

REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

Patrick Lee

ISSUE: What does the Church teach about reproductive technologies?

RESPONSE: If they help married couples realize the basic goods involved in marriage, the Church favors technological interventions. The Church opposes technological interventions that violate the natural law regarding the intrinsic goods and natural rights of the human person. In this regard, the Church protects human life and the procreative and unitive aspects of sexual acts within marriage.¹ The following are morally wrong: *in vitro* fertilization and the discarding of embryos in *in vitro* fertilization, non-therapeutic experimentation or manipulation on embryos, artificial insemination (whether by donor or by husband) and human cloning. The Church has not pronounced on the procedures called GIFT and TOTS.

DISCUSSION: The mere existence of technological intervention does not provide moral acceptance of its use. In light of her teachings, the criteria used by the Church to determine the morality of reproductive technologies pertains to the nature and fundamental goods of the human person. When applying technology to sexuality, we must respect three fundamental goods related to married love:

- (1) *Human life itself:* Every human being has a right to life. The Church teaches that each person must be respected as intrinsically good from the moment of conception. This right to life is the basic right from which all other rights flow. It necessarily involves a right to a life of dignity.²
- (2) *The procreative and unitive dimension of the marital act:* The procreative dimension of marriage flows directly from the unitive. They cannot be separated legitimately. The separation of these, one from the other, violates natural law and the will of God. As Pope Paul VI noted:

This particular doctrine, often expounded by the Magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.

Hence, to use this divine gift while depriving it, even if only partially, of its meaning and purpose, is equally repugnant to the nature of man and of woman, strikes at the heart of their relationship and is consequently in opposition to the plan of God and His holy will.³

- (3) *Responsible Parenthood.* Parents must accept children as gifts from God, as the fruit of their marital love and two-in-one-flesh communion. The relationship of the parents to the child, which requires that they treat the child as an end in himself, is itself a distinct, basic good. If technological interventions involve treating a child as a mere instrument in relation to the parents' wishes, then the basic good of the relationship of the parents to the child is violated.

In short, recognition of the procreative and unitive aspects of marital intercourse demands respect for the sanctity of life and responsible parenthood.

REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Reproductive specialists use several interventions to assist infertile couples. Noted below are four procedures expressly condemned by the Church as morally wrong. A fifth procedure, TOTS or GIFT, violates the principles espoused in *Humanae Vitae* and should be avoided.

***In Vitro* Fertilization and the Discarding of Embryos**

In vitro fertilization (IVF) and embryo transfer (ET) involve obtaining sperm cells (usually by masturbation) and ova (by laparoscopy) and causing their fusion in a petrie dish outside the bodies of the spouses. One of the resulting embryos is transferred to the uterus of the mother. If all goes well, the embryo will mature normally within the mother's womb.

Typically the technicians cause the fertilization of several ova, choose the embryo they think has the best chance of survival and freeze the rest. After successful implantation of an embryo occurs, the remaining embryos are discarded. The freezing and later killing of these embryos violates the right to life. "The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life."⁴

In addition to violating the right to life, *In vitro* fertilization separates the unitive and procreative dimensions of married love. As such, this procedure is intrinsically evil. This is further discussed below.

Artificial Insemination by Donor (AID), AKA: Heterologous Artificial Fertilization

In this procedure, a man other than the husband, donates semen for use by a woman. The semen is artificially placed in the fallopian tubes during the woman's fertile period. If successful, fertilization and implantation occur.

This practice is a moral evil because it "is contrary to the unity of marriage, to the dignity of the spouses, to the vocation proper to parents, and to the child's right to be conceived and brought into the world in marriage and from marriage."⁵ Although AID does not involve having a complete sexual act with someone other than one's spouse, it does involve procreation with someone other than one's spouse. In that respect, this procedure violates the unity of marriage. Procreation in accord with God's will requires bodily union within marriage. Technology should not deliberately separate procreation from the personal relationship of the spouses, as in this case, when the biological relationship and acts of the donor are dissociated from the personal, unitive dimension of the marriage covenant.

"Children are the outstanding gift of marriage, and contribute in the highest degree to the parents' welfare."⁶ They have a right to an environment most suited for their flourishing. Marriage, the union of a man and woman who have specific responsibility for their children, and who have a natural affection for them, establishes the environment most suited for the bearing and raising of children. Each child has a right to be born in marriage and a right to the affection and dedication of his or her parents. When conceiving by artificial insemination of donor, the natural parents willfully deprive the child of the natural environment of a family made up of its biological parents. Further, the "outstanding gift" is withheld from one of the two parents.

It follows from this that what is often called "surrogate motherhood," is morally wrong. In this practice a married couple hire another woman to carry to term either a baby produced by the husband's sperm and the other woman's ovum, or a baby produced *in vitro* by the sperm and ovum of the husband and wife. This involves deliberately causing a "rupture between genetic parenthood, gestational parenthood, and the responsibility for upbringing."⁷

***In Vitro* Fertilization and Artificial Insemination by Husband (AIH), AKA: Homologous Artificial Insemination**

In these procedures, the husband's sperm and the wife's ovum are used instead of those from donors. In all other respects, the procedure are the same.

Because the purpose of the procedure is procreation and it occurs with sperm and ovum from the married couple, some argue that artificial insemination by the husband should be morally acceptable if "surplus" embryos are not discarded. While the Church is in favor of procreation as an upright end, that does not mean that she approves of every means to that end. The difficulty with *in vitro fertilization* is that it separates the unitive aspect of the sexual

act from its procreative dimension. When a child is conceived through the marital act, even if the spouses hope for a child, the child is not directly *made or produced*. Rather, the child proceeds indirectly from their direct act of expressing and embodying their marital communion. When directly produced, the child comes to be as a product rather than as a gift. “In reality, the origin of a human person is the result of an act of giving. The one conceived must be the fruit of his parents’ love. He cannot be desired or conceived as the product of an intervention of medical or biological techniques; that would be equivalent to reducing him to an object of scientific technology.”⁸

These arguments show, perhaps even more emphatically, that human cloning would be contrary to the personal relationship between parents and child.

If the procedure substitutes for sexual intercourse (that is, if the procedure causes the fusion of sperm and ovum rather than sexual intercourse doing so), it separates the procreative and unitive aspects of married love and de-means the child in the first moment of existence. Other procedures which assist procreation through marital intercourse are morally acceptable. In short, the basic teaching of the Church on this issue is clear: “Homologous artificial insemination within marriage cannot be admitted except for those cases in which the technical means is not a substitute for the conjugal act but serves to facilitate and to help so that the act attains its natural purpose.”⁹

Experimentation on Embryos

Because the embryo should be respected as a person from conception onward, it follows that experimentation on the embryo that is not for his or her benefit (non-therapeutic) is immoral. The Church explicitly teaches that no end, no matter how noble, can justify non-therapeutic experimentation on living embryos or fetuses, whether viable or not, whether inside or outside the mother’s womb. Parents cannot give legitimate consent for experimentation on their unborn children, for they do not have the moral authority to dispose of the life and physical integrity of their children.¹⁰ Likewise, manipulation of the embryo for the sake of reproducing others (such as freezing embryos) is morally wrong, for this is a non-therapeutic manipulation. Because of the child’s intrinsic dignity, the Church also teaches that all “commercial trafficking” of dead fetuses is morally wrong.

Quite different is the judgment on *diagnostic* treatments performed on embryos or fetuses, if such prenatal diagnostic procedures “respect the life and the integrity of the embryo and fetus and is directed toward its safeguarding or healing as an individual.”¹¹ Such procedures are morally permissible.

Tubal Ovum Transfer with Sperm (TOTS), AKA: GIFT

In this procedure, the doctor removes an ovum from the wife’s ovary. The couple have intercourse using a perforated condom. Part of the semen is caught and part of it leaks into the vagina. The doctor puts the ovum and sperm into a thin glass tube with an air bubble in between to keep them apart until they are injected into the wife’s fallopian tube. If all goes well, conception occurs just as it normally does.

Though the Church has not made an express pronouncement on this procedure, in my opinion, it violates the principles espoused in *Humanae Vitae* and *Donum Vitae*. The central question is this: does the procedure *assist* marital intercourse to procreate, or *substitute* for marital intercourse? The fact that a perforated condom is used during sexual intercourse as a means of obtaining the sperm means only that the sexual intercourse is open to procreation. However, for the act to be morally right, the conception must be caused by the sexual intercourse—that is why the Church rejects *in vitro* fertilization. In TOTS this is not so: since the semen used for fertilization is not that which is deposited in the vagina, the sexual intercourse is incidental to the conception.

Conclusion

Many people mistakenly think the Church’s positions on sex, marriage, and procreation are the result of a Fundamentalist scorn for science and technology. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Catholic Church appreciates and promotes genuine science. She also appreciates technological progress when it is in the service of, rather than directed against, the intrinsic goods of persons. Because of the basic, personal goods involved, sexual acts belong within marriage, and they should be open to procreation. Procreation belongs within marriage, and procreation

should be the fruit of marital intercourse. “These interventions are not to be rejected on the grounds that they are artificial. As such, they bear witness to the possibilities of the art of medicine. But they must be given a moral evaluation in reference to the dignity of the human person, who is called to realize his vocation from God to the gift of love and the gift of life.”¹²

¹ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, no. 28.

² John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, no. 2.

³ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 1968, no. 12.

⁴ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*, 1987, part 1 no. 1.

⁵ *Ibid*, part 2, no. 2

⁶ *Humanae Vitae*, no. 9.

⁷ *Donum Vitae*, part 2, no. 2.

⁸ *Ibid*, part 2, no. 4.

⁹ *Ibid*, part 2, no. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, part 1, no. 4; *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, art. 4, b, c.

¹¹ *Donum Vitae*, part 1, no. 2.

¹² *Ibid*, part 1, no. 4.

AVAILABLE FROM CUF BOOKS AND TAPES BY MAIL:

Catechism of the Catholic Church; \$19.95 • CUF Member : \$12.00 (Paperback) **Call: 1-888-316-2640**

Catechism of the Catholic Church; \$29.95 • CUF Member : \$22.00 (Hardcover) **Call: 1-888-316-2640**

Catholic For A Reason, Scott Hahn, et al.; \$15.95 • CUF Member . . . \$14.35 **Call: 1-800-693-2484**

Patrick Lee, *Abortion & Unborn Human Life*, Catholic University of America Press, 1996...\$14.95

To order, call: 410-516-6953

Free FAITH FACTS: Abortion • The Truth About Birth Control • Effective Chastity Education • Euthanasia • Organ Donation

**Catholics United for the Faith
827 North Fourth St.
Steubenville, OH 43952
(800) 693-2484**