



E. Christian Brugger, Ph.D., Senior Fellow in Ethics

December 1, 2009

“I want to have children with you.” These are the opening words of the U.S. Bishops’ new document on reproductive technology, *Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology*, issued on November 17 (www.usccb.org/LifeGivingLove/lifegivinglovedocument.pdf). The document is addressed specifically to married couples suffering from infertility and considering their options. It attempts to balance a sincere empathy for their bitter experience of loss with clear guidance on ethically legitimate alternatives: “The Church has compassion for couples suffering from infertility and wants to be of real help to them.” The text acknowledges the temptation they can experience to cut a ‘faustian bargain’ in order to secure the object of their desperate desires. And it encourages them to hope in God even in the face of human disappointment. Specifically, it asks whether certain forms of assisted reproduction are consistent with the flourishing of marriage and with the duties we owe to nascent human life. In the words of the statement: “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.”

In this essay I lay out the document’s ethical framework for analyzing these particular techniques. In a future blast, I’ll consider several of the techniques themselves.

The theological foundation for the bishops’ moral teaching on marriage and procreation derives from the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2: God created man and women to come together in a union of persons unique among all human relationships. Marriage is this wholly unique procreative and unitive type of relationship in which a man and woman having consented to an exclusive, lifelong partnership consummate their union by becoming one flesh through sexual intercourse. At the foundation of this revealed teaching is the moral conclusion that *marriage is the justifying basis for genital sexual expression and procreation.*

It follows that the *meaning of marital intercourse* derives from the *meaning of marriage.*

Taking its name from marriage itself (*the ‘marital act’*), intercourse is a wholly unique procreative and unitive—i.e., *marital*—type of act. So disrespect for the marital act—i.e., for procreation or spousal unity—*is* disrespect for the marriage. Two correlative moral conclusions follow: *procreation should not be intentionally excluded from marital sexual intercourse* (i.e., intentional contraceptive acts are intrinsically evil, as taught in *Humanae vitae*), and *procreation should not take place outside of sexual intercourse* (i.e., babies only should be the fruit of married



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1413 K Street NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202-289-2500
Fax: 202-289-2502
info@culture-of-life.org
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love, as taught in the 1987 CDF document, *Donum vitae*). The Bishops write: “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.”

The same conclusion is reached by reflecting upon the duties we owe to human life in its origins. A child is a human person possessing *personal dignity* and *value*. Children therefore *should* come into the world congruent with what they are (i.e., in a *personal way*); they should be respected *as persons* from their first moments of existence. Bringing children into the world *through marital love* is treating them in a way befitting of persons. William E. May writes in his wonderful book, *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life* (2008): “The marital act is not an act of making or producing... It is something that [spouses] ‘do.’ In it they do not ‘make’ love or ‘make’ babies. They *give* love to one another by giving themselves bodily to one another and [in so doing] they open themselves to the gift of human life. The life begotten through their one-flesh union is ... ‘a gift supervening on and giving permanent embodiment to’ the marital act itself. Thus, when human life comes to be in and through the marital act we can rightly say that the spouses are procreating or begetting. Their child is ‘begotten, not made’” (p. 73). Formulating this normative truth in terms of the rights of children, the bishops teach: “children have a right to be conceived by the act that expresses and embodies their parents’ self-giving love.”

This is fundamentally different, morally speaking, from bringing a child into the world by a technique in the laboratory. In ‘making something’ one manipulates materials in the external world; one is dealing with a product. Even though parents who generate children in the laboratory may love their children and resolve to care for them as best they can, the objective manner of the children’s coming to be is *as a product*. The child becomes the end product of others interested in ‘having’ a baby (and, typically, by a procedure performed by persons other than the parents). With use of these technologies, it is true to say that the child is ‘made,’ not ‘begotten.’ The Bishops write: “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.” Products are not unto themselves, but unto ends (purposes) beyond them. As such, they can be made for those purposes, and unmade (destroyed) for contrary purposes. The logic of making intrinsically justifies unmaking; when contrary purposes arise, the “why” of the making is negated. What was the purpose for the baby’s making? To satisfy the parents’ *desire for a baby*—they ‘*wanted* a child’. If however the parents do not *want* a child—if the child is *unwanted*—he or she can be unmade. The logic of making babies as products extends quite naturally to multiple forms of destroying new human life, *forms which are routine in the assisted fertility industry*: eugenic screening of IVF embryos, ‘selective reduction’ abortions, eugenic abortions, and parents earmarking their ‘spare’ embryonic children for embryo-destructive research.

The Bishops end their preliminary analysis by teaching that when spouses



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procreate, they cooperate with God in bringing into existence a new human being. This extraordinary gift of sharing in God's creative act requires resolute determination on the part of spouses to treat human life in its origins as God desires, as the bishops say, "in a uniquely personal way." And although the desire to bring children into the world "is positive and natural," not all means of doing so "respect this great gift."

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