

Moral Interventions to Overcome Infertility

Any number of morally acceptable interventions may be used to overcome infertility. For example, surgery can overcome tubal blockages in the male or female reproductive system which prevents fertilization from taking place. Fertility drugs may also be used, with the caution that large multiple pregnancies may put mother and infants at risk. There are also many ways of tracking natural reproductive rhythms to enhance the chances for achieving pregnancy. The Pope Paul VI Institute at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska has been successful in helping couples overcome infertility using natural methods.

Most theologians consider the procedure known as LDT, or Lower Tubal Ovarian Transfer, to be morally acceptable. This involves transferring the wife's egg beyond a blockage in the fallopian tube so that marital relations can result in pregnancy. Another method, more morally controversial, is called GIFT, or Gamete Intra-Fallopian Transfer. It involves obtaining a husband's sperm following marital relations and aspirating an egg from the wife's ovary. Egg and sperm are placed in a tiny tube separated by an air bubble, and the contents of the tube are then injected into the wife's fallopian tube with the hope that fertilization will occur. Some theologians consider this to be a replacement of the marital act, and therefore immoral. Other theologians see it as assisting the marital act, and therefore permissible. Because the teaching authorities of the Church—the Pope and bishops—have not made a judgment about GIFT, Catholic couples are free to choose it or reject it depending on the guidance of their own conscience. If the teaching authority of the Church should judge the procedure to be immoral, however, GIFT should no longer be used.

The Church has great compassion for those who suffer from infertility. Out of love for all human life and respect for the integrity of marital relations, however, the Church teaches that some means of trying to achieve pregnancy are not licit. Some of these means actually involve the taking of innocent human life, or treating human life as a means toward an end or a "manufactured product." They do violence to the dignity of the human person.

In America we have a tendency to think that we can solve all problems with the right "technology." But children are not engendered by technology or produced by an industry. Children should arise from an act of love between a husband and wife, in cooperation with God. No human being can "create" the image of God. That is why we say that human beings "procreate" with God. Engendering children is a cooperative act among husband, wife, and God himself. Children, in the final analysis, should be begotten not made.

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BEGOTTEN NOT MADE: A

CATHOLIC VIEW OF REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY

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Infertility is a growing problem in the United States. And in true American fashion, there has been a corresponding growth in a reproductive technologies industry to provide a solution.

It is quite legitimate, indeed praiseworthy, to try to find ways to overcome infertility. The problem causes great pain and anguish for many married couples. Since children are a wonderful gift of marriage, it is a good thing to try to overcome the obstacles which prevent children from being conceived and born.

In our day many techniques and therapies have been developed to overcome infertility. In the United States an entire "industry" has emerged with little or no governmental or professional regulations to protect the interests of the men, women or children who become involved. Women receive fertility drugs which can result in their conceiving four, five or six children at once, risking their own health and the health of their children. Some have several eggs fertilized *in vitro* (in a glass dish) without realizing that this may lead to the destruction of these embryos or their being frozen for later experimental use.

The many techniques now used to overcome infertility also have profound moral implications, and couples should be aware of these before making decisions about their use. Each technique should be assessed to see if it is truly moral, that is, whether or not it promotes human good and human flourishing. All these technologies touch in some way on innocent human life.

Church Teaching

In 1987 the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a document known as *Donum Vitae* ("The Gift of Life"), which addressed the morality of many modern fertility procedures. The document did not judge the use of technology to overcome infertility as wrong in itself. It concluded that some methods are moral, while others—because they do violence to the dignity of the human person and the institution of marriage—are immoral. *Donum Vitae* reaffirmed an obligation to protect all human life when married couples use various technologies to try to have children. Without questioning the motives of those using these techniques, *Donum Vitae* pointed out that people can do harm to themselves and others even as they try to do what is good, that is, overcome infertility. The fundamental principle which the Church used to assess the morality of various means of overcoming infertility was a rather simple one, even if its application is sometimes difficult:

Donum Vitae teaches that if a given medical intervention helps or assists the marriage act to achieve pregnancy, it may be considered moral; if the intervention replaces the marriage act in order to engender life, it is not moral.

In Vitro Fertilization

One reproductive technology which the Church has clearly and unequivocally judged to be immoral is *in vitro* fertilization or IVF. Unfortunately, most Catholics are not aware of the Church's teaching, do not know that IVF is immoral, and some have used it in attempting to have children. If a couple is unaware that the procedure is immoral, they are not subjectively guilty of sin. Children conceived through this procedure are children of God and are loved by their parents, as they should be. Like all children, regardless of the circumstances of their conception and birth, they should be loved, cherished and cared for.

In vitro fertilization brings about new life in a petri dish. Children engendered through IVF are sometimes known as "test tube babies." Several eggs are aspirated from the woman's ovary after she has taken a fertility drug which causes a number of eggs to mature at the same time. Semen is collected from the man, usually through masturbation. The egg and sperm are ultimately joined in a glass dish, where conception takes place and the new life is allowed to develop for several days. In the simplest case, embryos are then transferred to the mother's womb in the hope that one will survive to term.

Why IVF is Wrong

Obviously, IVF *eliminates* the marriage act as the means of achieving pregnancy, instead of *helping* it achieve this natural end. The new life is not engendered through an act of love between husband and wife, but by a laboratory procedure performed by doctors or technicians. Husband and wife are merely sources for the "raw materials" of egg and sperm, which are later manipulated by a technician to cause the sperm to fertilize the egg. Not infrequently, "donor" eggs or sperm are used. This means that the genetic father or mother of the child could well be someone from outside the marriage. This can create a confusing

situation for the child later, when he or she learns that one parent raising him or her is not actually the biological parent.

But even if the egg and sperm come from husband and wife, serious moral problems arise. Invariably several embryos are brought into existence; only those which show the greatest promise of growing to term are implanted in the womb. The others are simply discarded or used for experiments. This is a terrible offense against human life. While a little baby may ultimately be born because of this procedure, other lives are usually snuffed out in the process.

To avoid the problems of carrying and rearing "too many" babies after several have been implanted, doctors sometimes engage in something euphemistically called "fetal reduction" or "selective reduction." Here they monitor the babies *in utero* to see if any have defects or are judged to be not as healthy as the others. Then they eliminate those "less desirable" babies by filling a syringe with potassium chloride, maneuvering the needle toward the "selected" baby in the womb with the aid of ultrasound, and then thrusting the needle into the baby's heart. Again we see the unspeakable diminishing of the value of human life which can arise from this procedure.

Not everyone who has had a child through IVF has used donor eggs or sperm, collected the sperm through masturbation, or killed "extra" unwanted babies in the course of the pregnancy. Yet there is still a moral problem with the procedure itself. Why?

Human beings bear the image and likeness of God. They are to be revered as sacred. Never are they to be used as a means to an end, not even to satisfy the deepest wishes of an infertile couple. Husbands and wives "make love," they do not "make babies." They give expression to their love for one another, and a child may or may not be engendered by that act of love. The marital act is not a manufacturing process, and children are not products. Like the Son of God himself, we are the kind of beings who are "begotten, not made" and, therefore, of equal status and dignity with our parents.

In IVF, children are engendered through a technical process, subjected to "quality control," and eliminated if found "defective." In their very coming into being, these children are thoroughly subjected to the arbitrary choices of those bringing them into being. In the words of *Donum Vitae*: "The connection between *in vitro* fertilization and the voluntary destruction of human embryos occurs too often. This is significant: through these procedures, with apparently contrary purposes, life and death are subjected to the decision of man, who thus sets himself up as the giver of life and death by decree." The document speaks of "the right of every person to be conceived and to be born *within marriage and from marriage*." To be within and from marriage, conception should occur from the marriage act which by its nature is ordered toward loving openness to life, not from the manipulations of technicians.

The dehumanizing aspects of some of these procedures is evident in the very language associated with them. There is the "reproductive technology industry." Children are called the "products" of conception. Inherent in IVF is the treatment of children, in their very coming into being, as less than human beings.