



Some Basic Scientific Facts and Ethical Problems regarding IVF

IVF is a form of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) in which conception is produced in the laboratory by uniting eggs and sperm in a petri dish (thus the name “in vitro,” Latin for “in glass”). In order to retrieve the eggs for in vitro fertilization, a woman’s ovaries are stimulated with a series of powerful drugs and hormones so that her follicles will release many more eggs than the usual one produced in a natural monthly cycle (often called super-ovulation). The eggs are then retrieved through a surgical procedure before being transferred to the lab, where they are mixed or injected with sperm to achieve fertilization. Of the resulting zygotes (embryos), one or more of those judged to be the most healthy are surgically “transferred” to the woman’s womb, in hopes that at least one will survive to term. Any remaining embryos are frozen, discarded, or used for experiments. In the event that more than two babies survive the first stages of development in the womb, the “extras” are sometimes aborted, the current medical term for which is “fetal reduction” or “selective reduction.”

Overview of Catholic Church Teaching on Reproductive Technologies

The Catholic Church supports the pursuit of finding both technological and natural ways to overcome the unfortunate and painful situation of couple infertility. “Since children are a wonderful gift of marriage, it is a good thing to try to overcome the obstacles which prevent children from being conceived and born.”¹ However, because of the Pauline principle that “one should never do evil so that good may come,” not all possible methods of conceiving a child are morally acceptable.

“In 1987 the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a document known as *Donum Vitae* (“The Gift of Life”), which addressed the morality of many modern fertility procedures. The document did not judge the use of technology to overcome infertility as wrong in itself. It concluded that some methods are moral, while others—because they do violence to the dignity of the human person and the institution of marriage—are immoral. *Donum Vitae* reaffirmed an obligation to protect all human life when married couples use various technologies to try to have children. Without questioning the motives of those using these techniques, *Donum Vitae* pointed out that people can do harm to themselves and others even as they try to do what is good, namely, overcome infertility.”²

There are two primary reasons why IVF is immoral. First, IVF “*eliminates* the marriage act as the means of achieving pregnancy, instead of *helping* it achieve this natural end,” so it harms the good of marriage.³ *Donum Vitae* teaches that if a given medical intervention helps or assists the marriage act to achieve pregnancy, it may be considered moral; if the intervention *replaces* or *bypasses* the marriage act in

¹ John M. Haas, [“Begotten Not Made: A Catholic View of Reproductive Technology,”](#) *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, 1998,

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

order to engender life, it is immoral.⁴ By circumventing the marital embrace, IVF separates the procreative and unitive meaning of the conjugal act. It seeks to procreate without the one flesh union.⁵ This is a violation of the dignity of the human person because "the child has the right...to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his parents; and he also has the right to be respected as a person from the moment of his conception."⁶ In addition, this bypassing of the marital embrace can also include (in some cases) the husband having to masturbate in order to collect his semen.

Secondly, IVF violates the dignity and sanctity of human life when embryos conceived in the process are destroyed, frozen, or used for experiments. Being consistently pro-life, then, means being against the destruction of embryos even when this is a means to the creation of new embryos. You should not destroy an innocent human life, even if you are trying to create another one.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Humanae Vitae*, 12. See also USCCB, "[Unitive and Procreative Nature of Intercourse.](#)"

⁶ *Donum Vitae*, 8