

# STEM CELL DEBATE GETS UGLY

The U.S. Senate passed three pieces of legislation regarding stem cell research on July 18. Two of the bills were non-controversial: one bans growing human embryos in a human or animal with the intent of harvesting stem cells, and the other promotes adult stem cell research. The controversial bill would have expanded federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), among others, was opposed to the controversial bill. President Bush, a day after the Senate's approval, vetoed that bill.

Debate on the issue became ugly. Instead of making reasoned arguments, some advocates of embryonic stem cell research chose to play the anti-religion card.

Senator Arlen Specter, a strong supporter of abortion-on-demand and euthanasia-on-demand, found it necessary to make his case for unlimited stem cell research by dragging up Galileo and Pope Boniface VIII, casting them as Catholic victim and victimizer. He also managed to say that those who oppose embryonic stem cell research are on a par with those who once opposed rail travel, though he did not cite Vatican opposition to trains.

New York Senator Charles Schumer said that those who oppose embryonic stem cell research were "theocrats" who "want their faith to dictate what the government does." Senator Schumer needs to explain himself. Are those Christians who want the U.S. to back Israel at any cost (and invoke the Bible to justify supporting Israel) "theocrats" who—in the Senator's words—are using "their faith to dictate what the government does?"

At least one Catholic politician also managed to criticize opposition to the embryonic stem cell bill. Senator Tom Harkin

denounced President Bush's vetoing of that bill. He asked, "Who set up the president of the United States, this president, as our moral pope? The president of the United States is not our moral ayatollah. He may wish to be, but he's not." Yet when Senator Harkin votes to allow doctors to kill babies who are 80 percent born, no one calls him a moral pope. But the Iowa Catholic was quick to drop the Taliban card on President Bush for vetoing a bill that was opposed by the USCCB.

The *Los Angeles Times* on July 18 blasted the Republican Party for "allowing religious conservatives to stall medical progress for nearly five years." But no one topped a new online group, The Campaign to Defend the Constitution (DEFCON): in a full-page ad in the *New York Times* on July 18, it blamed "a few religious extremists," claiming they were "exercising undue political influence." In other words, those who don't support killing human beings *de novo* are theocrats that disrespect the democratic process.

Cardinal William Keeler, who speaks for the bishops on life issues, is correct when he argues that "Technical progress that makes humans themselves into raw material for research is in fact a regress in our humanity." Everyone is free to disagree, but under no circumstances can Catholic baiting be tolerated.