholczyk said. "They also claimed the one cell they plucked off was turned directly into an embryonic stem cell. It turns out both claims were false."

Father Pacholczyk said the Advanced Cell scientists used 16 human embryos in their research "and destroyed all 16." Even if the research had done what it claimed to do, Father Pacholczyk said there would still be plenty of moral objections to that research.

"First of all, you're carrying out a nontherapeutic intervention on embryos, removing more than 10 percent of the body mass of a young human because you're interested in doing some experiment," he said. "You would never treat human patients in that way – removing parts of their bodies because you're interested in doing an experiment."

"THE PRESS release was inaccurate. The question is, who is responsible? One can almost say the scientists weren't responsible, but that is a stretch to the extent that they are making an initial summary available. You're not going to ask a PR firm to read the original research paper and summarize it for you. The issue here was that there was some kind of willful overlooking of what had actually transpired."

Father Pacholczyk said the list of diseases capable of being treated through adult stem cell research is large and growing every month.

"Research with adult stem cells has opened up the entire field of regenerative medicine in a way that it is light years ahead of clinical application of embryonic stem cells," Father Pacholczyk said. "You may throw a lot of money at embryonic stem cells, and you may come up

with some treatments in five, 10 or 15 years. But when the first one happens, it will be front page news in the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times. Advances with adult stem cells will just simply be ignored or damned with faint praise."

Father Pacholczyk said there is no federal law that prohibits using private funds for the destruction of human embryos. Some states prohibit such research, but even in heavily pro-life states such as Louisiana, there is no prohibition against embryonic stem cell research.

"That's a reminder to us that our universities are very influential," Father Pacholczyk said. "When these needs are brought before the Legislature, universities will basically send a couple of faculty members to testify and pro-life lawmakers get weak-kneed in the face of the appearance of university faculty."

Father Pacholczyk said the church needs to make clear its objections to embryonic stem cell research do not mean it is aloof and cold-hearted about the plight of those suffering with paralysis or Parkinson's Disease, especially when well-known victims such as the late Christopher Reeve garner public sympathy.

"THE FIRST thing we need to do is acknowledge the good intentions that person has to realize a cure or a treatment for a very serious disease," Father Pacholczyk said. "We all want to see people like Christopher Reeve get out of a wheelchair, but you have to immediately ask if that automatically legitimates the use of any means whatsoever."

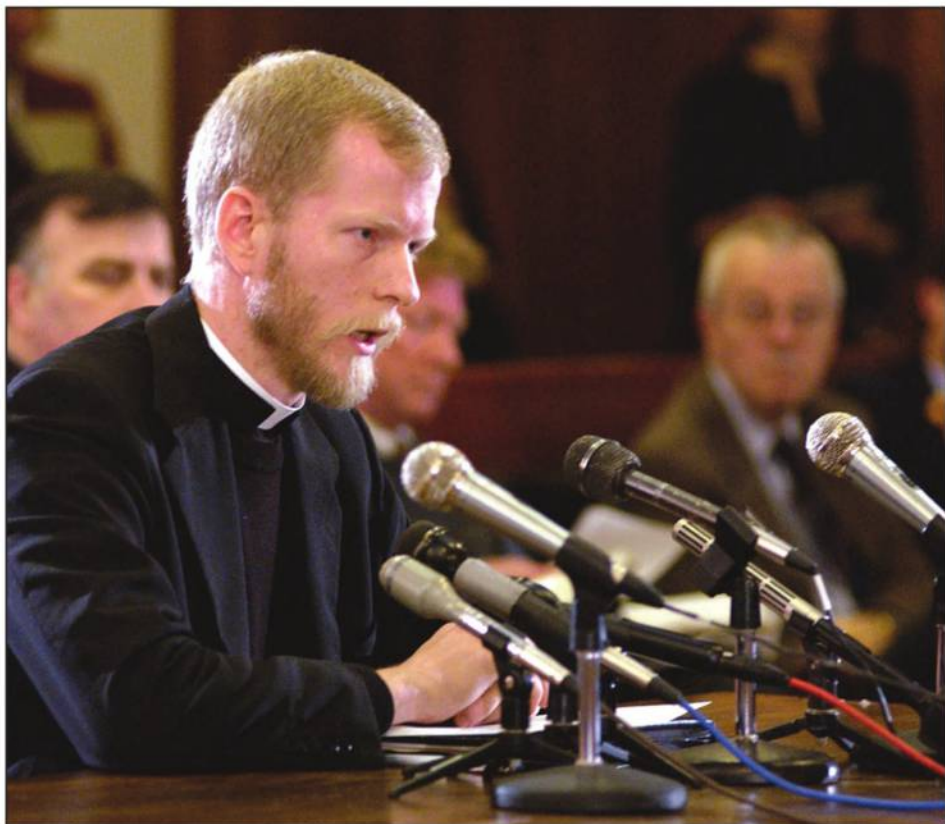
"Once we ask that question, it is clear it does not. If I had to remove some cells from a prisoner in order to cure Christopher Reeve, thereby paralyzing that prisoner, such a proposal would not be licit, no matter how much we wanted Christopher Reeve to walk again. Using illicit means is intrinsically disordered."

Despite his breadth of knowledge on the ethical dilemmas of embryonic stem cell research, Father Pacholczyk said he has been quoted only one time in the New York Times.

"Figuring out the intricacies of the journalistic flow of information is not a simple matter," he said. "I think many journalists have their preferred list of experts. When something breaks, they'll go right away to their experts and get an opinion because they're on deadline, and they don't go much further to deepen the whole discussion."

Father Pacholczyk will also hold a separate talk for priests and deacons Nov. 20 from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m.

Both the clergy and public lectures will be held at the seminary's Schulte Auditorium, 2901 S. Carrollton Ave.



THE CHURCH needs to express its objections to embryonic stem cell research in a way that makes a clear moral argument and shows compassion for persons suffering from debilitating diseases, says Father Tadeusz Pacholczyk, director of the National Catholic Bioethics Center. The scientist/priest says there have been amazing advances in adult stem cell research for possible cures. (CNS photo by Cory Silken, The Pilot, Boston)