

Is In-Vitro Fertilization a Moral Action?

Question: What about the suffering caused by infertility in marriage?

Answer: The suffering of spouses who cannot have children is a suffering that everyone must understand and properly respect. On the part of the spouses, the desire for a child is natural: it expresses the vocation to fatherhood and motherhood inscribed in conjugal love. This desire can be even stronger if the couple is affected by sterility which appears incurable.

Nevertheless, marriage does not confer upon the spouses the right to have a child, but only the right to perform those natural acts which are *per se* ordered to procreation. A true and proper right to a child would be contrary to the child's dignity and nature. The child is not an object to which one has a right, nor can he be considered as an object of ownership: rather, a child is a gift, the supreme gift, and the most gratuitous gift of marriage, and is a living testimony of the mutual giving of his parents. For this reason, the child has the right, as already mentioned, to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his parents; and he also has the right to be respected as a person from the moment of his conception.

Nevertheless, whatever its cause or prognosis, sterility is certainly a difficult trial. The community of believers is called to shed light upon and support the suffering of those who are unable to fulfill their legitimate aspiration to motherhood and fatherhood.

Spouses who find themselves in this sad situation are called to find in it an opportunity for sharing in a particular way in the Lord's Cross, the source of spiritual fruitfulness. Sterile couples must not forget that even when procreation is not possible, conjugal life does not for this reason lose its value. Physical sterility in fact can be for spouses the occasion for other important services to the life of the human person, for example, adoption, various forms of educational work, and assistance to other families and to poor or handicapped children.

Many researchers are engaged in the fight against sterility. While fully safeguarding the dignity of human procreation, some have achieved results which previously seemed unattainable. Scientists therefore are to be encouraged to continue their research with the aim of preventing the causes of sterility and of being able to remedy them so that sterile couples will be able to procreate in full respect for their own personal dignity and that of the child to be born.

Question: What is the teaching of the Catholic Church on in-vitro fertilization (IVF)?

Answer: There are a number of problems with IVF, and some techniques are worse than others. The least objectionable version would be homologous (married-couple) IVF where the germ cells are collected from married parents in a morally licit manner and everything is done to protect the life of the child or children thus conceived. However, even this form of IVF is problematic morally.

In its instruction *Donum vitae*, the Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) explains that "the Church remains opposed from the moral point of view to homologous *in vitro* fertilization. Such fertilization is in itself illicit and in opposition to the dignity of procreation and of the conjugal union, even when everything is done to avoid the death of the human embryo."

The CDF continues, "Although the manner in which human conception is achieved with IVF and ET [embryo transplant] cannot be approved, every child who comes into the world must in any case be accepted as a living gift of the divine Goodness and must be brought up with love."

Question: The Church teaches that it's wrong to pursue certain forms of conception, but have you ever wanted to get pregnant and couldn't? What about the right of a woman to have a baby?

Answer: While the Church's judgment concerning in-vitro fertilization treatments may appear cruel and unfair, it is not. Children are a gift, not an entitlement. The Church teaches that marriage does not confer upon the spouses the right to have a child, but only the right to perform those natural acts which are *per se* ordered to procreation. A true and proper right to a child would be contrary to the child's dignity and nature. The child is not an object to which one has a right, nor can he be considered as an object of ownership: rather, a child is a gift, the supreme gift, and the most gratuitous gift of marriage, and is a living testimony of the mutual giving of his parents. For this reason, the child has the right to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his parents; and he also has the right to be respected as a person from the moment of his conception.

The Catholic Church is not attempting to define anyone's feelings. It is concerned about what God allows and what he doesn't. Our rights do not originate in how we feel. They come to us from God. Simply because we want something does not mean

that we have a right to it. If we simply acted on our feelings and pursued whatever we felt like having, there would be utter chaos everywhere. We are not the center of creation; God is. God himself designed our sexuality. He designed the context in which children are to be born, nurtured, and challenged on their way to adulthood. Therefore, each child has a right to be the result of God's design: the product of the love of father and mother as expressed in the mutual self-gift of sexual union, which fulfills the "I do" of their wedding vows. The design is God's. No one has the right to counter his design by pulling conception out of its context.

For those having difficulty conceiving, it can be a tremendous hardship and sorrow. But skirting the moral law is not the answer. There are licit means to enhance fertility or overcome obstacles that inhibit conception. As well, there are many children in the world looking for parents to love them through adoption. Trusting God and working within his laws is the way to approach any challenge we are presented with in life.

Question: Why must human procreation take place in marriage?

Answer: Certainly one cannot ignore the legitimate aspirations of sterile couples. For some, recourse to homologous IVF appears to be the only way of fulfilling their sincere desire for a child. The question is asked whether the totality of conjugal life in such situations is not sufficient to ensure the dignity proper to human procreation. It is acknowledged that IVF certainly cannot supply for the absence of sexual relations and cannot be preferred to the specific acts of conjugal union, given the risks involved for the child and the difficulties of the procedure. But it is asked whether, when there is no other way of overcoming the sterility which is a source of suffering, homologous in-vitro fertilization may not constitute an aid, if not a form of therapy, whereby its moral licitness could be admitted. The desire for a child – or at the very least an openness to the transmission of life – is a necessary prerequisite from the moral point of view for responsible human procreation. But this good intention is not sufficient for making a positive moral evaluation of in-vitro fertilization between spouses. The process of IVF must be judged in itself and cannot borrow its definitive moral quality from the totality of conjugal life of which it becomes part nor from the conjugal acts which may precede or follow it.

It has already been recalled that, in the circumstances in which it is regularly practiced, IVF involves the destruction of human beings, which is something contrary to the doctrine on the illicitness of abortion

previously mentioned. But even in a situation in which every precaution were taken to avoid the death of human embryos, homologous IVF dissociates from the conjugal act the actions which are directed to human fertilization. For this reason the very nature of homologous IVF also must be taken into account, even abstracting from the link with procured abortion. Homologous IVF is brought about outside the bodies of the couple through actions of third parties whose competence and technical activity determine the success of the procedure. Such fertilization entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person. Such a relationship of domination is in itself contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children.

Conception in-vitro is the result of the technical action which presides over fertilization. Such fertilization is neither in fact achieved nor positively willed as the expression and fruit of a specific act of the conjugal union. In homologous IVF, therefore, even if it is considered in the context of 'de facto' existing sexual relations, the generation of the human person is objectively deprived of its proper perfection: namely, that of being the result and fruit of a conjugal act in which the spouses can become cooperators with God for giving life to a new person. These reasons enable us to understand why the act of conjugal love is considered in the teaching of the Church as the only setting worthy of human procreation. For the same reasons the so-called "simple case" i.e. a homologous IVF procedure that is free of any compromise with the abortive practice of destroying embryos and with masturbation, remains a technique which is morally illicit because it deprives human procreation of the dignity which is proper and connatural to it.

Certainly, homologous IVF fertilization is not marked by all that ethical negativity found in extra-conjugal procreation; the family and marriage continue to constitute the setting for the birth and upbringing of the children. Nevertheless, in conformity with the traditional doctrine relating to the goods of marriage and the dignity of the person, the Church remains opposed from the moral point of view to homologous in-vitro fertilization. Such fertilization is in itself illicit and in opposition to the dignity of procreation and of the conjugal union, even when everything is done to avoid the death of the human embryo. Although the manner in which human conception is achieved with IVF cannot be approved, every child which comes into the world must in any case be accepted as a living gift of the divine Goodness and must be brought up with love.