



# Medicine & Morals

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## *In Vitro* Fertilization



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“‘Huge’ demand for IVF in Ontario”, Tom Blackwell, Windsor Star, (NP3), Thursday, May 26, 2016.

There is an episode in TV’s “House” where the doctor, who is certainly not pro-life when it comes to abortion, is operating on a pregnant woman. The child in the womb reaches and grasps House’s finger. The scene then blacks out with the look of wonder on House’s face. It is often easy enough to understand why people can argue wrongly for some immoral practice. For example, people’s compassion can wrongly push them towards physician assisted suicide in some cases. We are not considering sin here; there are all sorts of explanations for sin, from self-interest, to pride, to fear, moral weakness and so on. We are speaking about objective

morality, and how people are sometimes easily deceived.

It is, however, very difficult to see how people can defend abortion. I once listened to a woman in theology school speaking with two female friends, saying how it is necessary that women have the right to abort, otherwise they will never be considered equal to men. This was a “no matter what it takes” kind of argument, other considerations put aside. Again, we are not considering the motivations women may have to abort, or the pressures some women are under. In some cases, these may be so overwhelming as to absolve from sin. What we are speaking about is the matter of justification for abortion. What could possibly justify killing an innocent child? The great Canadian

philosopher/theologian, Bernard Lonergan, used to speak about skotosis, a deep, embraced darkness of the mind and conscience which obscures obvious truth.

Other areas of morality are not easily grasped, however. Recently, I saw gorgeous twin girls of about four years of age. A relative of theirs had told me, rejoicing at a miracle, that a cousin of the mother had offered to be a surrogate mother. She miscarried the first implanted *in vitro* embryo, but volunteered for a second attempt. This was successful, and the rambunctious little girls were the result. In a country where many children are aborted and where over 90% of fertile couples practice contraception, are we going to condemn bringing children like the twins into being? Doesn't God approve and cooperate?

There are certain practices in many *in vitro* procedures which pro-life people would condemn. For example, most attempts include the production of more than one embryo. Not all of these embryos are implanted, perhaps only one, the one looking the most healthy. The "surplus to requirement" embryos are either destroyed or frozen for further use or for experimentation. Further, "defective" embryos will be destroyed, either before implantation or later in the womb if the "product" is damaged, physically or mentally. But each embryo is a person made in the image and likeness of God. This is Catholic faith, but is also capable of philosophical defense, based on biological fact. What we do to an embryo, we do to a member of our human community.

Further, many pro-life people would consider the use of gametes other than those of the husband and wife to be immoral. Apart from the possibility or likelihood of an imbalance of intimacy between the true parent and the child and the putative parent and the child, there is the matter of bringing outside genetic material into the marital covenant.

The question of surrogate motherhood ignores the bonding between mother and child which begins strongly during pregnancy. Separating the person carrying the child in pregnancy from the born child has obvious negative consequences for both. Added to all of these concerns are questions regarding the danger of physical and/or mental malformation of embryos derived from *in vitro* procedures. The data here are as yet uncertain.

We would like to look now, however, at what is known as "the simple case". The gametes are those of husband and wife. All embryos are implanted in the wife's womb, without any intention of later "pregnancy reduction", where some embryos are removed from the womb, should too many of them (according to desire) successfully implant. No embryo will be discarded because of physical or mental handicap, or for any other reason. Why, then, does the Church say that this particular *in vitro* procedure is immoral?

Before tackling this matter directly, several things should be recognized. First, as the Church clearly states, no matter how a particular person comes into being, he or she is of equal status to every other human being.



Second, the desire to have a child rests on human nature itself. Infertility is a hard cross to bear. Those choosing IVF should not be designated selfish, as simply satisfying their own wants and needs. Third, we live in a world where pragmatism trumps conscience. If some procedure satisfies a certain, isolated goal, go for it; ignore other considerations. Fourth, and connected to the previous point, people are impressed with inductive rather than deductive reasoning. Arguments based on science and evidence are far more persuasive than arguments based on “a priori” reasoning.

The reason for the Church’s arguments against *in vitro* fertilization even in the “simple case” does not necessarily impress modern generations. What the Church is saying is that the coming to be of a human person, one made in the image and likeness of God, is so sacred that it demands action in keeping with its dignity. Husband and wife, and they alone, in their mutual love desire to

incarnate that love in a new human being. Through the giving of their own bodies to each other, and through their bodies their whole selves, they, blessed and enabled by God, bring a new human being into existence, a unique other. In the face of pragmatism and relativism, it can be difficult to grasp the implications of these truths.

Human procreation may never be the consequence of mechanical acts, even though these be inspired by love. Third party involvement to unite sperm and ovum(a) in a petri-dish totally lacks the coming together in one flesh which both unites father and mother and makes love real in a new way in the incarnation of a son or daughter.

Once more, God bless the children conceived through *in vitro* fertilization. God bless their parents. If we are to turn back the tide of wrong and bad sexual instruction, sexual understanding and sexual practice, analyzing *in vitro* practice in “the simple case” is probably not the best starting place. Somehow, we have to begin to appreciate the unitive and procreative dimensions of human sexuality in order to discuss any particular practice.

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## Moral Theology and Pastoral Practice



The priest is in the rectory on a Saturday evening. There’s a knock on the door, and the priest answers it. A young man of about 25 stands there and tentatively asks

whether he can make his confession. The priest invites him in.

The young man says that he is here to confess his sins and also to give glory and thanksgiving to God. He says that he has known that he is gay from his earliest teens.

In his later teens and early twenties he frequented gay clubs and bars. He adopted a type of gay lifestyle, being exploited sexually and exploiting others. He wishes to confess all sins connected with that time in his life.

Two years ago, he met Roy, a slightly older gay man who was a practicing Anglican. They fell in love, and Roy and he have been going regularly to Anglican services.

After a time, Roy suggested to our penitent that he should think of practicing his own Catholic faith, and for some months they have alternated between Anglican and Catholic churches. Roy has suggested that he go to confession with a view to receiving Holy Communion. Now after confessing his sins, he wants to thank God for bringing the saving presence of Roy into his life.

Quid de casu? - What should be the priest's response?

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Launched in November of 2015, *The Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute at Assumption University* is a champion for ethics education, research and community service. The Institute seeks to raise awareness and respond to the ethical issues in healthcare that touch many of us as patients, families and providers of service.

In the spirit of collaboration, we are committed to providing services to our Diocese, our community institutions, and to all who seek a deeper understanding of healthcare and bioethics.

We are interested in what you have to say. If you have a particular topic of interest or would like to provide us feedback on this publication, please contact:

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