

Twisting the Truth in *Dignitas Personae*: January 13, 2011

By Debi Vinnedge

Note: Because it may be confusing to follow the quotes of the various writers when compared to the actual text of the Church documents, all citations from Church teaching are highlighted in red font.

Two articles have emerged in the past month by Senior Fellow William E. May at the Culture of Life Foundation, which seem to be causing confusion and consternation for Catholics, where none existed before. Because the writer himself seems confused on Pope Benedict XVI's approved instruction, *Dignitas Personae*, it is evident that clarification is indeed warranted as Mr. May opines.

But it is not necessary to call on the Vatican to provide a clearer instruction; one simply needs to carefully read the sections in question *in their entirety*, rather than picking, choosing and omitting that which might not fit one's particular agenda.

The purpose of this writing is to provide the unambiguous answers that seem to escape both Mr. May and a handful of others who seem unable to understand or perhaps, accept the truth of what the Church has already presented. More importantly, it will ease the minds of faithful Catholics and scientists who have been deeply disturbed by these writings.

The first article published in December 2010 by the Culture of Life Foundation was a brief by Mr. May, titled *May Researchers Use "Biological Material" Unjustly Obtained?* (See <http://culture-of-life.org//content/view/684/111/>).

The second was published as a result of a query by a reader in South Carolina, by ZENIT news on January 12, 2011, titled, *Using Vaccines Obtained From Intentionally Aborted Human Embryos – Further Clarification Needed for Parents, Researchers.* (See <http://www.zenit.org/article-31437?l=english>)

Because these two articles both have the same written conclusions and are thus, intimately linked, the following discussion serves to set the record straight on just what the Church is actually teaching.

In the first article, the key question May asks the readers is, "*What should a conscientious pro-life person do if his research center agreed to use biological material obtained as a result of the intentional abortion of babies in their embryonic or fetal stages of life?*" He then rightly goes to the document that provides the answer: *Dignitas Personae*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, December 8, 2008. However, it appears his interpretation of what is clearly stated in that instruction under Sections 34 and 35 is anything but right.

May makes his first mistake by quoting only partially from Section 34 under "The use of human 'biological material' of illicit origin". He establishes the question at hand by citing from the text on the use of cell lines for research, the production of vaccines, the levels of cooperation in evil and concludes with document's exhortation that, "*It is fitting therefore to formulate general principles on the basis of which people of good conscience can evaluate and resolve situations in which they may possibly be involved on account of their professional activity.*"

However, May immediately jumps to Section 35 without acknowledging the beginning of the answer provided in the very next sentence in that same section.

Citing from *Evangelium Vitae*, it goes on to state:

“It needs to be remembered above all that the category of abortion “is to be applied also to the recent forms of intervention on human embryos which, although carried out for purposes legitimate in themselves, inevitably involve the killing of those embryos. This is the case with experimentation on embryos, which is becoming increasingly widespread in the field of biomedical research and is legally permitted in some countries... [T]he use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation constitutes a crime against their dignity as human beings who have a right to the same respect owed to a child once born, just as to every person”. [54] These forms of experimentation always constitute a grave moral disorder. [55]” (emphasis added)

Some ethicists have opined in the past that using embryonic or aborted fetal cell lines that are taken from deliberately aborted fetuses or embryos is not morally problematic since the researcher had nothing to do with the initial destruction of innocent human beings.

Perhaps this is why Mr. May chose to ignore the opening sentence in this section of *Dignitas Personae* that addresses this clearly and concisely:

“In this regard, the criterion of independence as it has been formulated by some ethics committees is not sufficient. According to this criterion, the use of “biological material” of illicit origin would be ethically permissible provided there is a clear separation between those who, on the one hand, produce, freeze and cause the death of embryos and, on the other, the researchers involved in scientific experimentation.”

Whoa – let’s stop right there for a moment and examine what the Magisterium just said versus what Mr. May wrote. The Church notes above that the “criterion of independence as it has been formulated by some ethics committees is not sufficient.” They then go on to explain that “According to this criterion” – that is the criteria formulated by “some ethics committees” - not the Vatican’s criteria - “the use of such “biological material” would be ethically permissible...”

But in an unusual twist, May obfuscates the intention of this passage by eliminating the entire actual quote that showed a clear reference to those insufficient statements made by ethics committees in the past. In doing so, he made it sound as though Pope Benedict himself said it might be permissible to use the cell lines. In fact no such thing was ever said.

No wonder faithful Catholics are confused! May continues to treat the above passage throughout his discourse as though the Vatican is allowing exceptions in certain cases for researchers using these cell lines, when clearly the exact opposite is noted in several places.

In an attempt to further confuse what the Church intended, May again omits key sentences that forbid the use of cell lines by researchers as he quotes sporadically from the instruction.

For example, he fails to mention these two key sentences in *Dignitas Personae*: (No.35, par 3)

“At times, the objection is raised that the above-mentioned considerations would mean that people of good conscience involved in research would have the duty to oppose actively all the illicit actions that take place in the field of medicine, thus excessively broadening their ethical responsibility. In reality, the duty to avoid cooperation in evil and scandal relates to their ordinary professional activities, which they must pursue in a just manner and by means of which they must give witness to the value of life by their opposition to gravely unjust laws.”
(emphasis added)

Again, instead of citing this properly, May omits the above and immediately jumps to the very next sentence, in which he again eliminates important criteria. May begins by writing, “In fact, ‘there is a duty to refuse....’”, as he continues with the text in its entirety from this paragraph.

But *Dignitas Personae* actually begins a bit differently in that sentence:

*“Therefore, it needs to be stated that (emphasis added) there is a duty to refuse to use such “biological material” even when there is no close connection between the researcher and the actions of those who performed the artificial fertilization or the abortion, or when there was no prior agreement with the centers in which the artificial fertilization took place. This duty springs from the necessity to *remove oneself*, within the area of one’s own research, *from a gravely unjust legal situation and to affirm with clarity the value of human life*. Therefore, the above-mentioned criterion of independence is necessary, but may be ethically insufficient.”*
(Note: Original text includes above quotes and italics)

It is a slight nuance, between what May wrote and what *Dignitas Personae* actually stated, but it’s an important one. The intention was to show that because of past confusion on whether one could use the cell lines or not, it was necessary to state it clearly, as was finally done in this Church instruction.

Now if May had stopped right there and explained that indeed, these cell lines clearly could not be used by the researchers, it might not have been necessary to cry “foul!” Instead, he then goes on to blur the distinctions *Dignitas Personae* made between those who use the cell lines in research and those who use vaccines produced from these cell lines, citing a 2009 article by Christian Brugger, *Strengths and Weaknesses of Dignitas Personae*.

In that article Brugger poses some rather absurd questions regarding the use of these cell lines, where he writes, “*Would this apply to an epidemiologist in 2009 doing research on the WI-38 or MRC-5 cell lines, or to vaccines derived from those lines, given that both were taken from electively aborted fetuses? The moral wrong—the grave evil of abortion—was done nearly forty-five years ago. Current material cooperation in those immoral acts is doubtlessly remote.*”

Let’s break this down because we are talking apples and oranges here.

First, epidemiologists do not use aborted fetal cell lines to conduct research; scientists in the lab might, but epidemiologists gather statistical data and do not conduct biological research.

Second, the Vatican has drawn sharp distinctions between those who conduct research using immoral cell lines and parents who use the vaccines produced from those cell lines in order to protect the health of their children. At no point do they use the fact that the abortions were done several years ago. Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Catholic teaching knows that time does not diminish the sin, nor does it lessen the evil of the act that was performed.

Third, the Vatican did not say that, “Current material cooperation in those immoral acts is doubtlessly remote,” as Brugger contends.

In fact, here is what the Pontifical Academy for Life stated on cooperation for both researchers and the parents in their 2005 dissertation, *Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Fetuses*:

For Researchers (Pages 5-6)

“In the specific case under examination, there are three categories of people who are involved in the cooperation in evil, evil which is obviously represented by the action of a voluntary abortion performed by others: a) those who prepare the vaccines using human cell lines coming from voluntary abortions; b) those who participate in the mass marketing of such vaccines; c) those who need to use them for health reasons.

Firstly, one must consider morally illicit every form of formal cooperation (sharing the evil intention) in the action of those who have performed a voluntary abortion, which in turn has allowed the retrieval of foetal tissues, required for the preparation of vaccines. Therefore, whoever - regardless of the category to which he belongs — cooperates in some way, sharing its intention, to the performance of a voluntary abortion with the aim of producing the above-mentioned vaccines, participates, in actuality, in the same moral evil as the person who has performed that abortion. (emphasis added) Such participation would also take place in the case where someone, sharing the intention of the abortion, refrains from denouncing or criticizing this illicit action, although having the moral duty to do so (passive formal cooperation).

In a case where there is no such formal sharing of the immoral intention of the person who has performed the abortion, any form of cooperation would be material, (emphasis added) with the following specifications.

As regards the preparation, distribution and marketing of vaccines produced as a result of the use of biological material whose origin is connected with cells coming from fetuses voluntarily aborted, such a process is stated, as a matter of principle, morally illicit, (emphasis added) because it could contribute in encouraging the performance of other voluntary abortions, with the purpose of the production of such vaccines.”

In fact, that last statement is exactly what has happened with new abortions and new fetal cell lines being used for future vaccines. As for the level of cooperation by parents who use the vaccines, the PAFL had a lot more to say about “remote cooperation”:

For parents and physicians who use the vaccines from aborted fetal cell lines: (Page 6)

“As regards those who need to use such vaccines for reasons of health, it must be emphasized that, apart from every form of formal cooperation, in general, doctors or parents who resort to the use of these vaccines for their children, in spite of knowing their origin (voluntary abortion), carry out a form of very remote mediate material cooperation, and thus very mild, in the performance of the original act of abortion, and a mediate material cooperation, with regard to the marketing of cells coming from abortions, and immediate, with regard to the

marketing of vaccines produced with such cells. The cooperation is therefore more intense on the part of the authorities and national health systems that accept the use of the vaccines. However, in this situation, the aspect of passive cooperation is that which stands out most. It is up to the faithful and citizens of upright conscience (fathers of families, doctors, etc.) to oppose, even by making an objection of conscience, the ever more widespread attacks against life and the "culture of death" which underlies them. From this point of view, the use of vaccines whose production is connected with procured abortion constitutes at least a mediate remote passive material cooperation to the abortion, and an immediate passive material cooperation with regard to their marketing. (emphasis added) Furthermore, on a cultural level, the use of such vaccines contributes in the creation of a generalized social consensus to the operation of the pharmaceutical industries which produce them in an immoral way."

Without question, the PAFL went to great lengths to describe the various levels of cooperation and how those levels are far more complicated than Brugger described for both parents and the researchers using these cell lines. It is both irresponsible and incredible that Brugger and May fail to either understand or acknowledge this.

Yet May continues to distort the facts by quoting from Berger who goes on to assert, *"Is a researcher's duty to refuse to work on those materials exceptionless,[sic] even when the refusal could result in harms to the researcher and to his or her family? The text indicates that it is not. It states that "grave reasons may be morally proportionate to justify the use of such 'biological material' (n. 35)"*

And while May includes it in his article, Brugger omits the real explanation that *Dignitas Personae* gave for such criteria. The "grave reasons that may be morally proportionate" are directed toward parents who might need to use the vaccines for their children – not the researchers!

Here is the sentence from *Dignitas Personae*, which immediately follows why these "grave reasons may be morally proportionate":

"Thus, for example, danger to the health of children could permit parents to use a vaccine which was developed using cell lines of illicit origin, while keeping in mind that everyone has the duty to make known their disagreement and to ask that their healthcare system make other types of vaccines available. Moreover, in organizations where cell lines of illicit origin are being utilized, the responsibility of those who make the decision to use them is not the same as that of those who have no voice in such a decision."

Note, the "responsibility of those who make the decision to use them" applies to the researchers, whereas "those who have no voice in such a decision" are the parents and physicians who use the vaccines produced from cell lines of illicit origin.

Without question, there is no "exception" anywhere in *Dignitas Personae* for researchers as it states:

"Therefore, it needs to be stated that there is a duty to refuse to use such "biological material" even when there is no close connection between the researcher and the actions of those who performed the artificial fertilization or the abortion, or when there was no prior agreement with the centers in which the artificial fertilization took place."

While this portion in and of itself is enough to explain the Vatican's position on researchers using these cell lines Brugger and May continue to act very mystified and confused as to what the Church says on using these cell lines, opining, "*But the Instruction, following the 2005 Pontifical Academy for Life text, "Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Fetuses," only mentions parents consenting for grave reasons to their children's immunization. Where does this leave morally conscientious researchers?"*"

Now certainly both May and Brugger read the documents in their entirety didn't they? Then why act as though additional clarity is still needed? But just in case anyone still has any doubts after all that has been presented here from these Vatican documents, this is what "morally conscientious researchers" are left to consider according to the PAFL:

"However, there is another aspect to be considered, and that is the form of passive material cooperation which would be carried out by the producers of these vaccines, if they do not denounce and reject publicly the original immoral act (the voluntary abortion), and if they do not dedicate themselves together to research and promote alternative ways, exempt from moral evil, for the production of vaccines for the same infections. Such passive material cooperation, if it should occur, is equally illicit."(Page 6)

Regardless of Brugger and May's personal opinions, neither the PAFL dissertation nor *Dignitas Personae* left any wiggle room for the researchers.

But May seems to think otherwise, concluding that the "exceptions" in *Dignitas Personae* for parents must also apply to the researchers. Further, May contends solid prolife researchers could tolerate the evils involved since using the cell lines could provide great benefits to the unborn as he writes, "*I think that if the research is the kind that reasonably promises to provide a great benefit to unborn human subjects who are vulnerable to specific kinds of pathologies from which the research will protect them, as was the case of the research to which Brugger refers, then the kind of exception allowed for by "Dignitas Personae," (No. 35) is present.*"

Here May seems to forget that, without question, the end does not justify the means! As Pope Paul VI noted in *Humanae Vitae*, part II, citing Rom.3:8, "*It is not licit, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil so that good may follow therefrom.*" And for the casual reader who may not know the history of the aborted fetal cell lines in question, those abortions were performed in conjunction with the researchers for the sole purpose of viral vaccine production, as noted by the scientists involved.

(See www.cogforlife.org/vaccinetruth.htm)

In addition, a previous writing from the Pontifical Academy for Life was cited by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops regarding the use of embryonic cell lines in response to President Bush's August 2001 decision to only provide Federal Funding for those cell lines in which embryos had already been destroyed.

In that document, *Declaration on the Production and the Scientific and Therapeutic Use of Human Embryonic Stem Cells* (Pontifical Academy for Life, 2000), the question was asked:

"Is it morally licit to use ES [embryonic stem] cells, and the differentiated cells obtained from them, which are supplied by other researchers or are commercially obtainable? The answer is negative, since: Prescinding from the participation – formal or otherwise – in the morally illicit

intention of the principal agent, the case in question entails a proximate material cooperation in the production and manipulation of human embryos on the part of those producing or supplying them" (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, p. 17).

While the PAFL does not set doctrine as would a Papal Encyclical or an official instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, clearly both the bishops in the US and the Vatican made it implicitly clear that using these cell lines for research is illicit. *Dignitas Personae* simply codified that.

Yet incredibly, May continues to think there are exceptions for researchers that failed to make it into previous Papal writings and contends that, *"In all likelihood this kind of exception may simply not have occurred to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in preparing the 1987 instruction Donum Vitae."*

Such a bold statement by a lay individual to assert his thinking as superior to that of the Magisterium is to put it mildly, disappointing. What both May and Brugger fail to understand is that there are many scientists who have taken these important Church teachings to heart and are turning toward moral research, despite the hardships it might impose on their careers.

One such person is Dr Theresa Deisher, a Catholic adult stem cell scientist who formed AVM Biotechnology as a direct response to the 2005 PAFL document in which they strongly stated:

"Therefore, doctors and fathers of families have a duty to take recourse to alternative vaccines (if they exist), putting pressure on the political authorities and health systems so that other vaccines without moral problems become available. They should take recourse, if necessary, to the use of conscientious objection with regard to the use of vaccines produced by means of cell lines of aborted human foetal origin. Equally, they should oppose by all means (in writing, through the various associations, mass media, etc.) the vaccines which do not yet have morally acceptable alternatives, creating pressure so that alternative vaccines are prepared, which are not connected with the abortion of a human foetus, and requesting rigorous legal control of the pharmaceutical industry producers."(Page 7)

As a brilliant researcher with 23 patents to her name, Dr Deisher knew without question what this meant for her career. She left the established commercial pharmaceutical enterprises to form the **only** pro-life biomedical research organization of its kind in the United States that is 100%, faithful to the Magisterial teachings of the Church.

In a near prophetic move, the Directors at AVM Biotech formed a non-profit division Sound Choice Pharmaceutical Institute (SCPI) in 2008, only months before the release of *Dignitas Personae*. They recently launched their TOPP program – Training Opportunities for Pro-Life Professionals - where they are providing hands on experience for like-minded pro-life undergraduate and graduate scientists.

There are other companies and organizations that have been formed by prolife scientists, businessmen and women also intending to respond to the Church's call by trying to distance themselves from research that exploits or profits from the destruction of innocent human beings. However, AVM Biotechnology stands out as the only of these companies who has openly pledged not to use morally illicit materials at any time, just as the Magisterium has instructed.

The Church has clearly laid down the law and “dropped the gauntlet”. And the fact is that many morally minded scientists, physicians and consumers are ready and willing to pick up that gauntlet in faithful obedience to Her doctrinal instruction. It is as clear to them as it is to this writer.

While the trend in biomedical research has moved toward using these immorally obtained cell lines as an industry standard, AVM Biotech professes, “We know there is a better way.” And they are backing that up with several exciting new developments that have the ability to completely transform the future of scientific research and potential vaccines.

Parents want to immunize their children and scientists want to be able to work within their professions, without violating their consciences or what the Magisterium has taught them. However, the ability to reach that ideal is hampered when influential Catholic leaders either knowingly or unknowingly misconstrue those Church teachings. Not only does this result in unnecessary mental gymnastics of conscience, it has the potential to lead well-intentioned people into error.

As was noted in the introduction of *Dignitas Personae* (No.3):

“The present Instruction is addressed to the Catholic faithful and to all who seek the truth.”

It is essential therefore that this truth is understood clearly, protected fiercely and embraced willingly by all Catholics as the Magisterium intended.

Note: The entire text of Dignitas Personae can be found on the Vatican website at:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html

The author Debi Vinnedge is Executive Director of Children of God for Life, to whom the Pontifical Academy for Life responded in their 2005 dissertation. The organization has fought for the rights of parents and the production of moral alternatives for the past 11 years.

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