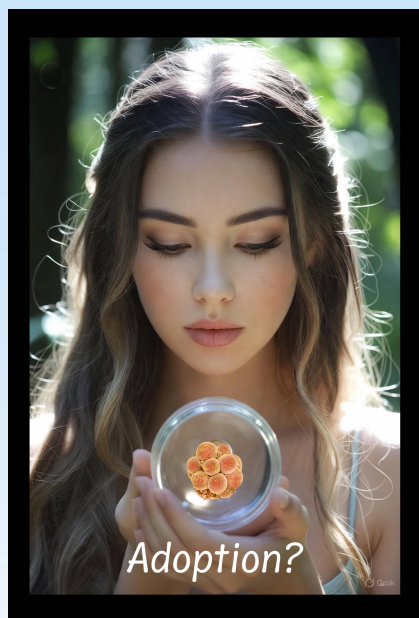


Embryo Adoption: An Open Question?

“Key magisterial texts indicate that the practice of embryo transfer involves fundamentally unethical actions.”



When it comes to the plight of the hundreds of thousands of IVF embryos frozen in the U.S. and elsewhere, it is often claimed that the Catholic Church has never definitively addressed the liceity, or moral allowability, of “embryo transfer” (also known as embryo rescue or embryo adoption).

I recently had the chance to participate in a public debate on this topic in Indianapolis. I argued that the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has, in fact, settled this question. If we scrutinize the two major teaching documents of the Church dealing with this issue, the immorality of the practice of embryo transfer becomes clear.

The 2008 document entitled *Dignitas Personae* states: “The proposal that these embryos could be put at the disposal of infertile couples as a treatment for infertility is not ethically acceptable” (19). It identifies a specific situation, namely, attempting to treat a couple’s infertility by embryo transfer, as being always immoral.

The document then goes on to point out that these moral objections extend beyond this single case, so that the same set of concerns will apply in other instances where embryo transfer might be proposed or considered:

It has also been proposed, solely in order to allow human beings to be born who are otherwise condemned to destruction, that there could be a form of ‘pre-natal adoption.’ This proposal, praiseworthy with regard to the intention of respecting and defending human life, presents however various problems not dissimilar to those mentioned above.

This passage reveals that even when we face the stark prospect of the outright killing of frozen human embryos (“otherwise condemned to destruction”), this does not allow us to bypass or ignore the substantive moral objections inherent in embryo transfer proposals.

The final section of the passage concludes with a forceful and unambiguous assertion: “All things considered, it needs to be recognized that the thousands of abandoned embryos represent a situation of injustice which in fact cannot be resolved.”

Despite the tragedy of the countless embryonic humans “frozen in time” (with thousands more each day being added to the stockpiles), *Dignitas Personae* rejects the practice of embryo adoption.

A second, older Church document released in 1987 and entitled

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Donum Vitae references the “absurd fate” to which human embryos have been exposed by freezing them, and then notes that there is “no possibility of their being offered safe means of survival which can be licitly pursued” (5). Hence, it would seem even as far back as the late 80s, a negative judgment had already been made by the teaching authority of the Church regarding the question of embryo adoption.

In addition to there being no morally permissible means of a path to survival for these embryos, *Donum Vitae* declares the basic human right of every person “to be conceived and to be born within marriage and from marriage.” For embryos to be “born from marriage” points also to the moral significance of the circumstances of our gestation.

Interestingly, *Donum Vitae* repetitively employs the phrase, “IVF and ET” (*in vitro* fertilization and embryo transfer). This conjoined phrase appears a remarkable sixteen times throughout the document as it seeks to explain the ethical concerns surrounding assisted reproductive technologies.

The deliberate inclusion of “ET” points to the fact that it is not merely the “*in vitro*” or “extracorporeal conception” aspect that renders the procedure immoral, but also that

the ET step itself violates sound ethics.

In other words, it seems that a double moral evil can be identified in each instance of *in vitro* fertilization and embryo transfer:

- (1) The manufacture of human beings in glassware, outside-the-body (and outside-the-marital-act); and
- (2) The importation/implantation of an outside-the-body generated embryo into the uterus.

Number two, of course, would constitute an action largely synonymous with “embryo adoption” or “embryo rescue.”

Taken together, these documents point to the fact that transferring a stranger’s embryo into one’s wife violates the inner structure of marital fruitfulness.

Based on these texts, we can also begin to grasp how embryo transfer, even motivated with the best of intentions, nevertheless involves a form of “pirating” the wife’s body for designs that are not proper to its intrinsic order within marriage. *Dignitas Personae* also compares embryo adoption to “any form of surrogate motherhood,” which the Church teaches to be morally unacceptable.

Couples who have done IVF and ended up with frozen children face an excruciatingly difficult situation as they try to figure out what to do with their “leftover” embryonic offspring. I offered some possible approaches to this situation in a previous article (see <https://tinyurl.com/4eua5j5p>).

So it is clearly problematic to assert that embryo adoption remains an “open question” for Catholics. Close scrutiny of key magisterial texts and reflection upon the explanations provided by those documents indicate that the practice of embryo transfer involves fundamentally unethical actions.

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