

Faith Tidbits..
*a little food for thought
and some knowledge
about your
Catholic faith*

February 2009

This monthly series will answer questions you always wondered about or questions you never even thought to ask... all about our Catholic Faith.

If you have a question you want answered, call Diane Hardick at 633-3672.

1. Why is the Catholic Church so against stem-cell research?

The complex scientific and public policy issue of stem-cell research continues to raise serious and sensitive ethical questions. First of all, what are stem cells? They are the building blocks of the human being. They possess the ability to develop into any number of directions: a heart, a liver, a brain, etc. Stem cells offer great potential for healing, including helping regenerate heart functions. The ethical dilemmas center not on the research as such, but on the source of the stem cells, and on the steps necessary to obtain the cells.

Much of the research has focused on embryos. In the early stages of development, the cells of the human embryo are stem cells. Harvesting the cells means destroying the embryo. Here is the key ethical issue for the Church: the embryo is not potential life, it is life – life with potential, needing only months of proper environment and nourishment to be born a baby. Destruction of beginning human life undermines the value of healing others. To kill one life to heal another makes no sense. Beginning human life is an awesome gift of God. Other stem-cell research makes use of stem cells found in umbilical cord blood and in bone marrow. Some scientists have claimed that this latter research has, in fact, been much more successful.

2. Why has the Church's stand on the death penalty changed over the past few decades?

The original edition of the *Catechism* (no. 2266) stated the traditional teaching of the Church on this topic: *that public authorities have the right to punish crimes with penalties commensurate with the crime, "not excluding in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty.* A new article was added to the revised edition of the *Catechism* (no. 2267) which states the traditional position, but then adds: *"If non-lethal means are sufficient to protect and defend the security of persons, then public authorities must limit themselves to such means. Cases in which execution of the offender is necessary "are very rare, if not practically nonexistent."*

The major reasons for this change, and the subsequent stronger stand against the death penalty by the Pope and the Bishops of the United States are:

- (1) The death penalty is applied with gross inequity. Everywhere in the United States, those on death row are predominantly the poor and racial minorities.
- (2) No evidence exists that the death penalty is a deterrent to crime.
- (3) Many condemned to death have been later found innocent, due to new evidence. Can we be absolutely sure of every person's guilt or innocence before we execute them?

The United States is the only developed nation in the world which has the death penalty. We, as a nation, stand in the company of Iran and Iraq with our insistence on the death penalty. Too often plain revenge is the real motive behind wanting the death of a perpetrator of a vicious crime. In the estimation of Pope John Paul II, that is not a worthy Christian motive for any action.