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Monkeys cloned from a gene-edited macaque with circadian rhythm disorders are seen in a la

Monkeys cloned from a gene-edited macaque with circadian rhythm disorders are seen in a lab at the Institute of Neuroscience of Chinese Academy of Sciences in Shanghai Jan. 18, 2019. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's decision to lift animal testing requirements prompts Catholic reflection on what the faith teaches about our relationship to animals and responsibilities to them, particular when it comes to research. (OSV News/Reuters/China Daily)



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Hailed as a victory by animal welfare groups, new federal legislation now eliminates a long-standing requirement that investigational drugs must be tested on animals before humans receive them in drug trials.

Instead, the FDA Modernization Act 2.0, bipartisan legislation signed into law by President Joe Biden Dec. 29, 2022, now allows alternate testing methods, including micro fluidic chips, miniature tissue models and artificial intelligence computer models, to contribute to the safety and effectiveness data required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The development reflects the Catholic Church's teaching on care of God's creation — evoking questions about both the treatment of animals, and the role of machine learning in medical advances.

"We are obligated to treat animals with 'kindness' — a concept in Catholic thought which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, not some anodyne or milquetoast 'niceness,'" Charles Camosy, professor of medical humanities at the Creighton University School of Medicine and author of "For Love of Animals: Christian Ethics, Consistent Action," told OSV News.

"As stewards of God's creation, we have an obligation to do justice to animals according to the way God created them," said Camosy, a Catholic moral theologian. "Obviously many practices in medical testing make a mockery of God's will in the created order for animals. To the extent that there will be less of this it is very much in line with the teaching of the church."

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Paragraphs 2415–2418 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church outline the necessity of respecting moral imperatives, the integrity of creation, the use of animals for food, clothing and — "if it remains within reasonable limits and contributes to caring for or saving human lives" — medical experimentation.

"The catechism uses the language of justice: We owe animals kindness," Camosy said. "These words are chosen carefully and Catholics should heed them."

Indeed, the catechism is quite specific that "It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly."

Millions of animals are used in laboratories for testing each year. Although a precise figure is hard to come by, various groups concerned about animal welfare estimate potentially 100 million animals are subjected to testing around the world each year.

In the U.S., Stanford Medicine qualifies that "95% of all animals necessary for biomedical research in the United States are rodents — rats and mice especially bred for laboratory use."

In 2019, The New York Times reported the Environmental Protection Agency is confident enough of animal testing alternatives to reduce chemical testing on mammals 30% by 2025, and completely eliminate it by 2035.

However, animal testing has not been banned by the FDA Modernization Act 2.0.

A statue of St. Francis of Assisi, patron of animals and the environment, is pictured in a garde

A statue of St. Francis of Assisi, patron of animals and the environment, is pictured in a garden at a community in Austin, Texas, Sept. 9, 2021. (OSV News/CNS file/Bob Roller)

"Ethically speaking, such testing tends to be critical as a means of establishing safety and assuring that human beings are not improperly treated as 'experimental subjects' or 'guinea pigs,'" said Fr. Tad Pacholczyk, director of education and ethicist at the National Catholic Bioethics Center.

Safeguarding human dignity is a key ethical concern, Pacholczyk noted, adding that animals "can be subject to experimentation when there are proportionately serious reasons for doing so." Animal welfare, Pacholczyk explained, "means that we recognize that animals can be used for reasonable purposes, but should not be abused."

One proportionate reason cited by Pacholczyk is that "such animal testing can offer the best or sometimes the only way to achieve a satisfactory level of certainty ahead of shifting over to human clinical trials." He predicts reliable alternatives may diminish animal testing, but not eliminate it.

Jesuit Fr. Christopher Steck, a professor of theology at Georgetown University and author of "All God's Animals: A Catholic Theological Framework for Animal Ethics," told OSV News that while researching a book, he was intrigued by a comment St. John Paul II made in an early 1980s address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The pontiff first recognized the traditional premise that animals serve us — but then, Steck recalled, "he goes on to commend the scientists for their efforts to reduce the amount of experimentation on animals, and says something to the effect of, 'That is

God's plan' — the plan for the well-being of creation."

This is notable, said Steck, because "it was a statement by a pope saying that the work to alleviate animal suffering is a good task." St. John Paull II acknowledged the licit use of animals in research — yet he was, Steck emphasized, "encouraging us, as much as possible, to diminish that — and hopefully someday free ourselves from the need to use animals for experiments."

Acceptance of animals' capacity to suffer has gradually shifted attitudes, Steck observed. Contemporary science, he said, has revealed "how cognitively sophisticated animals are — and with that, the knowledge that they can suffer. This brought about a new awareness of our responsibility toward non-human creatures."

Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk's Neuralink is reportedly under federal investigation for cruelty during lab monkey testing of a brain-implanted device designed to merge the human intellect with artificial intelligence, ostensibly to assist people with disabilities. The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a nonprofit dedicated to ending animal cruelty, alleges in its report on Neuralink's animal tests "a pattern of extreme suffering and staff negligence."

Musk is known to be a proponent of "transhumanism," the idea that human beings should have their bodies updated with computer technology, stating in 2018 the long-term goal of Neuralink is "to achieve a symbiosis with artificial intelligence" and avoid the fate of monkeys and other primates displaced by human evolution.

The allegations of animal abuse surrounding Musk's transhumanist project underscores the vivid moral warning made by Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*': "Our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings."