

Why not In Vitro Fertilization?

Moira McQueen, LLB, MDiv, PhD

Many questions have been surfacing in the media recently concerning reproductive technologies. For example, there are some concerns that there may be some abnormal patterns of gene expression associated with in vitro fertilization (IVF), and further concern about a possible increase in later genetic disorders. In November 2008, the US Centers for Disease Control published a paper claiming that babies conceived through IVF have a slightly increased risk of having birth defects. Other studies agree with this, but further long term studies are needed to inform parents and others who want to use the procedure.

Another technological development stemming from IVF procedure is the creation of sperm from male embryonic stem cells. In turn, these sperm were used to fertilize mice ova, and succeeded in producing offspring. Consequent research in this area has been focused on using this technology to produce human sperm.

Making gametes may seem far fetched to the non-scientist, but a team of researchers from Newcastle University in the UK has been working on this for some time, claiming some success in creating male sperm, including sperm produced from women's bone marrow cells.

The main aim is to better understand the genetics of these germ cells, but there is clearly potential use of this research by infertile couples, who could use the technique to "grow" their own gametes, perhaps using their own stem cells, followed

by IVF to produce an embryo. There are innumerable scientific hurdles to these attempts, but research is ongoing, using both embryonic stem cells from human embryos given over for scientific use as well as adult stem cells.

These and many other developments raise serious ethical questions, including questions specific to the IVF procedure and subsequent consequences, arising from research and developments within the context of the broader IVF industry.

This article will consider the ethics of IVF within the context of Catholic moral teaching, and subsequent articles will consider the ethics of some of the consequences of IVF and other reproductive technologies, including cloning.

From a Catholic perspective, what guides us in these areas as we try to make moral decisions from the standpoint of an informed conscience?

THE HUMAN DRIVE TOWARDS PROCREATION

Why do people look to IVF, an expensive and not wildly successful procedure, for help? Statistics tell us that approximately one in five couples will be infertile with no possibility of conception, or relatively infertile, meaning that there is some possibility that the couple will procreate.

The reasons for infertility vary, and deserve yet another article discussing them. Present trends towards postponing marriage, in many cases involving years of using oral contraceptives, appear to have contributed to the rise in infertility statistics, but other physiological causes remain problematic.

IVF is currently the main response to infertility when normal attempts to conceive fail. Many Catholics in fact think that IVF is allowed by the Church, since it is used in an attempt to bring a child into the world. That intention is seen by many as good in itself, but what is forgotten is that we must also consider whether the means of doing so are morally right. It is understandable that couples want to have a child. From an anthropological point of view, it is clear that the human drive towards procreation is innate. It is something that “goes with the territory” of being human. It has nothing to do with societal conditioning, and everything to do with human desires and inclinations that are at the core of our being, along with our rationality. The procreative drive is so strong, at least heterosexually, that it will be interesting to see whether it will transcend even current strong societal moves towards limiting the number of children we are told we “ought” to have.

The thinking of at least the last four decades is that there are too many people on this planet, and that society should be taking definite steps towards limiting the number of children to be born. China, for example, is applying this policy through force of law, with mandatory birth control and abortion of children conceived beyond the limit of one per family. There are further sanctions for those who break the law. Although this is an intentionally pragmatic move, it clearly goes against natural procreative desires and inclinations, and it will be interesting to discover how successful or otherwise this policy will be over the long run. It is much more likely that the human procreative drive—the innate law of nature—will resist and outlast any civil law that tries to change it.

Since the drive to procreate is such a necessary and essential part of human nature, the Church naturally has sympathy for those who discover that they cannot conceive a

child because of infertility. That sympathy, however, does not translate into allowing a technological procedure such as IVF where normal conception proves impossible.

Why is this so? Catholics start their moral enquiry by asking what reasons the Church gives for its teaching on this question.

THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE TO IVF

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an Instruction called *Donum Vitae (On Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation)* 1987, in response to developments in IVF and other reproductive technologies that were emerging since the birth of the first “test-tube” baby in 1973.

The Congregation restated the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which said in *Gaudium et Spes* that the procreative and unitive dimensions of the marital act are so important that they must always be kept together.

This teaching was reinforced by the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which forbids contraception on the basis that it does not maintain the inseparability of the procreative and unitive dimensions of marriage. Many Catholics cannot see the validity of this teaching, looking instead more to the overall goodness of the couple’s marital procreativity and unity in their ethical decision making. In IVF, the unitive and procreative dimensions are also separated, but in a different way. What does the Church say about this?

Donum Vitae says in Part II A 1 that:

Every human being is always to be accepted as a gift and blessing of God. However, from the moral point of view a truly responsible procreation vis-à-vis the unborn child must be the fruit of marriage.

... the procreation of a new person, whereby the man and the woman collaborate with the power of the Creator, must be the fruit and the sign of the mutual self-giving of the spouses, of their love and of their fidelity. The fidelity of the spouses in the unity of marriage involves reciprocal respect of their right to become a father and a mother only through each other. (Section 34)

This means that the church believes that a child should be conceived through the loving sexual act of its own mother and father. Only this setting is considered worthy of human conception and birth. Only this conjugal act fulfills “the laws inscribed in the very being of man and woman.” (Section 38)

The main reason IVF is not allowed is, then, that the infant so procreated is “not the fruit of a specific act of conjugal union.” (Section 41) The document goes on to explain: “It is in their bodies and through their bodies that the spouses consummate their marriage and are able to become father and mother. In order to respect the language of their bodies and their natural generosity, the conjugal union must take place with respect for its openness to procreation; and the procreation of a person must be the fruit and the result of married love. (Section 44) Further, the Congregation writes: “Fertilization achieved outside the bodies of the couple remains by this very fact deprived of the meanings and the values which are expressed in the language of the body and in the union of human persons.” (Section 45)

Church teaching is clear that through their conjugal act the couple cooperates with the Creator in procreating, (*Gaudium et Spes*, Section 50), whereas couples are deemed to be acting as “masters” of creation if they separate procreativity and unity through their use of IVF. (*Donum Vitae*, Section 45)

The church states that a child “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. No one may subject the coming of a child into the world to conditions of technical efficiency which are to be evaluated according to standards of control and dominion.” (Section 46)

These are strong injunctions, telling us that we may not resort to technical means of creating, no matter how serious the level of infertility. *Donum Vitae* acknowledges that, for some, recourse to IVF using their own gametes appears to be the only way of fulfilling their desire for a child.

The question is asked whether the totality of conjugal life in such situations is sufficient to ensure the dignity proper to human procreation?

The Congregation replies in Section 48:

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 definite moral quality from the totality of conjugal life of which it becomes part nor from the conjugal life of which it becomes part nor from the conjugal acts which may precede or follow it.

IMPORTANCE OF THE CONJUGAL ACT FOR PROCREATION

The fertilization process and the other technical aspects of IVF are of great concern to the Congregation, and it states in Section 50:

Such fertilization is neither in fact achieved, nor positively willed, as the expression and fruit of specific act of the conjugal union. In homologous IVF and ET, 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."

IVF not only takes place outside the bodies of the couple, but the actions of third parties and their technical skill are required for the procedure to be effective. The Church is further concerned that this places the fate of the embryo in the hands of medical personnel, and "establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person."

FREEDOM, DIGNITY, EQUALITY

This is clearly in contravention of Catholic teaching that emphasizes the essential freedom, dignity and equality of all, including the tiniest embryo.

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," of IVF that does not involve the destruction of spare or defective embryos is still considered morally illicit, because it deprives human procreation of its proper dignity.

It is important to note, however, that the Church is clear that, "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." (Section 51)

CONCLUSION

These pastoral comments are important in considering moral questions surrounding IVF, but *Donum Vitae* leaves us in no doubt that it considers IVF to be objectively wrong. In the next two articles we will discuss further developments in IVF and cloning, including the type of question raised at the beginning of this article. We will also consider what happens to and with the embryos that are never implanted, and the kind of moral climate that IVF has created. ■

Moira McQueen, LLB, MDiv, PhD, is the Executive Director of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute. Prof. McQueen also teaches moral theology in the Faculty of Theology, University of St. Michael's College. She has written and co-authored several articles in bioethics, fundamental ethics and other areas.

Dr. McQueen's book, Bioethics Matters: A Guide for Concerned Catholics, is available through Novalis.

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