

Seven Considerations While Navigating Infertility

We often assume parenthood happens easily after “I do,” but for many married couples, it does not. For some, the joy of conception never happens. Others suffer repeated miscarriages. Still others experience secondary infertility: after giving birth to one or more children, they are unable to have another.

The pain can become overwhelming. Social media posts of pregnancies, baby announcements, or pictures of newborns may intensify feelings of being alone in the ache for a child. Attending baby showers and being around children or pregnant women can be excruciating.

If you experience difficulty bringing a child into your family, know that you are not alone. God is with you, and his Church desires to walk with you. The following suggestions may be helpful to you on this journey.

1. **Start with Prayer:** God has a beautiful plan for your life as a married couple. Seek his guidance, and let the healing power of prayer, a conversation in which “heart speaks unto heart,”¹ strengthen you. Pope Francis encourages us to pray not only with commonly known prayers, “but also to pray in our own words.”²
2. **Connect with Others:** A mentorship, a faith-based support group, or spiritual direction can offer comfort and provide new perspectives. Sharing your struggles with family, friends, or a therapist can also help ease the pain. Ask the saints for their intercession, and reflect upon the biblical stories of Sarah and Abraham, Hannah and Elkanah, and Elizabeth and Zechariah.³
3. **Seek to Understand the Church’s Teaching:*** The sexual act expresses the marital covenant, repeating over and over again, “I give myself to you entirely, unreservedly, holding nothing back.” In this mutual gift of self, so all-encompassing that it includes their potential for procreation, a husband and wife are united as one, giving full expression to their love. These two aspects of sexuality, the unitive and the procreative, are intertwined and are not meant to be separated.

Suppressing the possibility of conception (i.e., contraceptive use) and creating life outside the marital sexual act (i.e., use of some reproductive technologies) both work against God’s plan for married love and the gift of life. Pope Francis explains that “a child deserves to be born of that love” expressed between a husband and wife in intercourse, “and not by any other means, for ‘he or she is not something owed ... but is a gift.’”⁴

**(Further explanation in listed resources.)*

4. **Learn the Difference between Ethical and Unethical Interventions:*** Applying the Church’s teaching means that, in short, procedures that introduce a third party into the process (such as surrogates or sperm/egg donors) are not morally acceptable. Additionally, substituting a laboratory action or anything else for intercourse, such as artificial insemination or *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), is also morally unacceptable.

However, treatments that help facilitate conception through marital intercourse are morally ethical.

**(Further information in listed resources.)*

5. **Be Aware of “Treatments” That Destroy Life:** Some procedures are problematic for multiple reasons. For example, beyond its unethical nature (as per the previous section), *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) often involves the tragic loss of human life. Children in the embryonic stage are frequently discarded—or frozen—without ever being implanted into their mother’s womb. And if multiple babies are implanted, doctors may suggest performing a “fetal reduction” by killing one or more to increase the survival chances of the strongest child in utero. While a baby might eventually be born, his or her tiny siblings may be destroyed in the process.⁵
6. **Make a Plan:** Do you know there are medical options consistent with Church teaching that have statistically significantly higher rates of achieving pregnancy than IVF?⁶ Learn about these, fertility awareness practices, and other treatments that also respect your marriage and any children who may be conceived. If you have sought to bring a child into your family through ways not in keeping with God’s plan for life and married love, have hope. The Lord welcomes us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where we can receive the loving mercy and forgiveness we each need. With prayer and an informed conscience, work together as a couple to create a plan that takes into consideration the desire for children along with moral principles, finances, medical realities, and your overall well-being (both individually and as a couple). Locate a trained specialist or doctor who honors your plan and has training in methods of assistance that are in keeping with Church teaching.
7. **Keep Your Marriage Healthy:** Handling the uncertainties of infertility is a challenge for even the strongest marriages. Once engaged in treatment, it can become easy to focus more on the process than on each other. However, communication and mutual decision-making are vital. Staying intimately connected can help make it easier to manage lifestyle changes, reordering of priorities, physical discomfort, career disruption, and difficulties with insensitive people.

Hold fast to the constant truth of God’s love for you. “To couples who cannot have children of their own,” St. John Paul II affirmed, “you are no less loved by God; your love for each other is complete and fruitful when it is open to others”⁷ and their needs. In times of suffering, Pope Francis notes, “we sense a powerful need for someone to be close and feel compassion for us.” You are not alone: “Jesus ‘does not abandon those whom he loves.’”⁸

Even if we ourselves do not experience difficulty bearing children, we can be channels of God’s mercy for those who do. Learn how to show compassion sensitively from a short list of suggested *dos* and *don’ts* at www.usccb.org/respectlife.

*Resources:

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009.
- Natural Family Planning Program, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. “Reproductive Technology (Evaluation & Treatment of Infertility): Guidelines for Catholic Couples.” Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Instruction *Donum Vitae (Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation)*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Instruction *Dignitas Personae (The Dignity of a Person)*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2008.
- Articles, documents, statements, and more: www.usccb.org/LifeGivingLove

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily at the Mass with the Beatification of Venerable Cardinal John Henry Newman on September 19, 2010*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010).

² Pope Francis, *General Audience, May 7, 2014*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014).

³ Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-8; 1 Samuel 1:1 – 2:11, 18-21; Luke 1:5-25

⁴ Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), nos. 80-81.

⁵ John M. Haas, Ph.D., S.T.L., “Begotten Not Made: A Catholic View of Reproductive Technology,” (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998).

⁶ “Infertility,” NaProTechnology, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.naprotechnology.com/infertility.htm>,

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⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Homily at the Mass for the Families on February 13, 1982*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1982).

⁸ Pope Francis, *Meditation at the Prayer Vigil to “Dry the Tears” on May 5, 2016*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016).

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