

Surrogacy and Child Trafficking

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At the start of 2024, Pope Francis offered strong public criticism of surrogate motherhood. His willingness to speak out on this important topic has helped to pull surrogacy out of the shadows, where it has often been relegated, and shine some much-needed light on the children at the center of the process and their rights.

Surrogacy is often framed as a generous act, since the surrogate mother seeks to offer her own body to help another woman unable carry a pregnancy. Judith Hoechst, who hired a surrogate to have a son, was quoted in a *National Catholic Register* article as declaring: "There's nothing more selfless and more loving than a woman who says, 'Let me share my uterus with you. Let me do for you what you cannot do.'"

When you examine it more deeply, however, surrogacy offers only the veneer of a selfless act. It relies on evil means to achieve a good end. It tends to be driven by the selfish slant of "entitlement thinking." It often involves a coercive financial angle, as wealthy individuals offer significant remuneration to secure poor women as "volunteers."

Pope Francis cut through much of the duplicity around this issue when he provocatively observed that surrogacy involves a form of "trafficking" of children, implying that children are being bought and sold,

treated as property and often transported across international borders, which, all in all, sums up many contemporary aspects of surrogacy.

The whole process of surrogacy typically begins with the creation of children for implantation through *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), a practice that itself raises numerous moral objections.

Most fundamentally, IVF misappropriates the generative powers we have received from God that are ordered to procreating new life.

The powers we have are not meant be used any way we wish. For example, we have the power to use our hands to pick things up, to write, and to reach out to help others. But that same power in our hands can be used in reckless and improper ways to hit people, to choke them, or to otherwise harm them.

Just because we have the power to do something — or the fact that science may open up a new power to us — does not automatically mean we should utilize it.

Our power to procreate is a very special gift, meant to be shared in collaboration with God and our spouse in an exclusive manner. That we have the technical prowess to take hold of our sex cells and manipulate them to manufacture a new life constitutes a misuse of our God-given powers. We fail to respect our children's dignity when we turn them

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into “projects” to be engendered in laboratory glassware and implanted into third party carriers. By such an approach, we end up twisting the designs of human sexuality and turning what is meant to be an act of love into an act of production.

Yet many people today have accepted the notion that children are a kind of “entitlement” or even a “right” to be claimed for themselves. This flawed thinking enables a facile movement into the twin evils of IVF and surrogacy, and ultimately encourages the trafficking of unborn children. Clearly, a child — or any person — is never a “right,” or a possession, or a piece of property to whom we are entitled.

The only “entitlement” or “right” operative here would be the right of the child to be conceived uniquely through the marital act. Rather than being summoned into being in glassware and implanted into surrogates by fertility clinic employees in exchange for valuable consideration, children have the inalienable right to be conceived through the one flesh, body-to-body spousal communion of their parents’ marital embrace.

Having a sense of “entitlement” about children and imagining that I

“deserve” a child corrupts the delicate order of our receptivity towards the mysterious gift of new life in marital sexuality.

Whenever we turn to IVF and surrogacy to satisfy the desire of adults for offspring, we override that delicate order of receptivity and arrogate to ourselves the right to control and even dominate our children. We pay to have them implanted into strangers who act as “gestational carriers.” We impose on them a multitude of “parental-role figures,” ranging from the surrogate mother who becomes pregnant, to the woman who receives the baby afterwards, to the third-party egg donor. We multiply father-role figures, depending upon the source of the sperm. We trap our left over embryonic children, potentially for decades, in the wasteland of frozen orphanages connected to fertility clinics. We carry out genetic testing and discard less-than-perfect embryos. We selectively reduce children when multiplet pregnancies arise.

The use of the term “deplorable” by the Pope is not excessive, but spot-on when it comes to describing these offensive aspects of surrogacy. His observations help refocus our attention on the runaway

train that IVF and surrogacy have become, and invite us to push back against the problematic-but-widely-endorsed approach that seeks to satisfy adult desires for children while largely ignoring the consequences to the kids.

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