



Babies in Test Tubes

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When asked why IVF might be immoral, most people will usually mention the extra embryos that are frozen or discarded. Such embryos are certainly a serious concern, but they are not the primary reason the Church reminds us that the procedure is immoral. Even if IVF were carried out without making any extra embryos, this way of making babies would still be morally objectionable because the procedure strikes at the very core and meaning of marital sexuality. In the final analysis, it substitutes an act of laboratory manipulation for an act of bodily union between spouses. It turns procreation into production. IVF is really the flip-side of contraception: rather than trying to have sex without babies, we now try to have babies without sex. Because many Americans have come to view sex largely in terms of recreation, ignoring its procreative orientation, they have lost touch with the grave moral violations that occur both in contraceptive sex and in making test tube babies.

Clearly, the moral violations that occur in IVF do not reflect upon the child. It is not the baby's fault in any way, and he or she is an innocent bystander. Regardless of how a child enters the world, whether by IVF, whether by adultery, pre-marital sex, sexual assault,

or even by cloning, that baby is always a gift and a blessing. The child has no say over how he or she came into the world. The problem with IVF is never with the child, but rather with a decision made by the parents to pursue the satisfaction of their parental desires through immoral means. The laudable goal of having a child can never justify the use of disordered means. Context is everything, and children really are entitled to come into being only within that intimate love-giving moment of the marital embrace. Through the bodily surrender of the parents to each other, through their body to body communion, the new body of their child is meant to be engendered. In their one-flesh union, they enflesh new life. Through that intimate and sacred bodily embrace, human love is properly translated into new life.

IVF violates this design by replacing that love-giving act with an act of production, whereby we manufacture our own children in petri dishes and test tubes, as if they were products or objects to be manhandled at will. In this way, IVF incidentalizes and adulterates sex, reducing it to another arena for manipulation according to our own desires.

Making Sense of Bioethics

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Is it not reasonable and right to insist, as the Church does, that new human life should be the fruit of married love, carried out through bodily self-giving between spouses, a unique human act which allows each partner to enrich the other with the total gift of himself or herself? On the other hand, is it not also unreasonable for the woman to disrupt her delicate hormonal balance and subject herself to repetitive injections with powerful drugs to make her body produce unnaturally large numbers of eggs, and for the man to go into a back room with salacious magazines and videos to “provide a sample” in order that a child be generated? Is it not also unreasonable to undertake a procedure that routinely involves the freezing or even the discarding of our own embryonic children, as if they were a form of medical waste? Can we really say that IVF embodies spousal love in an authentic and exclusive way when a third-party, a lab technician, ends up being the causal agent of both the conception and the pregnancy, instead of the spouses themselves? How can we possibly suggest that IVF is faithful to God's designs for marriage?

We sometimes tend to brush the ungainly and unsightly parts of the procedure under the rug and rather try to focus our attention on the outcome: the baby. In this way, we seek to allay the disturbing reality of what we are really engaging in. Some couples also may rely on a perfunctory assumption, namely: “I have a right to a child when I get married, so any means, even IVF, should be okay.” But the deeper truth is that we never have a right to a baby. A child is not our property, possession or entitlement. Rather, a baby is a gift, a blessing we hope God will send our way, one we stand ready and eager to receive, but certainly not something we can lay claim to or otherwise demand. To demand the gift is to make it no longer a gift at all.

When we get married, we properly have a right to those beautiful, life-giving acts we call marital acts, which open us up to the mysterious divine spark at the heart of human love. Those marital acts are the only human acts appropriately ordered to engendering the remarkable gift of new human life.

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