



## Bioethics and Infertility Care

Babies are an incredible blessing and gift from God. Infertility can break the hearts of a couple and lead them to highly unethical choices in their quest to have a child. The Church in Her wisdom has provided an excellent discernment guide regarding medical interventions aimed at overcoming infertility in a teaching document, [Dignitas Personae](#). The Church explains in this instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that any procedure that *replaces* the conjugal act in order to overcome infertility can never be morally acceptable. Actions that serve to *assist* the conjugal act or to increase fertility can be morally good depending on further ethical criteria. “The Church moreover holds that it is ethically unacceptable to *dissociate procreation from the integrally personal context of the conjugal act*: human procreation is a personal act of a husband and wife, which is not capable of substitution.” Catholic bioethicists look at infertility care using this lens of which therapies and techniques respect the marital act and the rights and dignity of the parents and children and which do not.

Human freedom has limits, and a very basic one is that no one has a “right to a child.” The bride and groom must be open to life in order to be validly married in the Church, but there is no guarantee of children that comes with marriage. My wife and I experienced the trial of over eight childless years of marriage before we conceived our daughter, Therese. We explored many ethical infertility treatments and had many many people praying for us. In fact, my wife Marie has written an excellent book from a Catholic perspective, [When Expecting Doesn't Happen](#), that discusses the suffering of infertility, spiritual support for couples and their families, the treatments that are available, and even the reactions of friends or other people to infertility.

A key Catholic insight of Pope Saint John Paul II was that human persons are procreated as a gift from God, and we are made with a deep longing to give ourselves completely. This explains the radicalness of the consecrated life where men and women religious offer their lives to God and in sacramental marriages where the husbands and wives vow to make a complete gift of themselves to their spouses for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, etc. until death. Since a child is a gift rather than a right, it follows that we must respect the ethical

conditions for a proper reception of these little persons and never treat them like commodities or objects that can be created artificially or discarded at will. The secular approach to infertility generally involves *in vitro* fertilization or IVF. This technique completely replaces the sexual act of the parents by procuring human egg and sperm cells and having third parties conceiving new human lives in laboratory glassware-hence *in vitro*. IVF involves numerous ethical violations of the right of children to be conceived by a loving act of their parents and to have their human dignity respected. Obtaining the eggs involves a painful and sometimes dangerous process for the women. The documentary [Eggsplotation](#) goes into many of the abuses that take place in procuring eggs from young women by the fertility industry. For the men, the usual procedure for procuring sperm is through the immoral means of masturbation. After the conception of the embryos in the lab, they are frequently subjected to pre-implantation genetic diagnosis for quality control purposes. Those who fail these tests are treated as “defective products” to be thrown away. Others are put into frozen storage in liquid nitrogen cooled tanks. This suspended animation can last for years, or the embryos are transferred to a womb, not necessarily their mother’s. Many fail to implant. Some do but miscarry later in the pregnancy. Others, that have been abandoned or “donated,” are subjected to research that kills them. The whole IVF process can be so lethal that only 10% of the embryos conceived survive to birth.

IVF also created the problem of human embryos in laboratories who are exposed to experimentation and killing for their stem cells. Most recently, human embryos in labs were subjected to germ-line gene editing by a Chinese scientist who altered the DNA of three little girls such that their cells have the modification, and this will be passed on to their future children and on down their hereditary line. Other abuses, such as three parent embryos, are also possible because of the conception of children in labs and the regulations that allow them to be subjected to experimentation up to 14 days of development after fertilization before they are killed.

Fortunately, there is another world of infertility treatment that comes from a Catholic ethical framework. Natural methods of fertility awareness can help many couples suffering from infertility to conceive and bear children. The [Saint Paul VI Institute](#) has been doing wonderful medical work to help treat infertility since 1985. Their average success rates are higher than IVF. For spiritual support there are Catholic infertility ministries like [Springs in the Desert](#). The pain of infertility can be tremendous, but getting ethical medical care and compassionate spiritual support are the best solutions. The ethical violations inherent in technological baby-making are too high of a price to pay for the joy of having a child. Our

children must be respected and honored starting with the way they come into existence and throughout the rest of their lives.

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