



## Parental Desires, Children and IVF

**"Marital acts are a way of 'petitioning the Giver for his gifts.' By insisting on or demanding the gift (through *in vitro* fertilization), the child is no longer that 'gift' but a kind of entitlement or project to be realized."**



Whenever I give talks on *in vitro* fertilization, I try to explain to my audiences how new human life must be procreated in the warmth of the marital embrace and in the protective hearth of the maternal womb, not in the icy, impersonal world of the research laboratory, or the manipulative setting of a Petri dish.

On one occasion, after finishing up a talk, a married couple approached me. They had done *in vitro* fertilization and had several children from the procedure. They appeared to be struggling in conscience, and posed a searing question:

"If *in vitro* fertilization is wrong, are you suggesting it would be better that we didn't have our beautiful children? We can't imagine our life without them."

Imagining a world different from the one we have constructed through our own personal choices is difficult. This is often because of our innate tendency to validate our decisions, even erroneous ones, by focusing on "desirable outcomes" and "good intentions."

I recall once speaking with a woman who had given birth to a little boy out of wedlock. She was raising him as a single mom. He was

a source of endless joy and blessing to her and to her extended family of brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. Yet in a moment of candor, she admitted,

"Although I love my son dearly, and I can't imagine my life without him, I've also come to see how it would have been better if I had chosen not to have sex before marriage. I could have, and should have, followed another path."

By giving herself to the man she hoped might one day be her husband, she supposed she was entering onto a path towards fulfillment. She soon came to realize, though, that her son would be deprived of the presence of a father figure, and that he was subject to various other difficulties as he grew up because of the choice she had made.

Whenever we choose to follow a path that involves intrinsically immoral choices, we necessarily mislead ourselves about the best total state of affairs that could have been ours. We usually also bring harm to others because of such choices.

For the intrinsically disordered choice of *in vitro* fertiliza-

# Making Sense of Bioethics

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tion, it can be doubly difficult to see the harmful nature of the decision we are making because we direct our attention so intensely towards the baby we yearn for. Couples who do *in vitro* fertilization are doubtless convinced that the best total state of affairs for them would be to have a child, regardless of the steps it might require.

In the conversation with the husband and wife who attended my talk, they admitted that their own strong parental desires had gotten the upper hand in their decision-making process. They also admitted they were beginning to see a bigger picture: how a third party, an anonymous laboratory technician in the back room of the clinic, had actually produced their kids, reducing their parental and procreative role, in effect, to mere donors of sex-cells; how pornography and masturbation impinged on the origins of their own children; how they had produced a plethora of children, with some frozen, and others discarded along the way.

The attraction for children can be so strong that it can prevent us from acknowledging honestly the evil aspects that may be interwoven into certain choices we make. We can

mislead ourselves into thinking that our desires are worthy to be achieved at any cost. It is but a short step to ruin if our own desires become the final arbiters of right and wrong, and if we suppose that it's really up to us to determine what constitutes the best state of affairs for our lives. By granting our own willfulness center stage, we end up undermining the very blessings we seek for our life and for those around us.

Infertile couples may believe they have a *right* to children, when in reality they possess no such right, because the deeper truth is that children are always meant to be a gift, freely given by the Giver of gifts. Marital acts are a way of "petitioning the Giver for his gifts." By insisting on or demanding the gift (through *in vitro* fertilization), the child is no longer that "gift" but a kind of entitlement or project to be realized. After all, if we demand and force a "gift," is it still truly a gift?

Infertile couples too often may not have paused to reflect on the possibility of another path, nor fully considered the various other important and humanly fulfilling ways of expressing their marital fruitfulness, ways that might include foster parenting, teaching, becoming a "Big

Brother/Big Sister" to needy children in the community, or the generous decision to adopt a child.

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