

Hon. Chair of the Executive Committee of the Pan American Health and Education Foundation
Hon. Director of the Pan American Health Organization
Hon. Ministers of Health and representatives of the PAHO Member Countries
Hon. Delegates to the Pan American Sanitary Conference
Relatives and friends of Dr. Manuel Velasco-Suárez
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to begin by thanking the Pan American Health and Education Foundation for having created the Manuel Velasco-Suárez Scholarship in Bioethics; and in particular, the Committee that selected my project as deserving of this distinction.

This esteemed award encourages me on several levels: as the first Mexican to receive it (to modestly continue the effort begun by Dr. Velasco-Suárez to develop bioethics in Mexico), as the first man after four distinguished South American women, and of course, as a young investigator who is developing his capacities in bioethics analysis.

I have been engaging in bioethics analysis somewhat in recent years in areas that are part of the current bioethics agenda; around what the beginning of human life is: assisted reproduction, the sexuality of infertile or sterile couples, gamete donation, preimplantation genetic diagnosis, research with human embryos, human cloning, and interspecies chimerism. These and many more therapeutic and research situations revolve one way or another around a basic problem: the status of the human embryo. What takes place after the union of an egg and sperm? When does human life begin? Can one talk about a specific “moment” when that takes place? One would think that the marvelous advances in the biology of development and genetics and the wealth of knowledge amassed to date would offer precise answers to these questions. Nothing could be further from the truth. In addition, we have the views of other disciplines—for example, law, theology and religion, and philosophy through philosophical anthropology and, of course, bioethics as applied ethics. As this knowledge becomes more complex, new questions and new debates arise that, even while unresolved, must be addressed in a practical manner in clinical settings and research. Many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have private (and some public) assisted reproductive services. It is almost a constant that there is no specific legislation in this area (although having it would not necessarily signify progress in bioethics). And without having solved the problems associated with these new forms of human reproduction, we are confronted with a new one: the surplus embryos resulting from the use of these techniques. This would appear to be a problem only in the developed countries; as if infertility and sterility existed only there.

Thus, in this complex world, my proposal intends to look into what couples who seek out these types of treatments think about embryo donation. We don’t know. We need to find out, since, as Dr. Diego Garcia noted in the masters in bioethics organized by the PAHO Bioethics Unit, deliberation is the method in bioethics. We shouldn’t engage in discussions with only a few people, be they clinicians, investigators, jurists, individual philosophers, or an almost interminable list of professionals who deal with this topic from a theoretical perspective. We must ask. There is a tremendous need for descriptive bioethics studies in this and all other areas of bioethics. Theoretical analysis, more properly metaethical analysis, is undoubtedly important for bioethics, as is the regulatory area. However, it is not enough. In order to deliberate, we must have the opinions of the people involved. As long as it is impossible to ask an embryo whether it wishes to be donated or not, we must direct our questions to the actors on the scene: those who provide the gametes. As you can see, this is an extremely complex issue and will certainly lead to conflicting opinions, but it is about these that we must deliberate. It is illogical even to think about a legal framework or a proper analysis without knowledge of the facts. Therefore, at the

conclusion of the work, we hope to have obtained first-hand data about questions such as: Would you donate your embryos to Latin American couples seeking assisted reproduction or would you prefer to destroy the embryos? If you would donate them, would you do it for other couples with the same problem, for research, or for both? These opinions must be considered when establishing a public policy.

I would also like to thank Dr. Diego Gracia, renowned Spanish bioethicist, for proposing my project, which in fact, is the basis of my doctoral dissertation. I am proud to have been his disciple in the masters in bioethics and proud that he is now my dissertation advisor, having given me his full support from the outset, supporting my ideas and projects. I must also thank those who in different ways have helped to awaken my interest in bioethics: my family, my academic and clinical peers, my students, and my friends. And if I had to dedicate the honor of this award to anyone, it would undoubtedly be to my daughter, Aurora, who has learned to tolerate my lengthy absences and my absent presences, serving always as my motivating force.

Finally, I would like to recall that Dr. Velasco-Suárez used to say: that “a man’s value is not what he has, or even what he knows, but how he serves.” Speaking about ethics, it is almost impossible not to think of Aristotle to explain things more deeply. Aristotelian ethics is eudaimonic, and eudaimonics has been translated as “happiness,” which has led to inaccurate interpretations. Perhaps the best translation of eudaimonics is “excellence.” Thus, the explanation would be that man has value not only because he serves, but because he serves with excellence. Hence, the creation and conferral of the award and scholarship for research serve to encourage young bioethics investigators to search for ways to serve with excellence in this important field.

Thank you very much.