



Sperm for Sale

"Our gametes, and their exclusive availability to our spouse through marital acts, manifest this beautiful and life-engendering possibility of giving ourselves away to the one person whom we singularly love."



The *New York Times Magazine* a few years back ran an article entitled, "Wanted: A Few Good Sperm" addressing the modern trend toward "open donor" sperm banks, where the donor agrees to meet any children born of his sperm once they reach the age of eighteen. The article included the story of a woman named Karyn and chronicled her odyssey as she sought the "perfect" donor for artificial insemination:

She did have a few ideas of what she might look for: she wanted a man of her same blood type, O positive. Because she herself is so tall, she preferred a medium height... She was also attracted by the idea of a donor of another race. "I believe in multiculturalism," she said. "I would probably choose somebody with a darker skin color so I don't have to slather sunblock on my kid all the time. I want it to be a healthy mix. You know how mixed dogs are always the nicest and the friendliest and the healthiest? If you get a clear race, they have all the problems. Mutts are always the friendly ones, the intelligent ones, the ones who don't bark and have a good character. I want a mutt."

She eventually settled on eight units of donor sperm for \$3,100. The donor had "proven fertility," meaning that at least one woman conceived using his sperm. His picture was available on the company's website, and she printed it out to keep on the coffee table of her Manhattan studio apartment. "I kind of glance at it as I pass," she said of the picture. "It's almost like when you date someone, and you keep looking at them, and you're, like, Are they cute? But every time I pass, I'm, like, Oh, he's really cute."

Buying and selling sex cells is becoming increasingly commonplace, and a growing number of companies allow customers to purchase sperm or ova. In many people's mind, the transaction is hardly different from buying groceries or office supplies.

Yet our sex cells, or gametes, are special cells. They uniquely identify us. They are an intimate expression of our own bodily identity, and mark our human fruitfulness. Each of us, in fact, has been given a capacity, a radical capacity, for total self-donation to a unique member of the opposite sex in marriage. Our gametes, and their exclusive availability to our spouse through marital acts, manifest this beauti-

Making Sense of Bioethics

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ful and life-engendering possibility of giving ourselves away to the one person whom we singularly love. Hence, donating to sperm or egg banks violates something fundamental at the core of our own humanity. It dissociates us from the deeper meaning of our own bodies and gravely damages the inner order of the marital union.

The notion that it is OK for a single woman to impregnate herself with a stranger's sperm is like trying to play a game of chess with oneself: it may look like you win every time you play, but you really lose every time as well. A truly good chess game requires two participants fully committed to the endeavor, and the same holds true for human procreation. Babies are the “pouring forth” and “brimming over” of reciprocal marital love, not “trophies” or “mutts” to be acquired.

Sometimes those who purchase other people's sex cells imagine that they have a “right” to children. But even when we get married, we don't have a “right” to a baby; rather, we have a right to those sacred marital acts that are ordered and disposed to procreating new life. Those loving genital acts are the unique and exclusive domain in which our sex cells properly become available to our

spouse. Oftentimes, however, overwhelming parental desires can distort the right order of transmitting human life, and a consumerist mentality may subtly convince us that children are our “projects” to be realized through laboratory techniques of gamete manipulation.

In 1987, while serving as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then-Cardinal Ratzinger issued a document called *Donum Vitae* (*On the Gift of Life*) which examines modern forms of reproductive technology. That document also discusses the donation of sperm and egg cells:

Recourse to the gametes of a third person, in order to have sperm or ovum available, constitutes a violation of the reciprocal commitment of the spouses and a grave lack in regard to that essential property of marriage which is its unity.... Masturbation, through which the sperm is normally obtained, is another sign of this dissociation...”

The delicate design that governs this intimate area of our lives calls for a respectful and receptive attitude on our part. Nested within that receptiv-

ity to God's ordering of procreation, children can become fully appreciated for what they are: sacred gifts received within the Divine order, beautiful surprises blooming out of committed marital love.

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