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## Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology

“I want to have children with you.”

So much meaning is packed into these words, when a man or woman says them to a spouse. Especially in the light of faith, they mean: I entrust myself to you and to you alone—including my ability to join you in cooperating with God to create a son or daughter. I have faith in your ability to be a loving and committed spouse and parent. I want the kind of person you are and the kind of upbringing you can provide to influence the way our children live and grow. I promise to work side by side with you through the years of challenge and adventure we may face as parents, and I trust that you will always be there for me and for our children.

In short, it means: I love you so much that I want our married love to be open to children we can love and care for together.

This *openness* to new life, this willingness to beget and raise children together, is essential to married love.

It is sad, then, that so many couples hoping to have children find it difficult to do so. It is estimated today that one out of six couples will experience infertility.<sup>1</sup> The suffering of unanticipated childlessness is real. Spouses may feel they have somehow failed, that they are inadequate in a basic aspect of their marital life. Their pain may even be aggravated by regret or guilt over past contraceptive use, sterilization, abortion, or other factors that can contribute to infertility. The sight of other couples’ children may make them yearn for a child all the more and

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<sup>1</sup> Physicians define infertility as an inability to conceive after a year of regular intercourse without contraception.

add to their distress. Infertility can affect a couple’s sexual relationship and the stability of their marriage. It may even affect relationships with parents and in-laws who express disappointment at the absence of grandchildren. Catholic couples may feel this pain even more deeply as they hear the Church praise family life and teach that children are “the supreme gift of marriage” (Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [Gaudium et Spes]*, no. 50).

*“We had tried to have kids for the eight years we’ve been married. Over the years it has been bittersweet to watch the growing families of our friends while we struggled with infertility.”*

—Jenny Campbell, Bremerton, Washington

In an age of advances in reproductive medicine, many solutions are offered to couples going through this distress. Some solutions offer real hope for restoring a couple’s natural, healthy ability to have children. Others pose serious moral problems by failing to respect the dignity of the couple’s marital relationship, of their sexuality, or of the child.

The Church has compassion for couples suffering from infertility and wants to be of real help to them. At the same time, some “reproductive technologies” are not morally legitimate ways to solve those problems. We bishops of the United States offer this reflection to explain why. We also offer it to provide hope—real hope that couples can “accept children lovingly from God”<sup>2</sup> and build a family while fully respecting God’s design for their marriage and for the gift of children.

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<sup>2</sup> *Rite of Marriage*, no. 24, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1 (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1976).

## Questions and Answers

### **How are sex and procreation related?**

In Scripture, the Book of Genesis offers two accounts of God's creation of human beings as male and female. These passages reveal essential truths about the nature of marriage and married love. One passage shows God blessing Adam and Eve and giving them his first command, to "be fertile and multiply" (Gn 1:28). This shows the *procreative* aspect of married love. The second passage shows the uniquely intimate relationship between man and woman as embodied creatures who belong together as one flesh, the *unitive* aspect of married love. Woman is made from man as the only companion who can truly be his equal partner; united together, the two make up "one body" (Gn 2:24). Procreation and the unity of the couple are therefore seen as intrinsic blessings or aspects of marriage. The Church's teaching on sexual morality is a reflection on these two goods and on how, in the unfolding of God's plan for marriage, they should not be separated.

In marriage, man and woman are united to each other, body and soul, through a loving physical union. As embodied persons, they were created to complete and fulfill one another in love and also to unite together in bringing about a new human being as the fruit of that love. These two aspects of sexuality are essentially intertwined. The loving and permanent union of husband and wife, accepted among Catholics as a sacrament, creates the fitting environment for nurturing and protecting a new, defenseless, and dependent human being; and parents' love for their child, and the cooperation needed to give that child a home, strengthen and enrich their love for one another.

## **How does this vision differ from the dominant view of our contemporary culture?**

Our modern secular culture tends to separate the unitive and procreative aspects of conjugal love from each other, to the detriment of both. This separation weakens marriage.

Many once thought that modern contraception would improve the unitive side of marriage, by allowing husbands and wives to pursue sexual union without worrying about unintended pregnancy. Instead, many couples have found something missing from their marital love, and marital infidelity and divorce have increased. In society as a whole, the effect of a contraceptive mentality has been to sever sexual relations from permanent commitment, allowing the pursuit of pleasure to become an overriding goal.

The meaning of procreation also suffers when the unitive and procreative aspects of married love are intentionally separated. A couple's openness to cooperating with God in generating a new human being is then no longer accepted as an integral aspect of married sexual love. Rather, fulfilling the desire for a child can come to be seen as a separate goal in itself, and the body's "reproductive system" seen as merely an instrument for reaching that goal. In a technological age, if an instrument is damaged or malfunctioning, we may assume we can have someone repair or replace it by whatever technical means seems most efficient in reaching the goal. Because couples have tried without success to experience the gift of new life arising from their union in one flesh, some are tempted to have a child "produced" or "made" as the work of human hands. Then children themselves may come to be seen as products of our technology, even as consumer goods that parents have paid for and have a "right" to expect—not as fellow persons, equal in dignity to their parents and destined to eternal happiness with God. In reality, a child "produced" this way is still in every way a full human person, whom God loves and

endows with his or her own immortal soul. The question is whether each means chosen as a way to reproduce does justice to the full human dignity of the child.

Our ability to cooperate with God in generating a new human being is not just a bodily function. It is a personal gift from God—exclusively shared by husband and wife, who thereby share responsibility for bringing this new child into the world in a uniquely personal way. So while the desire to share that gift with each other and have a child is positive and natural, some means used to have a child revere and respect this great gift while others do not. Many couples are tempted to resort to reproductive technologies because they do love each other and want to share this love with their own biological child. However, here, as in other areas of life, a good end does not justify every possible means.

### **How does the use of donors and surrogates in trying to have a child raise a moral problem?**

Some approaches to infertility clearly violate the integrity of the marital relationship. These introduce third parties to fulfill essential aspects of parenthood, by using eggs or sperm or even embryos from “donors” (who are often paid, and therefore more accurately described as vendors), or even by making use of another woman’s womb to carry the couple’s child. The latter practice is sometimes known as surrogate motherhood, though this woman acts the way any mother would throughout pregnancy and then must relinquish the child to the couple who hired her. The child resulting from these arrangements is not the fruit of the spouses’ commitment to procreate only with and through one another. In an important sense, the spouses have decided not to be fully the mother and father of their child, because they have delegated part of their role to others. The procreative aspect of their marital relationship is violated, just as its unitive aspect would be violated by sexual relations with a person outside the marriage.

These arrangements may harm people other than the married couple. Fertility clinics show disrespect for young men and women when they treat them as commodities, by offering large sums of money for sperm or egg donors with specific intellectual, physical, or personality traits. The cash incentives persuade these men and women to mistreat the gift of their own fertility, and—for women—even to jeopardize their own health in the egg extraction process, in the effort to help others obtain a child outside the context of their own marital relationship.

### **What about reproductive technology that does not involve such third parties?**

Some methods that attempt to provide a couple with a child do not introduce donors or “surrogates” into the couple’s relationship. However, they still use artificial insemination, most often using sperm that is immorally obtained. In an attempt to conceive a child, the husband’s sperm is transferred with a syringe into the wife’s uterus. Substituting this technological procedure for the couple’s loving sexual union as a way of bringing a new human being into existence is immoral. Often it is not the couple’s act at all, but an impersonal act performed by a technician. This procedure can be performed even if the husband is no longer alive, using frozen and stored sperm. The husband and wife may love each other very much and look forward to having a child to love, but in artificial insemination the acts by which the child is brought into being do not reflect this reality. Children have a right to be conceived by the act that expresses and embodies their parents’ self-giving love; morally responsible medicine can assist this act but should never substitute for it.

### **What is wrong with *in vitro* fertilization (IVF)?**

IVF is a reproductive technology in which a new human being is conceived by joining egg and sperm in a glass dish, not in the mother’s body (“*in vitro*” is Latin for “in glass”). It further depersonalizes the act of generating a child, turning it into a technical process in a

laboratory. This procedure is so far from a loving act of the spouses that it can even be used to conceive a child if neither of them is alive, for the body of neither one is involved in the act of generating this life once sperm and egg are obtained and stored. Because these embryos are deliberately created not in the nurturing environment of the mother's body but in the poor substitute of a culture in a glass dish, the great majority of them die. Many couples have exhausted their savings and ultimately abandoned their efforts without ever having a live-born child from IVF.

*"When we realized there was a problem conceiving, we made the decision to try a more natural approach rather than IVF. We found the experience to be positive with a successful outcome, and we are now trying for our second child."*

—Carol and Len Preston, Cinnaminson, New Jersey

### **Does IVF lead to further risks and abuses?**

Yes. By “producing” new human beings in the laboratory, IVF divides the decision to welcome a new child into two separate decisions: whether to conceive this new human being, and whether to transfer him or her to the mother’s womb. This has tempted fertility doctors and couples to exercise various forms of so-called “quality control” through genetic screening, so that only the embryos who seem most viable or have the most desired traits are given an opportunity to implant in their mother’s womb. The embryos not selected are destroyed. Occasionally couples have discovered that doctors transferred the “wrong” embryo, conceived by another couple, causing distress for two families.

The death rate of embryos conceived by IVF is so high that clinics routinely produce many of them and transfer several at once to the mother's womb, hoping that one will survive. If more embryos than are wanted continue developing in the womb, many clinics offer "selective reduction" (targeted abortion) to eliminate the unwanted "extra" children. This can exact a terrible psychological toll on the couple, whose desire for a child has led them to a gravely immoral decision about taking the life of one or more children in the mother's womb.

Often embryos not used in a first attempt at pregnancy are frozen and stored for future attempts. This also poses a serious risk to their lives. When their parents have as many live-born children as they want, or abandon their efforts to have a child through IVF, the remaining embryos are considered "excess" or "spare." Some are thrown away as laboratory waste, while others are abandoned indefinitely in a frozen state or slated for experimental purposes. The current debate about killing embryonic human beings on a large scale to "harvest" their embryonic stem cells arose partly because IVF clinics produced so many "spare" embryos, creating a terrible temptation for researchers to find a "use" for these human beings no longer wanted by their parents.

Broader abuse is in the realm of science fiction at this point, although many scientists say it is possible and even should be welcomed: a "brave new world" in which human beings are tailored for genetic perfection, developed outside their mothers' bodies, and pre-selected for given roles in society. This would be the ultimate step toward a very efficient society in which the idea of human dignity may seem obsolete.

Each of these abuses is a natural outgrowth of the original decision to turn the begetting of a child into a manufacturing process. This threatens to turn what should be the unconditional love and acceptance of parents for their sons and daughters into something more tentative and

conditional. In this situation a new life may be highly *valued*—as a way of meeting parents' goals for family size, or of achieving other goals such as scientific knowledge—but this human life is not *respected* as human persons deserve to be respected.

### **What is wrong with human cloning?**

Human cloning is the most extreme reduction of human procreation to a manufacturing process. It begins with the nucleus of a somatic (body) cell, or at least the complete genetic material of that nucleus, taken from a living or deceased human being. This is transferred into an egg cell to give rise to a new human being who is genetically identical to the donor of the body cell: a sort of delayed identical twin. This is truly *asexual* reproduction: it does not involve sperm; and because the egg cell is used without its nuclear DNA or genetic material, it may even be attempted using an egg from an animal rather than a human being. The goal is to produce—or even mass-produce—new embryonic human beings who are valued not for their own unique identities, but for the particular traits they may share with the donor of the body cell. The cloned human embryo is a living human being who deserves to be treated with full moral respect; yet in the act of being created not for his or her own sake but as a “copy” of someone else, he or she is treated as a thing or even a commodity, not as a person. This is a gross violation of human dignity.

### **Do these technologies pose risks to women and to children who are born?**

Yes. IVF and cloning require surgically extracting eggs from women's bodies, a process that generally begins with the use of powerful fertility drugs to make their ovaries produce many eggs at a time instead of one. Some women develop a condition called ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, which can further damage their fertility and lead to serious medical complications and

even death. Children conceived by IVF, if they do survive to birth, have been found by some studies to have an increased risk of some serious birth defects.

The cloning process is so unnatural and wasteful that it magnifies these risks further. Hundreds of eggs may be needed to produce even one live human embryo; animal trials have produced live-born offspring only very rarely, usually with serious health problems; and any attempt to bring a human child to birth from this procedure would pose grave risks to mother and child.

### **Must couples with fertility problems abandon their hope of conceiving a child?**

Not necessarily. The male and female bodies are made to be able to procreate together. The challenge is to diagnose and address problems so these bodies can function as they should—and there is no moral problem in doing this, any more than there is in other medical treatments to restore health. Hormonal treatment and other medications, conventional or laser surgery to repair damaged or blocked fallopian tubes, means for alleviating male infertility factors, and other restorative treatments are available. The techniques of natural family planning (NFP) can also be used to locate the most fertile time of a woman's cycle in order to maximize the chances of conceiving. These and other methods do not substitute for the married couple's act of loving union; rather, they assist this act in reaching its potential to conceive a new human life.<sup>3</sup>

*"Natural methods took the focus of conception away from the wonders of technology and back to the love between me and my*

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<sup>3</sup> On methods that try to assist the couple's marital act in conceiving instead of substituting for it, see "Reproductive Technology (Evaluation and Treatment of Infertility) Guidelines for Catholic Couples," [www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/treatment.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/treatment.shtml).

*husband, and I didn't have any of the awful side effects from medication or treatments.”*

—Amy Cagliola Smith, Norristown, Pennsylvania

## **If a couple cannot have children, can their marriage still have its full Christian purpose and meaning?**

Yes, of course. Spouses are called to be open to accepting a child from God. Despite the exaggerated promises of some fertility clinics, no one can guarantee that each couple will receive this gift. This can be a painful truth for couples who have longed to conceive and raise a child together. Their suffering should call forth the sympathy and support of others and of the whole Church. Yet, as Pope John Paul II has said, husband and wife in their love for each other can also learn to redirect their openness to children to become open to life in many other ways that are badly needed today: “to couples who cannot have children of their own I say: you are no less loved by God; your love for each other is complete and fruitful when it is open to others, to the needs of the apostolate, to the needs of the poor, to the needs of orphans, to the needs of the world” (Homily at Mass for families, Onitsha, Nigeria, February 13, 1982).

## **What is the Church’s view of having a family through adoption? What about “embryo adoption”?**

The Church strongly supports adoption as a wonderful way to build a family. As Christians we should especially appreciate this, as we are all sons and daughters of God by adoption (Gal 4:5). Those who cannot conceive or bear a child who want to consider adoption should receive every assistance and support so this process can be successfully completed in ways that respect the dignity of everyone involved. Adoption is a gift to the child who receives a

new family, to the new parents who receive a child to love and to raise, and to the biological parents who, in self-sacrificing love, have done all they can to provide their son or daughter with a good home and a bright future. Adoption also benefits society by contributing to a culture of life in which the inherent dignity of every child is recognized.

*“After three years of marriage and many doctor visits, we had to come to terms with the fact that we were infertile. Adoption then surfaced as the best way for us to open our hearts and home to welcome a child (or in our case, six children!) as a gift from God.”*

—Rob and Robin Laird, Omaha, Nebraska

“Embryo adoption” refers to having an abandoned embryo transferred to the uterus of a woman willing to gestate this child to save his or her life. Many have asked whether this might be a legitimate way for conscientious couples to respond, in a potentially life-affirming way, to the terrible problem of thousands of abandoned embryos at IVF clinics in the United States. However, serious moral concerns have been raised about embryo adoption, particularly as it requires the wife in the adopting couple to receive into her womb an embryonic child who was not conceived through her bodily union with her husband. The Church’s teaching authority has acknowledged the moral concerns associated with this practice. The terrible plight of abandoned frozen embryos underscores the need for our society to end practices such as IVF that regularly produce so many “spare” or unwanted human beings.

## Conclusion

The ability to cooperate with God to conceive and raise a child is one of the most inspiring and profound gifts that a man and a woman can receive. It stands to reason that some ways of responding to this gift respect the goods of married love and new life while others do not. Some solutions offered to infertile couples do justice to their dignity as individuals and as a couple, and to the full human dignity of their child, by helping their marital act to be life-giving. Others are morally flawed efforts to replace the marital act and are not worthy of the tremendous gift God offers to husband and wife by calling them together as spouses and parents. In short, procedures that assist the marital act in being procreative are morally acceptable, while those that substitute for it are not.

*“As I became more educated on what IVF entails, I realized the wisdom and beauty of the Church’s teaching in upholding my dignity as a woman and in safeguarding my personal health.”*

—Mary Louise Kurey, Chicago, Illinois

God is love. Made in God’s image and likeness, we human beings are created by love and for love, called to share God’s unconditional love with each other and the world. Because marriage is the first and most basic human community of love, Pope John Paul II has called it “the primordial sacrament” (General Audience, October 6, 1982). This community, through its power of procreation, serves to continue God’s loving work of creation.

Keeping this vision in mind, we can understand that some aspects of the vocation of marriage and parenthood cannot be delegated to others or replaced with technology. Because we

are made in God's image, we are called to imitate him by letting new life arise from the loving union that makes two persons "one flesh." Children are not parents' possessions to manufacture, manipulate, or design; rather, they are fellow persons with full human dignity, and parents are called to accept, care for, and raise them to be new members of God's family and his Kingdom. Children deserve to be "begotten, not made." In love, hope, and prayer, then, let us be open to God's gift of life and love in marriage, with profound respect for the dignity of all God's children.

### Where to Learn More

#### **Web Site**

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, [www.usccb.org/LifeGivingLove](http://www.usccb.org/LifeGivingLove) (information on Church teaching, reproductive technologies, morally sound fertility treatments, and pastoral resources for infertile couples)

#### **Church Documents**

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Instruction *Dignitas Personae (The Dignity of a Person)*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2008.

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Instruction *Donum Vitae (Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation)*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987.

Pope John Paul II. Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae (On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life)*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995.

### **Statements of the Bishops of the United States**

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Married Love and the Gift of Life. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.

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### **Articles from the Respect Life Program of the Bishops of the United States**

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