

Vatican stem cell summit wants cutting-edge treatment to reach the poor

- [Inés San Martín](#)

Apr 28, 2016

VATICAN CORRESPONDENT



A session from the Pontifical Council for Culture's second conference on stem cell research in 2013.

ROME - This week the Vatican is hosting its third conference on stem cell research, seeking to promote therapies based on adult stem cells, which the Catholic Church supports, rather than the use of embryos, and also to make sure cutting-edge medical technology is available to the poor and the young.

The April 28-30 meeting will bring together scientists, physicians, patients, philanthropists, religious leaders, and government officials in a conversation about the healing potential of stem cell therapy. It will be co-hosted by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture, headed by Italian Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, and the U.S.-based Stem for Life Foundation, a non-profit based in New York originally created to foster treatments based on the use of adult cells. Among the political leaders who will be on hand is U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, as part of his "Moonshot" campaign to encourage a cure for cancer.

According to Ravasi, Biden's presence "has no political meaning in the strict sense, but it has a political meaning in a noble sense." The presence of clergy, he added in a press conference held in Rome on Tuesday, is meant to showcase the interest that the Catholic Church has to take in cell research which "goes beyond scientific research."

The reason behind scientific research, he said, is finding a cure not only for cancer and diabetes, but also, and this is one of the scopes of the conference, rare childhood diseases.

"What does it mean to be born ill?" Ravasi said, quoting the name of another conference which he'll inaugurate in early May.

"From the cultural [and] theological perspective, humanity has always encountered this: the suffering, the pain of the innocent," he said.

Dr. Robin Smith, president of the Stem for Life Foundation, said the special attention to "sick children and marginalized populations" emphasizes the results of discussions the organizing committee had with Pope Francis, while reflecting "his concern for young people who are sick and suffering."

The Argentine pontiff has spoken about children suffering, and his inability to explain it, on various occasions.

In early 2015, when he was visiting the Philippines, he told a young girl who had asked him "Why does God allow children to suffer?", that she'd asked "the only question that doesn't have an answer."

Ravasi said he doesn't know what the pope will say in his remarks, adding it's "not hard to imagine" he might touch on children's suffering.

Titled "Cellular Horizons: How Science, Technology, Information and Communication Will Impact Society," this is the third conference on regenerative medicine organized in the Vatican. The first was held in 2011, and the second in 2013.

During his address to the participants in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI announced the Catholic Church's support for adult stem cell research.

"It opens up possibilities for healing chronic degenerative illnesses," he said at the time.

The Catholic Church supports research using adult stem cells, which are gleaned from most tissues in the body. However, it's long been against research or therapies that involve the destruction of embryos, which the Church regards as human life.

According to Smith, science essentially has already resolved that debate. Pioneers in the field who initially thought embryos would be more promising, she said, have since realized that it's not so.

Smith said that today there are more than 5,000 clinical trials employing adult stem cells, but only 38-40 using embryonic cells.

Ravasi added that the Church's position has already been stated and is not under debate, but said this doesn't rule out dialogue even with those who decide to follow other paths.

Biden's 25-minute address represents the latest stop on his "Moonshot" campaign to eliminate cancer, which has taken him to Duke University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Johns Hopkins University.

The vice president announced last October that he would pursue a "moonshot" effort to cure cancer instead of seeking the presidency, and President Barack Obama announced the initiative during his January State of the Union address. His administration has asked Congress to devote \$1 billion to double the rate of progress toward a cancer cure.

Biden's talk will precede the pope's, so the two are expected to at least shake hands. Sources have told Crux that no private meeting is

planned, but it's possible Biden will meet with the Vatican's Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Pietro Parolin.

Similar speculation occurred some weeks ago with the visit of U.S. Senator and Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who delivered a 10-minute speech at a different Vatican conference.

At the time, no meeting between the pope and Sanders was scheduled, but the senator was able to greet the pope at Francis' residence, the Hotel Santa Marta, on Vatican grounds.

According to the pontiff, the politician took the opportunity to greet the religious leader as the pope was leaving for his one-day trip to Greece. On the way back from the foray, Francis called the handshake "common courtesy."

Biden, a Catholic, has met with the pope on other occasions, including during Francis' visit to the United States to participate in the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia last September.

Also attending will be TV journalist Katie Couric, who will moderate a panel on immunotherapy.

According to the event's organizers, the meeting aims to unite people "without prejudice, to create an open dialogue about the interconnections among cellular research, technology, faith, and culture."