



THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

600 REED ROAD, SUITE 102, BROOMALL, PA 19008 (215) 877-2660 (215) 877-2688 FAX NCBCENTER.ORG

The Child: A Preeminent Good

The child holds the center of our attention this time of year. There are the beautiful portrayals of the holy Virgin, cradling her infant son in her arms after His birth. Eight days later, according to Jewish tradition, the baby boy is circumcised, the first shedding of His blood for our redemption. Forty days after his birth Jesus is presented in the Temple at the same time His Mother undergoes the ritual of purification. These are intimate moments with our attention and our love focused on the holy Child.

Everyone with a heart loves a baby. Their vulnerability and helplessness, their tender freshness, their delicately shaped little noses, ears, and mouths. What is there not to love! The Catholic Church acknowledges this in the somewhat dry language of canon law: “The primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of children.” Among the many goods of marriage, the child has a privileged place, for it ultimately explains why God draws a man and a woman together in love and gives rise to the family.

The child is an unqualified good. The child is, as the theologians would say, a *bonum honestum*, a true good. The Catholic Church teaches that human beings naturally seek the good; it is part of their very being. As classical philosophy puts it: “Love is the spontaneous movement of the will toward that which is good.” No wonder we are drawn to the child in its goodness.

However, good things must be sought and loved in the right way. Sometimes we so intensely want a good that we can violate other goods as we pursue it. This can be seen even in our desire for a child. Some married couples are unable to have children and will go to great lengths to try to have their own child. Some resort to a procedure known as “in vitro fertilization” which brings the sex cells of the husband and wife together in a glass dish. Eggs are extracted from the wife after she has taken hyper-ovulatory stimulation drugs and sperm is collected from the husband almost invariably by masturbation. Some eggs are fertilized in a nutrient serum in the petri dish and become embryonic human beings. The medical personnel will observe which embryos appear to be the healthiest and will transfer them to the uterus of the mother after about five days. Eight to ten embryos can be engendered but customarily only two or three are transferred to the uterus. The “spare” embryonic humans are frozen in liquid nitrogen to be used in the future if the procedure does not work. Or they are discarded or used for experimentation. If both embryos implant and gestate and the mother only wants one child, one of the embryos can be killed by injecting potassium chloride into the baby’s chest cavity. In the final analysis, in the attempt to welcome a single new child, as many as eight embryonic humans may have been killed or subjected to the inhumane fate of being frozen in liquid nitrogen.

The good of the child is understandably sought by a couple suffering infertility but it can result in the destruction of a number of embryonic children. This is simply not a reasonable and humane way for human beings to act because destroying goods goes against our very nature.

However, there are also other goods sometimes violated in the pursuit of the child. At times the man cannot produce sperm, and so the sperm of a donor is used. Or the wife cannot produce the eggs and donor eggs are used. This results in a violation of the good of marriage, of its exclusivity between the husband and wife. These attempts at having a child are a species of adultery, for at marriage a husband and wife give their bodies and the generative powers of their bodies to one another and to no one else.

Another procedure used in an attempt to achieve the great good of a child is surrogate mothering. In this case an infertile couple enters into a contract with a woman who has shown that she has been able to bear children. These women are sometimes referred to as “breeders,” a term which itself violates their dignity. There are different kinds of surrogacy. In one of the most common, the “surrogate” is impregnated with sperm from the husband of the infertile couple. This is a contractual arrangement and attorneys and agencies are involved as well as medical professionals.

The “surrogate” agrees to turn the baby over to the contracting couple after it has been born. As noted, this, too, will constitute a form of adultery. However, other injustices often occur. The pregnancy is monitored, and if it is found that the child is “defective”, the contracting couple can direct the surrogate to have an abortion. If she refuses, the contract is voided, and the contracting couple is relieved of any obligations for the child. The “surrogate” is left with all the medical costs associated with pregnancy and delivery as well as the costs of raising the child to adulthood.

These arrangements can be quite expensive, costing as much as \$100,000. But another consideration factors in here. The “surrogate” in this case is not actually the surrogate but rather the *mother*, for her egg was fertilized by the sperm from the man of the contracting couple. So in this case, the real mother is willing to relinquish her own child for the sum of money she was paid for her services. In the final analysis, this can be seen as “trafficking in human flesh,” in the sale of her baby for an agreed upon sum of money. Once again, a true good is sought, but many other goods are violated in the process; the sanctity and exclusivity of marriage, the reduction of the mother of the child to being the provider of a product for the contracting couple, the engendering of a new human being in accord with the terms of a commercial contract, and even the willingness to kill the child if fails “quality control.”

Seeking goods in this life is laudable. However, we must take care that the means we use in pursuit of those goods are good themselves!

The Church understands the challenges which this can sometimes present when we become so desirous of a certain good, we cease to see things clearly. Her teachings are found in the Catechism which makes it clear that pursuing a good in a disordered way is not a good! It

teaches that sin “is a failure in love for God and neighbor caused by *a perverse attachment* to certain goods”. We are always seeking the good but in some cases it is a disordered pursuit.

We are naturally drawn to seek the good, and a child is certainly a preeminent one. The child is a true good, *a bonum honestum*. But each step we take to achieve that good must itself also be a *bonum honestum* which sometimes requires a serious examination of conscience and guidance from the Church and trusted interpreters of the Church teaching like The National Catholic Bioethics Center!

John Haas PhD, STL
President Emeritus of the National Catholic Bioethics Center