

WHEN DOES LIFE BEGIN?

55. At conception or fertilisation, the fusion of the gametes from each parent produces a new biological individual, a cell with a completely new genetic identity. From the beginning, the embryonic human exists within a network of relationships: as the offspring of a mother and a father and as the gift of God the creator. Each embryo is a living being, possessing the dynamic potential to develop, first inside the womb and then outside.

56. The qualities we think of as being most distinctively human do not show themselves until much later in life. Babies are human beings before they can walk and talk, even though many of their abilities have not yet become fully apparent. With an embryo we are considering the very earliest stages of human development, but the principle is the same. The human embryo should therefore be regarded as 'not a potential human being but a human being with potential' (*Abortion and the Right to Life*, 1980, paragraph 12).

57. In many different places and using many different images, the Scriptures bear witness to the involvement of God in the origin of each human being in the womb. God creates our innermost being, knits us together in our mother's womb. The Scriptures show God calling, naming and setting apart those he has chosen even while they are still in the womb: Jacob in the womb of Rebecca, Samuel in the womb of Hannah, John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth. When Mary was told that she would conceive and bear the Son of the Most High she went in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth. There she was greeted as 'the mother of the Lord' (*Luke 1:43*). For nine months, the Lord dwelt in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

58. From the first century, Christians have recognised the human being that God is forming in the womb as sacred and inviolable. The Church's stance has remained unchanged throughout the centuries: any attack on the embryo, however young, has always been regarded as a serious sin against God.

59. Pope John Paul II has reiterated the teaching that 'the human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception' (*The Gospel of Life*, paragraph 60).

60. Some people cast doubt on the status of the human embryo because, in the normal course of events, many embryos fail to implant and are lost. The existence of spontaneous embryo loss should not lead us to the conclusion that healthy embryos are also expendable.

61. A more perplexing question has been raised about the status of the embryo in relation to identical twins. Occasionally a human embryo will divide within the first few days of development and produce twins. Nevertheless, there is no contradiction here. If one human embryo gives rise to two human embryos, this is an instance of one living being giving rise to two living beings, something not unknown elsewhere in nature. The process of twinning does not contradict the fact that the human embryo is human.

QUESTIONS

Is the embryo a 'potential human being' or a 'human being with potential'? Discuss

Are the young more open to the pro-life message than the two immediate previous generations? Discuss

Is the emphasis on 'fertility control' being bombarded at the young in secondary schools engendering a negative impact towards fertility in general and family life in particular? Discuss

God infuses the person with a soul at the moment of conception. Discuss