



Office of the President

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Cardinal Francis George, OMI
Archbishop of Chicago

January 16, 2009

The Honorable Barack Obama
President-elect
Presidential Transition Team
Washington, D.C. 20270

Dear Mr. President-elect,

I recently wrote to assure you of the prayers of the Catholic Bishops of the United States for your service to our nation, and to outline issues of special concern to us as we seek to work with your Administration and the new Congress to serve the common good.

I am writing today on a matter that could introduce significant negative and divisive factors into our national life, at a time when we need to come together to address the serious challenges facing our people. I expect that some want you to take executive action soon to reverse current policies against government-sponsored destruction of unborn human life. I urge you to consider that this could be a terrible mistake -- morally, politically, and in terms of advancing the solidarity and well-being of our nation's people.

During the campaign, you promised as President to represent all the people and respect everyone's moral and religious viewpoints. You also made several statements about abortion. On one occasion, when asked at what point a baby has human rights, you answered in effect that you do not have a definite answer. And you spoke often about a need to reduce abortions.

The Catholic Church teaches that each human being, at every moment of biological development from conception to natural death, has an inherent and fundamental right to life. We are committed not only to reducing abortion, but to making it unthinkable as an answer to unintended pregnancy. At the same time, I think your remarks provide a basis for common ground.

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Uncertainty as to when human rights begin provides no basis for compelling others to *violate* their conviction that these rights exist from the beginning. After all, those people may be right. And if the goal is to reduce abortions, that will not be achieved by involving the government in expanding and promoting abortions.

The **regulation to protect conscience rights in health care** issued last month by the Bush administration is the subject of false and misleading criticisms. It does not reach out to expand the rights of pro-life health professionals, but is a long-overdue measure for implementing three statutes enacted by Congress over the last 35 years. Many criticizing the new rule have done so without being aware of this legal foundation – but widespread ignorance of a longstanding federal law protecting basic civil rights is among the good reasons for more visibly implementing it. An Administration committed to faithfully implementing and enforcing the laws of the United States will want to retain this common-sense regulation, which explicitly protects the right of health professionals who favor *or* oppose abortion to serve the basic health needs of their communities. Suggestions that government involvement in health care will be aimed at denying conscience, or excluding Catholic and other health care providers from participation in serving the public good, could threaten much-needed health care reform at the outset.

The **Mexico City Policy**, first established in 1984, has wrongly been attacked as a restriction on foreign aid for family planning. In fact, it has not reduced such aid at all, but has ensured that family planning funds are not diverted to organizations dedicated to performing and promoting abortions instead of reducing them. Once the clear line between family planning and abortion is erased, the idea of using family planning to reduce abortions becomes meaningless, and abortion tends to replace contraception as the means for reducing family size. A shift toward promoting abortion in developing nations would also increase distrust of the United States in these nations, whose values and culture often reject abortion, at a time when we need their trust and respect.

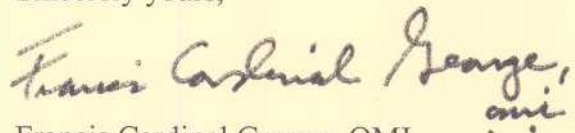
The **embryonic stem cell policy** initiated by President Bush has at times been criticized from both ends of the pro-life debate, but some criticisms are based on false premises. The policy did not ban embryonic stem cell research, or funding of such research. By restricting federally funded research to cell lines in existence at the time he issued his policy, he was trying to ensure that Americans are not forced to use their tax dollars to encourage expanded destruction of embryonic human beings for their stem cells. Such destruction is especially pointless at the present time, for several reasons. First, basic research in the capabilities of embryonic stem cells can be and is being pursued using the currently eligible cell lines as well as the hundreds of lines produced with nonfederal funds since 2001. Second, recent startling advances in reprogramming adult cells into embryonic-like stem cells – hailed by the journal *Science* as the scientific breakthrough of the year – are said by many scientists to be making embryonic stem cells irrelevant to medical progress. Third, adult and cord blood stem cells are now known to have great versatility, and are increasingly being used to reverse serious illnesses and even help rebuild damaged organs. To divert scarce funds away from these promising avenues for research and treatment toward the avenue that is most morally controversial as well as most medically speculative would be a sad victory of politics over science.

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I hope you will consider these comments in the spirit in which they are intended, as an invitation to set aside political pressures and ideologies and focus on the priorities and challenges that will unite us as a nation. Again I want to express our hopes for your Administration, and our offer to cooperate in advancing the common good and protecting the poor and vulnerable in these challenging times.

As we approach the first days of your new responsibilities as President of the United States, I will offer my prayers for you and for your family. May God bless your efforts in fostering justice and peace for all, Mr. President, as you begin your term.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Francis Cardinal George, OMI." The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial 'F' and a large 'G'. The letters "omi." are written in a smaller, more compact script at the end of the signature.

Francis Cardinal George, OMI
Archbishop of Chicago
President