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I read section one of the book, God with Us, critical issues in Christian life and faith by Fr. John Breck, which is entitled “Moral Issues”. This section examines the Orthodox Church’s views on current moral issues in our society including abortion, stem cell research, and many more. The reading is somewhat wordy for teens, so keeping with the theme of “Sanctity of Life” I summarized the parts that refer to human life, abortion, stem cell research, etc. Some of what I have written consists of direct quotes from the book, but most of it consists of simplified summaries of the book. The title of each part is the title of the specific part in the book. I did not use every section because only parts of the section pertain to the idea of “Sanctity of Life”. As I read the book, I asked myself the commonly asked questions so many teens ask themselves, their peers, and their teachers, *which are in italicized and bold print*. I answered the questions to the best of my ability using the book.

In Christ,
Christopher Shadid

The Beginning of Human Life

What is human life? This is the first question we must ask ourselves when discussing anything regarding life. Obviously taking a human life away is wrong, especially in the eyes of the Orthodox Church, but ***when does “life” begin? At what stage of development are the cells that make up a body considered human?***

Many people believe in “delayed animation” theories:

Some people, including many “pro-life” Christians, will acknowledge the human *potential* of the early embryo, but will not acknowledge its human status while the embryo moves through the fallopian tubes on its way to implantation in the wall of the uterus. They think this should be called a “pre-embryo”. At this stage, the embryo can twin and even recombine, and each cell is characterized by “totipotency”, which means each cell can develop into a complete individual being. The lack of distinctively human or personal characteristics causes these people to not recognize this “pre-embryo” as a human being.

Others say the embryo cannot be considered human because the nervous system has not yet formed.

Some say the fetus is not truly human and is not a person until it is born.

Some say a newborn child must prove itself worthy of being a “person” by having good health, potential intelligence, a capacity for meaningful relationships, and no physical defects. This theory would claim that people with Down syndrome, autism, or physical disabilities are not human beings.

So how does the Orthodox Church feel about this?

The Orthodox Church believes in “immediate animation”, meaning that human life begins with the formation of the zygote (when the sperm meets the egg). The “delayed animation” perspectives have been rejected by the Orthodox Church since at least the fourth century:

St. Basil the Great (†379) said that abortion of any point of pregnancy is murder “and we do not ask whether the fetus was formed or unformed” (*Canonical Letters* 2 and 8).

Again, the question arises, “Even at fertilization, is the zygote ‘personal’?” Can a one-celled, or eight-celled, or even an implanting embryo be given the status of “person”?

The answer is yes. Genetic uniqueness is only the physical part of life, not taking into account the more important reality, which is creation of a spiritual being in which soul and body are thoroughly integrated with each other. We are created in the image and likeness of God. The created being is “personal” not only because it has the capacity to develop into a complete human being, but because at every stage of human existence it bears the image of the *personal* God. A person is *always* an image of God, whether that person is an embryo or a terminally ill patient in a coma. If someone were in a coma or had Alzheimer’s disease, would we still consider that being a “person”? Even though that being cannot take care of him/herself? From this perspective there is no difference between a terminally ill “being” and a fetus. Therefore, since we are all made in God’s image and likeness, no matter what stage of existence a “being” is in, one is a “person”.

Even though our eyes may view an embryo as some tissue with no more value than a single hair or a mole, the Church’s view of “life from the beginning” has always held that God, and not us, determines authentic “personhood”. He brings human life into existence and grants it life. This status is God’s love for His human creature at every stage of growth. It may sound different to say that God loves an embryo, but it has always been known by the Orthodox Church, and by countless pregnant women as well.

Manipulation of the Human Person

We know how the Church feels about abortion, but what about stem cell research? What about cloning?

Embryonic stem cell research began in 1999, and the goal is to create every tissue and organ in the human body. There is also pressure now to patent human genes (segments of DNA) to build new organs to replace old ones, eliminating various genetic defects, and the creation of “designer babies” with pre-selected characteristics including, through cloning, another person’s genetic make-up.

Where does the Orthodox Church stand on this issue, which involves manipulation of human life at its most basic level?

There are no Scriptural or patristic teachings that speak to this direct issue, but the Church has a very clear vision pertaining to the meaning and value of the human *person*.

The idea that every person is made in the “image and likeness of God” means that every person is “in communion” with God. The human person is not an isolated entity but a member of a community – that is, the community of the Church, which is the Body Jesus Christ.

The Orthodox Church has always understood the eternal value of the human person. The primary purpose of human existence is to glorify God through our struggles, and enter into the eternal and joyful communion with the Holy Trinity in Heaven.

What does this mean in regard to stem cell research, cloning, and the manipulation of human embryos?

It means that no manipulation of the human person (on any level) is acceptable unless that manipulation is for strictly therapeutic purposes that will serve the best interested of the person concerned. This excludes experiments with human embryos (who in God’s eyes are human persons, not just blobs of tissues), and it excludes the patenting of human genes for commercial ends (cloning).

What has the Orthodox Church said about these issues?

In 1998, the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America called for a stop of human cloning experiments. Renewed in 2001, the bishops’ condemned embryonic stem cell research and human cloning in general.

Ova for Sale

What does the Church say about selling one's ova or sperm so that others, who may be infertile, can naturally have their own children?

Many people feel this is a good thing, because it enables infertile couples to be able to have their own children. It seems just, fair, and politically correct. ***But what does the Orthodox Church say?***

The Orthodox Church's basic rule of thumb is that there should be no "third party" in the work of procreation. Some people think this means not using gynecologists, obstetricians, and midwives. However, this rule of thumb rejects any procedure involving a third party's genetic material – sperm or ova.

*To some Orthodox this also excludes artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization, but that is another issue.

The Church also rejects surrogate mothering (women who agree to bear a child for another couple). The reason for this is because of the sexual act that leads to procreation.

*To procreate means to produce, to bring into being. This is why the Orthodox Church views the entire process as "procreation" and not "reproduction". Copy machines reproduce; people procreate.

Procreation involves participation in God's ongoing work of creation. He relies on the loving relationship between a husband and wife (not unmarried, homosexual, or other) because their loving union is spiritual. This type of relationship is created within the Church where the man and woman receive God's blessing to make a formal, public commitment that begins with the sacrament of marriage and continues into eternity.

What about when a couple cannot have a child?

The ability to bear children is a gift from God. If a couple is not able to do this, they should accept this inability as an expression of God's will, and should consider adoption.

Will Human Clones Have Souls?

Great Britain has legalized human cloning, and surely other countries will follow. Considering clones are not created naturally by a man and a woman, the question arises: ***Will these clones have souls?***

Some people, including at least one bishop, argue that human clones will not have souls because the embryo was not conceived by an act of love.

This is wrong though, considering many children are conceived by unloving acts. This argument would suggest that every child conceived by rape, incest, violence, or indifference does not have a soul.

We must first ask ourselves the question: ***What is the soul?***

According to the Bible, a person does not “have” a soul. In other words, the soul is not a separate entity that becomes part of the separate body at conception. The human person is a “living being”, which means a “living soul”. Even though we speak of the “separation of soul and body” at physical death, the soul is still not a separate entity from the body. It is distinct from the “flesh”, which “is dust and returns to dust”. In other words, we do not “have” a soul; we “are” soul.

Now that we have determined that human beings “are” souls, we can ask: ***Would clones “be” souls (not “have” them)?***

The answer is ***yes***. If we compare clones to biological twins, we can see that clones are fully human, personal, and “ensouled” as a child conceived naturally.

When a mother gives birth to a single child or identical twins, she gives birth to one or more human beings with souls. We know that identical twins are not always “identical” because our personal identity is determined by more than just genetic material. We are shaped by our environments, parents, friends, etc... Since clones only share the same DNA of the original person, they will not necessarily develop into the same exact human beings as the original. Each cell is “totipotent”, which means each cell is able to form a complete human being, and sometimes these cells combine. Clones will not necessarily be identical to the original person, as they can be shaped by many other factors, including their genetic makeup.

Abortion: Tragic and Inevitable

Are there any exceptions when abortion is OK in the eyes of the Church?

Yes. The Orthodox Church generally has only one exception when abortion is justified, and that is when the continued pregnancy endangers the life of the mother. Even this allowance can be questioned, but due to the mother's existing relationships with other members of the family (as a wife, mother of other children, etc...) this is the one exception where it is acceptable to abort the child. However, even this requires repentance because a life was lost.

What about rape, incest, or when the child will have genetic defects?

Many Christians feel abortion is acceptable when the conception is a result of rape, incest, or the child will have genetic defects, but the Orthodox Church has not condoned abortion in these cases suggesting adoption be considered. Studies have shown that, in general, rape and incest victims, with the proper love and support, can bear the child, and if necessary, give it up for adoption. This offers life to the child, which is God's plan for every human being.

What does the Orthodox Church say about serious genetic defects?

A child is a gift from God to the parents to be protected, nurtured, and loved, no matter what "defects" the child bears. Some defects are so severe that an abortion may be necessary to protect the mother's life. If the child has life-threatening genetic defects or suffers from incurable conditions, such as anencephaly, which will result in death, then everything should be done to ensure the child will die with as much love and comfort as possible. We need to remember that our children do not belong to us. They belong to God.

Does the Orthodox Church condemn women who get an abortion?

Unfortunately, there will always be abortions, as there always have been. However we must not completely put the mother at fault, as we need to remember the father's role in abortions. The Orthodox Church does not condemn women or men who decide to get abortions, as the God loves everybody. We are taught to love everyone – remember the familiar saying, "Hate the sin, love the sinner".

We also need to be careful not to judge anyone else. God will judge us all on Judgment Day. Our role is to inform, guide, and support with compassion anyone who experiences a moral crisis.