

Embryonic stem cell research in Europe

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 28, 2006 All Things Catholic

Embryonic stem cell research is shaping up as a critical "wedge issue" in American politics this November, and it's no less volatile in Europe, where the European Parliament recently approved a measure theoretically liberalizing such research, but with enough unanswered questions to make its impact as yet unclear.

Foreign ministers from E.U. nations approved a motion in Brussels this week that finances embryonic stem cell research for the period 2007-2013, over strong opposition from staunchly Catholic nations such as Poland and Malta.

The official Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, editorialized on July 26 that the move is "a macabre product of a badly understood sense of progress."

The bill, however, has two strings attached: first, the funding cannot be used for research to clone human beings; second, embryos cannot be created for the purpose of being destroyed for research.

According to its promoters, the result means that only already-existing "surplus" embryos generated as part of artificial fertility procedures, which would otherwise be destroyed, can be used for EU-funded research.

The Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, however, suggested that the distinction is largely cosmetic, arguing that it still involves the E.U. in an "illicit commerce" in embryos. The official newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference, *L'Avvenire* said the result is "poisoned by hypocrisy," and suggested that it will open the door to wider trade in embryos.

The Commission of Bishops' Conferences of the European Community issued a statement asserting that "the instrumentalization of embryos for the ends of research, which is to say their destruction, is not acceptable," and said the issue is a question of "the defense of human dignity."

The outcome in the E.U. was hardly unanimous; while Italy, Luxembourg and Slovenia dropped their objections once a restriction to existing stem cell lines was added, Poland, Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia and Austria refused to sign the agreement, insisting that no such research will be carried out within their borders regardless of the availability of E.U. funds.

"My government, my parliament, my public opinion and my own conscience oblige me to reject the proposal," said Polish Foreign Minister Michal Sewerynski.

The E.U. also struggled with the question of a "cut-off date," meaning a period of time after which embryonic stem cells can be declared no longer viable for implantation and hence available for research. In the end, ministers seemed inclined to create a panel of scientists and experts to consider the issue, but no decision was

taken.

Italy's center-left government initially opposed the measure but eventually signed on, citing its restrictive nature. Even so, critics called upon Catholic members of the center-left coalition to rebel, hoping that prominent Catholics such as Paola Binetti, a senator and Opus Dei member, would press the government to fall back in line with Poland and the other European nations backing an absolute ban.

With the most recent continent-wide polls showing 59 percent support for embryonic stem cell research, positions seem to be hardening on both sides. Influential Catholic leaders in Poland, Italy and elsewhere are privately voicing the hope that Benedict XVI will rally his troops on the issue with a public, and pointed, intervention in the European debate.

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Source URL (retrieved on 07/23/2017 - 04:36): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/embryonic-stem-cell-research-europe>