

ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY AND THE FAMILY

By Helen Alvaré

Respect Life

At the beginning of the 21st century, it is impossible to avoid news reports on the subject of the “changing American family.” The legalization of same-sex marriage and civil unions, high rates of cohabitation, divorce, remarriage, and out-of-wedlock parenting are all altering many people’s understanding of the nature and purposes of family life. One lesser-noted phenomenon, changing people’s experience of family from the inside out, is the increasing use of assisted reproductive technologies (“ARTs”). In the United States alone, there are thousands of fertility clinics, sperm banks, egg brokers and surrogate mothers annually producing about 10,000 children.

This article will consider ARTs from the perspective of Catholic social teaching on the family. First, it will summarize very briefly the way ARTs are practiced in the United States, and the leading Catholic moral objections to them. It will then apply the two major aspects of Catholic social teaching about the nature and role of families to the practice of ARTs.

In the United States today, ART services range from the sale of drugs affecting a woman’s ovulation, to the sale of sperm for intra-uterine insemination, to in vitro fertilization and other fertilization processes. Increasing numbers of clinics are also offering egg and/or embryo freezing (“cryopreservation”), pre-implantation genetic diagnosis for weeding out embryos with certain genes or of a certain sex, “selective reduction” for destroying developing unborn children in multiple-gestation pregnancies, and even custom-designed embryos for clients seeking children with certain levels of beauty and/or accomplishment. Even this list does not encompass the entire ART industry, for it also includes surrogate mothers and their brokers, as well as egg and sperm “donors” (who don’t “donate” but in fact are paid). There are virtually no laws limiting the practice of ART in the U.S. What few there are treat mostly the questions of truth in advertising, and—in cases involving the sale of eggs, sperm or embryos—that of assigning parenting rights to the purchasers of fertility services while cutting off the rights of the biological parents. There are no laws limiting ARTs’

use to married couples or to individuals of any sexual preference; no laws limiting payments to “donors,” limiting the volume of “donations” from one person, or setting high or low age limits for ART clients. What limits exist in practice depend entirely on the wishes of the fertility clinic or doctor.

Many people, including many Catholics, are unaware of the Church’s moral responses to these practices. Perhaps not surprisingly, many find it difficult to imagine that our faith would have moral objections to married couples “making babies” by any means. Yet the Church does firmly object. Church documents such as *Donum Vitae* and *Evangelium Vitae* explain the arguments against substituting a technological act for married love as the source of procreation. A 1998 article by Dr. John Haas in this Respect Life Program elaborated on these moral objections—noting, for example, the way the ART industry tends to “commodify” children generally, and how the procedures often require masturbation for the collection of sperm. Certain ART processes may also involve freezing, destroying or donating (for experiments) embryos “left over” from clients. ART practitioners may employ “selective reduction” (really selective abortion) when “too many” embryos implant in the mother’s womb and begin to grow. All of these are moral problems in the real-world practice of ARTs today.

Another Catholic perspective on ARTs concerns their effects upon the family, and by extension, society. That is the subject of this article. It is not an easy teaching for many to accept, especially married couples who discover that they are infertile. Parts of this teaching will appeal immediately to our commonsense. Other parts require one to accept with good will that God’s ways are not our ways—that there is holy mystery in God’s choosing to bring human life into being in one manner and not another. The first aspect of Catholic social teaching about the family involves such holy mystery.

Catholic social teaching calls the family the “first natural community,” society’s first cell. As such, the family ought

to be the prototype of a good society. This has been shown across the globe and throughout history: strong family life builds strong communities and nations. A famous 19th century U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Maynard v. Hill*, said of the family based on marriage: “It is … a relation the most important, … the purest tie of social life, and the true basis of human progress.” In other words, families foster qualities that help build good human societies.

At a very basic level, Catholic teaching holds that good social life requires every person to regard every other person as a gift from God—as a unique individual with his or her own talents and responsibilities, a person to be treated in accord with the dignity given by God Himself. Furthermore, Catholics recognize that human beings are

of ARTs, the notion that children are gifts is, at the very least, obscured.

Increasingly, too, the ART industry is helping to blot out the notion that people ought to be accepted simply for who they are; rather, via ARTs, children’s traits may increasingly be selected. Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis can determine whether an embryo is male or female. Embryos carrying certain genetically identifiable disorders may be eliminated. More commonly, each year in the United States, thousands of paid donors possessing currently desired traits—height, certain levels of education, beauty, athletic or musical accomplishment, and ethnic type—sell their eggs or their sperm to fertility clinics to be purchased by individuals and couples after reviewing their “donor profiles.” Even the most innocent married

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destined to live socially. Adam longed for another human fit to be his companion. God Himself, in the Trinity, lives in a community of love. The Church takes this point yet further: We are meant not only to live in community, but to find in service to others the very meaning of our life, just as Jesus’ life was characterized and crowned by his complete service to others.

Families are to form human beings for this manner of social living. They do this in part when they form children by an act of the most profound and intimate love between the parents. Children so conceived are, from their very beginning, the gifts and fruits of this love. Children so conceived may be desired but cannot be “demanded.” And if they do come, they “come as they are,” with unique talents and weaknesses. They are loved by their parents just for being.

We do not fully understand why God designed the human race to propagate itself this way. He may have chosen myriad other ways, completely unrelated to the act by which a man and woman express the strength of their love for one another. But from the fact that he chose this way, we know that the relationship between love and life means something very important.

Even if one has to struggle to accept God’s ways in this area, the manner in which the ART industry has come to operate certainly should give us cause for concern. By its very nature, of course, this industry creates children using acts of medical technology. But ever increasingly, it has come to characterize children as entitlements, and as products. Advertising by fertility clinics shouts: “Have a baby or your money back!” In other words, in the world

couple imaginable, approaching a fertility clinic wishing only for a child of their own, will be exposed by the clinic to the option of substituting the gametes of a younger or healthier or better looking “donor.” They will be told that it’s possible to select the preferred sex of their child, and to use pre-implantation genetic diagnosis to avoid many genetic diseases. Further, because most fertility clinics implant large numbers of embryos to increase the chances of a live birth, the couple may face the prospect of selective reduction to “assure” at least one live birth.

After all, the clinic is a profit making entity, and its reputation depends heavily upon its ability to maximize the chances that each reproductive cycle will produce a live-born, high-quality child. Each clinic therefore seeks clients who are willing to do “anything it takes” to produce a live birth. It is therefore very difficult, even for a couple with the best intentions, to avoid the temptation to opt not just for “a child,” but for the best child they can afford.

ARTs pose a second threat to building families who may serve as the prototype of a good society. Strong societies contain as many individuals as possible who are reared in stable, nurturing environments. Today, a vast amount of social science research indicates that the very best environment for children includes stable, married parents. On average, neither cohabitation, nor single parenthood provides children the educational and emotional and even financial advantages provided by their married, biological parents.

By their very nature, ARTs separate procreation from marriage physically. But they also accomplish this social-

ly. Anyone—any individual or couple, single or married, young or old, heterosexual or homosexual—can buy sperm or eggs or even a custom-made embryo in the United States. These can be ordered over the Internet with a credit card and delivered to your home or your doctor's office. Even many married couples use “donor” gametes and embryos. The ART industry, in other words, is regularly and deliberately placing children in situations known to cause problems for them and for society.

There are more than hints that we are already reaping the whirlwind from this. Media are now reporting on children’s intensive searches for their biological “sperm donor” fathers, followed by their emotional upset upon realizing that these “fathers” thought nothing of their involvement in the child’s conception and want nothing to do with the child.

ARTs’ separation of marriage and children has also contributed to a general de-linking of the two in the wider public mind. In all the court cases finding that homosexuals possess a right to marriage or a similar union, the fact that there are no laws restricting ARTs to married couples has played a strong role. Courts have said that states could not really believe that children’s well-being depends on heterosexual marriage, or their laws would not allow everyone access to ARTs. As the laws do allow such access, homosexual marriage offends no state policy.

A second aspect of Catholic Social Teaching on the family is also directly contradicted by the practice of ARTs. It is that the family based on marriage is the sanctuary of life, the place where life can best be welcomed and protected. It is not only the fact that ARTs are so easily offered outside of marriage that threatens this principle. It is also that, as practiced today, ARTs present many possibilities for harming or killing human life during its embryonic or later phase. Many couples are completely unaware of this. Yet it is the case that many embryos die during or after various assisted fertilization procedures. Some are directly killed if they are the “wrong sex,” or have the “wrong genes” following pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, or simply don’t seem to be growing as vigorously as their siblings in the Petri dish. Some embryos die while frozen, or upon being thawed. Some are aborted during the fetal stage if “too many” children begin to grow in their mother’s womb. Some unused embryos are simply discarded once parents have reached their desired family or have given up trying to have a child.

Furthermore, we increasingly know that even those embryos who “make it” are subjected to serious risks. Very little testing was undertaken regarding the safety of IVF and related practices before these were offered commercially. Scientific literature over the last several years

has begun to document the high rates of disabilities suffered from multiple gestation births from ARTs; over 38% of all ART births are of multiples. This figure does not account for the many additional ART pregnancies that began as multiple but were “reduced” before birth. Even “singleton” ART children seem to have higher rates of some rare genetic disorders than are found among natural births. These facts, coming to light only recently, underscore how ARTs may erode the notion of the family as the very sanctuary of human life.

CONCLUSION

Many people have difficulty understanding how an industry seemingly dedicated to providing children could run afoul of Catholic social teaching about the well-being of families. Human beings naturally desire children. A married couple may easily come to think of procreation as a “right.” Thousands of fertility services will do everything scientifically possible to produce children for them. But a closer look at the practices and values of the ART industry shows how deeply it contradicts the real goods of the family and of society.

It is not easy to stand where Catholics stand on this matter. Very likely, the industry will get better at producing children more often, with fewer easily visible complications. Other trends argue for a growing role for ARTs. Women are marrying later, or not at all, but want children. The widespread availability of birth control and abortion sustain the notion that children are always a “choice,” and ARTs feed into this. Combine this with a trend toward consumerism, and we can appreciate how hard it will be for an average person to resist creating the “best child possible.”

Over time, however, the ART industry has revealed more and more of its flawed values and practices. Catholics and others naturally recoil from many of these, but they are less widely known and understood than they should be—especially among couples lured by the promise that the industry can give them “a child of their own.” Spiritual strength and reverence for the mystery of God’s plan for creation will need to sustain us at times when our merely human reason and strength are not enough to resist this temptation.

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Parish/ Diocesan Activities

Pastoral Care for Infertility

Begotten, Not Made: Pastoral Care for Couples Experiencing Infertility. Both a “Priest’s Guide” and a “Couple’s Manual” are available in this program developed by Steven Bozza, available from the Family Life Institute. The manuals explain moral teachings on dealing with infertility and are designed to aid pastors and diocesan family life offices in counseling infertile couples. For more information on how to start this program in your diocese contact Steven Bozza, Director, Office of Family Life/Respect Life, Diocese of Camden (N.J.) at sbozza@camdendiocese.org or call (856) 583-6116. To order the manuals, visit www.familylifeinstitute.org.

Awareness and Education

Ask a member of your parish Pro-Life Committee to draw up a list of local Ob-Gyns with their mailing addresses. Send each doctor a personal note, inviting them to learn about the highly successful treatment of infertility at the National Center for Women’s Health in Omaha. Enclose several brochures from the Pope Paul VI Institute (below).

Resources

Teaching Documents

Donum Vitae (Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation)

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1987. USCCB: Call 800-235-8722 or visit www.usccb.org/publishing.

The Gospel of Life

Pope John Paul II, 1995. USCCB: Call 800-235-8722 or visit www.usccb.org/publishing.

Books

Eugene F. Diamond, M.D. *A Catholic Guide to Medical Ethics: Catholic Principles in Clinical Practice*. Palos Park, Ill.: The Linacre Institute, 2001. Visit www.cathmed.org.

Edward J. Furton, Ph.D. and Louise A. Mitchell, M.T.S. (eds.) *What is Man, O Lord? The Human Person in a Biotech Age*. Boston, Mass.: The National Catholic Bioethics Center, 2002.

Luke Gormally (ed.). *Issues for a Catholic Bioethic*. London: The Linacre Center, 1999. Visit www.linacre.org.

Leon R. Kass, M.D. *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002.

John F. Kilner et al. (eds.). *Cutting-Edge Bioethics: A Christian Exploration of Technologies and Trends*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2002. Call 800-253-7521 or visit www.eerdmans.com.

William Kristol and Eric Cohen (eds.). *The Future Is Now: America Confronts the New Genetics*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publ., 2002. Call 800-462-6420 or visit www.rowmanlittlefield.com.

Include a message in the Sunday bulletin along these lines: “If you or someone you know is having difficulty conceiving, there’s no need to go through the expense, risks and disappointments of IVF. Free brochures in the vestibule explain why the Church opposes some reproductive technologies (like IVF) and offers better, highly successful alternatives to IVF.” Keep the pamphlet rack supplied with brochures and articles recommended below.

Recruit an MD from your parish to ask the local medical society to allow a Creighton-trained physician to address an upcoming meeting or conference on the exciting breakthroughs in Natural Reproductive Technology (NaProTECHNOLOGY®). If no Creighton-trained MD is available locally, the parish women’s club or Knights of Columbus Council may be able to help cover travel expenses for one to speak.

Prayer

Ask your pastor to include an intercession at Sunday Masses periodically asking, for example: *For married couples experiencing difficulties conceiving a baby, that the Lord sustain their hope and bless their marriage with children; we pray to the Lord*:

Nicholas C. Lund-Molfese and Michael L. Kelly (eds.). *Human Dignity and Reproductive Technology*. New York: University Press of America, 2003. Visit www.univpress.com or call 800-462-6420.

William E. May. *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life*. Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor Books, 2000. Call 800-348-2440 or visit www.osvbooks.com.

Wesley J. Smith. *Consumer’s Guide to a Brave New World*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004.

Articles

Helen Alvaré, “Catholic Teaching and the Law Concerning the New Reproductive Technologies,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 30:1 (2002) 107-134.

Marie Anderson, M.D., FACOG and John Bruchalski, M.D., “Assisted Reproductive Technologies Are Anti-Woman,” *Respect Life Program 2004*; Available at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/04anderson.shtml>.

Steven Bozza, “A Pastoral Response to Infertility,” *NFP Forum* 11:3-4 (Summer/Fall 2000); Available at www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/nwssumfl00.shtml#bozza.

Marilyn E. Coors, Ph.D., “Genetic Enhancement: Custom Kids and Chimeras,” *Respect Life Program 2005*; Available at www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/coors05finaleng.pdf.

Edward J. Furton, Ph.D. (ed.), “Respect for the Human Embryo,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 1:2 (Summer 2001).

John M. Haas, Ph.D., S.T.L., “Begotten Not Made: A Catholic View of Reproductive Technology,” *Respect Life Program 1998*; Available at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rhp/98rlphaa.shtml>.

Sr. Renée Mirkes, OSF, Ph.D., “NaProTECHNOLOGY® -- Health Care Women Really Need”; Available at www.popepaulvi.com/PDF/sister/Forum-2006.pdf.

Pamphlets

The following are available from the Pope Paul VI Institute E-Store at www.popepaulvi.com/estorebrochures.htm:

- P-BR-1 *The Creighton Model Fertility Care System™*
- P-BR-2 *What are Catholic Reproductive Health Services?*
- P-BR-4 *12 Great Reasons to Use a Natural Means to Regulate Fertility*
- P-BR-19 *NaProTECHNOLOGY: The Contemporary Approach to Women’s Health Care*
- P-BR-22 *Answers for Infertility*
- P-BR-23 *Infertility*
- P-BR-24 *A Disease Based Approach to Infertility*
- P-BR-25 *Comprehensive Planning for the Treatment of Infertility*

Internet

www.ncbcenter.org
(Nat'l Catholic Bioethics Center)

www.popepaulvi.com and www.naprotechnology.com
(Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction; its National Center for Women’s Health adheres to Catholic teaching and is one of the most successful infertility programs in the U.S.)

www.usccb.org/prolife
(U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities)