

Last week, the daily Vatican bulletin announced the latest decree from the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The vast majority of names are unknown during the early stages of the arduous process of canonization. Amidst the seven unfamiliar names last Thursday, one stood out—Dr. **Jérôme Lejeune**, who died in Paris on Easter Sunday in 1994. Born in 1926, he was a noted physician and geneticist. With the declaration of his “life of heroic virtue” the now Venerable **Jérôme Lejeune** is eligible for beatification if a miracle is attributed to his intercession.

In 1958, Lejeune deduced that Down syndrome was caused by an additional chromosome on the twenty-first pair. He went on to dedicate the rest of his life to researching treatments to improve the lives of our brothers and sisters who were born with this chromosomal condition. On the occasion of accepting an award from the American Society of Human Genetics in San Francisco in 1969, Lejeune [delivered a lecture](#), catching his audience off guard. He noted that, “if early detection of a chromosomal condition could be achieved....a decision could be taken whether such a pregnancy would be allowed to go to term or would be interrupted by an induced abortion.”

He went on to ask rhetorically, “What do we know about the time at which a new human being comes into existence?” He then offered a hypothetical in which a new research facility is created named simply, “The National Institute of Death.” Among its duties:

- a. Decree on undesirable genes or chromosomes
- b. Deliver unhappy parents from unwanted pregnancies
- c. Discard embryos not fitting standard requirements
- d. Dispose of newborns not reaching minimal specifications of normalcy
- e. Destroy, delete or decry any human condition voted against by the above-mentioned board of advisors of the National Institute of Death.

Imagine the silence that descended upon the room as he spoke so bluntly to his colleagues. He concluded his lecture, “But should we capitulate in the face of our own ignorance and propose to eliminate those we cannot help?” He added, “Our duty has always been not to inflict the sentence but to try to commute the pain. In any foreseeable genetical trial I do not know enough to judge, but I feel enough to advocate.”¹

It turned out to be an impassioned speech against abortion. It received a cool response; his career crumbled in fact. Afterwards, he reportedly told his wife, “Today, I lost my Nobel Prize.” Perhaps that is true, perhaps not, but the decree from the Vatican last week demonstrates that worldly honors, even a Nobel Prize, pale in comparison to the unperishable crown of victory that awaits those who are faithful to the Lord.

The Church has been on the front lines with respect to standing up for innocent life in the womb since January 22, 1973. His lecture was delivered four years before that infamous day, yet see how prophetic his hypothetical situation has become. New genetic testing has indeed made possible the pre-natal diagnosis of Down Syndrome, and as a result, the rate of abortions for this singular population skyrocketed to 67% here in the USA and closer to 90% in some countries in Europe.

Many born with Down Syndrome live full, healthy lives, with an average lifespan of between 50 and 60 years. Often, they are employed at grocery stores or restaurants, and are among the most reliable employees. I do not pretend to know the many challenges of parenthood, especially in the case of children with special needs. They know it will be difficult but believe that God is calling them to love even more deeply than before.

Lejeune acknowledged the difficulties involved with respect to genetic conditions. **“People say, ‘The price of genetic diseases is high. If these**

¹ Jerome Lejeune, The William Allan Memorial Award Lecture: On the Nature of Man, Oct. 2-4, 1969. The American Journal of Human Genetics, Vol. 22, No. 2, March 1970.

individuals could be eliminated early on, the savings would be enormous!’ It cannot be denied that the price of these diseases is high - in suffering for the individual and in burdens for society. Not to mention what parents suffer! **But we can assign a value to that price: It is precisely what a society must pay to remain fully human.**”² Such courage is precisely the example that we priests and our bishops should emulate.

The prophet Jeremiah reminds us: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.” (Jeremiah 1:5) What kind of society do we desire? How prepared are we to say that this life is somehow less valuable than another due to a pre-natal diagnosis? All human life is equally precious. We distinguish neither upon health, nor intelligence.

In our first reading from the prophet Jonah, Nineveh was challenged, but also given fair warning before its destruction. Thankfully, the people collectively repented; an entire city had changed its ways. Do we believe this is possible today? If not, why not? Have you lost the virtue of hope?

If you think it is possible for a collective change of heart, then the question becomes, “What are you willing to do to bring that change about? We must be informed, see the deeper realities that lie beneath the surface, and pray that God’s light will illumine a path forward. Every time we witness in truth and charity, someone may begin to re-think their logic, reconsider their presuppositions, and be open to the light of truth.

Following the example of Venerable Jerome Lejeune, may we never tire of defending human life, from the moment of conception through natural death. And may we never count the cost that may come from our sharing the truth in love.

² Jérôme Lejeune, “21 Thoughts,” cf. website of the Association of Friends of Professor Jérôme Lejeune <http://www.amislejeune.org/index.php/en/>