

# Church Ministries / Commissions

## Medical/Ethics Commission

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	<b>Dr. Al Rossi</b>
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## Accomplishments/Progress Since the 13th All-American Council

The Medical-Ethics Commission keeps abreast of the latest developments in medical science, bioethics, and related fields on behalf of and in an effort to advise the Holy Synod of Bishops. The commission also provides resources and recommendations on contemporary medical and ethical issues as needs arise.

The last report of this commission was submitted in July 2004. During that year I was in discussion with Dr. Al Rossi regarding his SCOBA paper on homosexuality and same-sex unions, and with Dr. Terry Orr-Weaver on the question of the status of the pre-implantation embryo. These are areas of primary importance for us today, given the current pressures in this country toward legalizing same-sex marriage, and toward acceptance of medical procedures involving manipulation of human embryos, including human cloning.

There is a great deal of discussion currently going on in both of these areas, and it is not yet possible to provide answers to some of the most pressing issues.

With regard to *same-sex* unions: Dr. Rossi drafted a very thoughtful paper on homosexuality in response to a SCOBA request for a statement that addresses the problem of same-sex unions. Some readers have urged him to limit his reflection to that particular issue, rather than attempt to address homosexuality in general.

*Questions that seem to me to be important include the following:*

We have traditionally held that overt sexual expression is appropriate only in the context of a monogamous, heterosexual conjugal union. Therefore we hold that *marriage* must be limited to the union of one man and one woman. May we, as Orthodox Christians, nevertheless make a distinction between same-sex unions and same-sex marriage? Is it theologically and pastorally responsible to reject the notion of such “marriages,” yet accept civil unions, whose purpose is to promote fidelity within the couple, preserve rights to inheritance, etc., and to protect the well-being and interests of any children the couple may have adopted? Or must we hold that no such unions are acceptable under any circumstances, because they involve active homosexual relations? And if the latter, then what does this imply about our pastoral approach to those who are already engaged in such unions (unofficially, they exist in many of our Orthodox parishes)?

Is it possible, in other words, to preserve our traditional rejection of homosexual behavior, yet accept, by “economia,” some form of same-sex union for the reasons just stated? And if not, what attitude should we adopt toward those members of our parishes who are engaged in such unions and wish to receive Holy Communion? Do they ipso facto excommunicate themselves? And what would be an appropriate pastoral approach to reintegrate them into the Church community? (It is perhaps simplistic to say merely that they must repent, end their union, and live an entirely celibate life. The reality is that there are many “active” homosexuals in our Orthodox parishes, as there are singles whose sexual activity falls into the category of “fornication.” It seems that we have something of a double standard in the way we approach - or ignore - heterosexual behavior while we condemn, to the point of excommunication, homosexual

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behavior.)

With regard to the *status of the embryo*: *The Orthodox Church* newspaper last year published an article I wrote on the question of “immediate” or “delayed” animation. As I tried to indicate in a letter I had previously sent to commission members, this is a crucial issue that needs to be resolved if we are to speak responsibly to recent developments in the field of bio-medical technology.

There can be no doubt, theologically or scientifically, that an individual human being exists from the time the embryo is implanted in the uterine wall and the primitive neural streak appears, some ten to twelve days after fertilization. The question at issue concerns the theological and biological status of the so-called “pre-embryo,” prior to implantation. If animation (in theological terms, “ensoulment”) occurs with fertilization (this signifies “immediate” animation), then we must hold that individual human life begins at that point, and consequently the pre-implantation embryo is inherently sacred, worthy of full legal and moral protection. If, however, the pre-implantation embryo is, as many embryologists hold, a mass of undifferentiated cells, then that embryo can be considered (more or less like the gametes prior to fertilization) as *potential* human life, the essential *substratum* of human existence, but not an individual or personal being as such. In this latter case, animation (ensoulment) would occur with implantation, and that would mark the true beginning of human life.

In the latter case, the notion of “conception” would be redefined to express not a “moment” but a *process*, one that is complete only with implantation. Also in that case, there would be far less moral objection to manipulating the pre-implantation embryo, thus allowing for *in vitro* fertilization, the harvesting of embryonic stem cells, and possibly cloning (nuclear transfer to create a genetically identical individual) for therapeutic - but not for reproductive - purposes. These uses of the embryo would have to be regarded as abuses, however - and morally impermissible - if animation is in fact immediate, that is, if individual human life actually begins with creation of the zygote.

Dr. Orr-Weaver has accepted to explore this issue in the appropriate literature. She has proven to be of great importance to us, given her expertise and experience, and I am very grateful she has accepted to be a member of the committee. We will be continuing our dialogue in this area once she returns to the US following her sabbatical in Greece.

During the past year no requests were submitted to the Medical-Ethics Committee by the Holy Synod, so there is nothing to report in that regard. I have, however, continued to participate to some degree in the SCOBA Commission on Social and Ethical Problems (although their meetings usually fall at times when I am in Europe).

I continue to teach courses twice a year, in Bioethics and Patristic Exegesis, at the St. Sergius Institute in Paris, as well as in various theological faculties in Romania (especially Cluj, Alba Iulia, and Sibiu). As president of the Association Orthodoxe d'Etudes Bioéthiques (Paris), I am involved in dialogue with ethicists in France, Greece, Russia, and elsewhere concerning issues such as those mentioned above, plus matters of sexuality, euthanasia, palliative care, and various forms of addictions.

Together with my wife, Lyn, I recently completed a manuscript that is being published by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, entitled *Stages on Life's Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*. It focuses on bioethical issues from a theological and pastoral perspective: sexuality and marriage, the use and abuse of human embryos, care for the newborn (and especially handicapped) child, dysfunction and addictive family systems, the mystery of death, and care for the terminally ill. The book should appear toward the end of 2005.

My other activities include a keynote lecture on bioethical challenges, given to priests of the Antiochian Archdiocese in July 2004 (subsequently published in *Again* magazine); a similar lecture delivered at the St. John the Baptist Conference in England on August 8 (with Bishops Kallistos Ware and Basil Osborne); and a week-long course in bioethical issues given (together with my wife) in February 2005, to the Antiochian clergy of their Western Diocese at the invitation of Bishop Joseph.

Finally, I continue to serve as a consultant in the area of medical ethics for laypersons and clergy who spend time at our St. Silouan Retreat House in South Carolina, or who contact me by email or telephone. I continue as well to write two columns each month for the OCA web site, often dealing with bioethical issues.