



A CATHOLIC PRIMER on *In Vitro* Fertilization

Today, for a wide range of possible reasons, more and more couples are experiencing the pain of infertility. Many, understandably, deeply desire to have biological children and turn to biomedical technologies like *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) to try to fulfill their dreams. As Catholics, however, our faith teaches that these popular procedures are not the answer. In fact, they are harmful and wrong, and even tragically result in the deaths of many innocent children while they are young embryos. It is important to consider these realities when thinking about infertility treatments.

What is IVF?

In vitro fertilization is the most popular type of assisted reproductive technology, a medical procedure women undergo to become pregnant. *In vitro* means “in glass.” In the IVF process, a woman’s ovaries are typically hyper-stimulated to yield multiple eggs, which are then harvested and fertilized with sperm in a laboratory. Some of the embryos created are transferred into her womb with the intention that at least one of the embryos will grow to full term. Many of the embryos that are transferred do not survive, though, and most of the remaining embryos are either killed in the process (some intentionally, some unintentionally) or are frozen in cryopreservation. Often, the process involves a couple’s own egg and sperm cells. Sometimes, however, they come from third parties. In either case, this process frequently incorporates a form of eugenics in which only certain embryonic children are chosen for implantation based on desirable characteristics,

health outcomes, or both, and those who fail the quality control checks are killed.

Why is IVF wrong?

Even though IVF can help create new life, there are multiple factors that make it contrary to God’s plan for marriage and children, therefore rendering it morally wrong. For example, as mentioned above, it often includes the death or freezing of embryonic children. And although preserving embryos by freezing them does not kill them, it could be compared to placing innocent children in prison. Creating embryonic children to be frozen and participating in their deaths are both profound violations of their dignity. As another example of why IVF is wrong, it also often includes immoral behavior by the man to obtain sperm.

Furthermore, according to God’s plan, marriage is an exclusive, lifelong union between a man and a woman that reflects the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves us. Sexual intimacy has two aspects—the power to unite (unitive) and the potential to create new life (procreative). These aspects belong together and should not be separated. And every child, as a human being, has the right to be conceived through a natural act of mutual, self-giving love within marital intercourse. But IVF separates conception from the spouses’ intimate, sexual union, and the children conceived through IVF are instead created through technological manipulation. IVF also intrudes on the exclusive nature of the couple’s union by introducing other people into the act of conception itself (as opposed to other treatments, discussed

below, which may help conception to occur within marital intercourse).

Additionally, every human being is a gift made in God's image with infinite dignity, so people should not be treated like objects or property. No matter how sincerely the children are loved and wanted, the process still treats them like products that can be bought and ordered. And in cases where a third party's eggs or sperm are used, or where a woman acts as a gestational surrogate and carries the child, these people are also treated like property in a transaction and as means to an end, rather than as people to be respected.

But isn't it good to help bring more children into loving families?

The powerful desire to procreate children is natural and good. Children themselves are among the greatest goods and are a blessing from God. Like all human beings, they are also a gift. In marriage, we are called to be open to receiving such a beautiful gift. But no one has an absolute "right" to obtain a child, just like we do not have a "right" to demand any other gift, no matter how deeply and sincerely we desire it. Even though children are a great good, this does not make IVF (with all its problems as discussed above) morally acceptable.

Are there any acceptable medical treatments for couples struggling with infertility?

Yes, there are ethical fertility treatments of which the Catholic Church approves. These can take many forms but are collectively referred to as "restorative reproductive medicine."

Restorative reproductive medicine investigates and seeks to heal the root causes of the couple's infertility (which can vary) rather than ignoring or bypassing the causes of infertility like IVF does. In fact, restorative reproductive medicine is often more successful than IVF. Many in the health care industry, however, do not know how to pursue these options, and it may be challenging to find a doctor who practices restorative reproductive medicine. A number of national Natural Family Planning (NFP) education organizations can assist married couples with a list



of medical professionals who provide Restorative Reproductive Medicine (RRM); please see uscgb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/nfp-national-providers.

What if the ethical treatments don't work?

Unfortunately, even after pursuing restorative reproductive medicine, some couples may still experience infertility. This cross can be deeply painful, and the grief may be overwhelming. It is crucial to note that these couples are not alone. God is with them and has a beautiful plan for their lives, and the Church desires to walk with them. "To couples who cannot have children," Pope St. John Paul II assured, "you are no less loved by God; your love for each other is complete and fruitful when it is open to others."¹

Adoption and foster care are some ways married couples can cultivate and share their love that is fruitful and open to others. There is so much need for open hearts and homes. Pope St. John Paul II described adoption as "a great work of love," assuring parents that "[w]hen it is done, much is given, but much is also received. It is a true exchange of gifts."² There are also other ways couples can cultivate and share love, such as through service and participation in parish life.

Reflecting on the healed wounds of the Risen Christ, we can see that even our most difficult trials can be the place where God shows the power

of his love. He makes all things beautiful. He makes all things new. He is the reason for hope and joy even in the darkest moments.

For more from the USCCB on infertility, visit usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/infertility. Your diocese may have additional ministries or resources for couples experiencing infertility as well.

My child was conceived through IVF. I love them. God loves them. Does the Church love them?

Absolutely!

Every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and is equally loved by Him—and is equally worthy of the love of fellow Christians. That love does not depend on the circumstances of a person’s conception or birth. In fact, this is why we also care about the little brothers and sisters who were also created with IVF but who died or were frozen as young embryos.

Can I serve as a surrogate to help someone I love to have a child?

For many of the same reasons described above, participation in surrogate childbearing is wrong. Again, it intrudes into the unique and sacred space of the marriage bond and treats the women and children involved like objects—even if that is not the intention. In surrogacy contracts, even in cases of “altruistic” surrogacy where no money is exchanged, the nature of the process means that a woman is valued according to her capacity

for production and output; she is not treated as a mother who loves and nurtures her child as he or she grows in the womb.

Surrogacy is also especially harmful to the rights of the child, who bonds with and comes to know the voice of his or her mother before he or she is even born. But in a surrogacy arrangement, that child is then taken away from his or her mother at birth. That is different from adoption because, in surrogacy, a child is procreated specifically for this unfortunate situation. Whereas, in the case of infant adoption, the separation is decided as the best outcome for the wellbeing of a child who is already in existence in the womb.

Where can I read more about what the Church says on IVF and infertility?

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2373 – 2379.
- *Donum vitae*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1987
- *Dignitas personae*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2008
- *Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology*, USCCB, 2009
- “Children as Commodities?” USCCB Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, 2014
- “Seven Considerations While Navigating Infertility,” USCCB Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, 2016

For more information, visit usccb.org/prolife/reproductive-technology.

¹ Pope John Paul II, “Homily at the Mass for the Families on February 13, 1982,” (Vatican City: *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 1982).

² Pope John Paul II, “Address to the Meeting of the Adoptive Families Organized by the Missionaries of Charity on September 5, 2000,” (Vatican City: *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 2000).

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