

Is in vitro fertilization ever okay?

By Father Thomas V. Berg, PhD

DEAR FATHER,

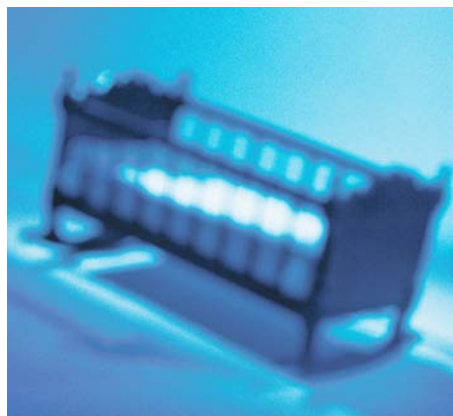
My younger sister and her husband have been married for seven years, but they haven't been able to have children. Today they announced that they would be trying in vitro fertilization (IVF) to conceive a child. I know this is against Church teaching, but what can I say to a couple that is grieving after so many years of infertility?

—WORRIED SISTER

The first thing to do, which you have undoubtedly done, is to validate the pain they are experiencing as a couple. The trial of infertility constitutes a singular kind of anguish that a couple often suffers alone, tortured with each announcement that friends are expecting and every invitation to a baby shower. We have to let these couples know that they are not alone, that we understand, and that we want to help.

Your sister and her husband are likely seeking answers to the question: “Why can't we have a baby?” And they believe that the doctors at the IVF clinic will help them get those answers. Somehow, you will need to help them see that, tragically, they are mistaken.

As they will soon find out, the IVF clinicians have little interest in discovering the underlying causes of their infertility. On the contrary, the clinic's interest is purely economic: They want to make a buck. Your sister and brother-in-law will likely come



away from their first visit to the clinic feeling like they're dealing with a used car salesman, not with someone who really cares about their plight.

Try to explain to them that many people—even non-Catholics—find IVF to be morally problematic for reasons your sister and her husband may have never considered.

The Catholic Church teaches that IVF is morally illicit without exception, even

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when the couple uses their own egg and sperm. The problem is that IVF substitutes the marital act with technical interventions aimed at making a baby.


But babies are meant to be “begotten, not made.” In fact, the Church understands that every child has a right to come into the world through the unitive and life-giving embrace of husband and wife in marital sexual intercourse. Out of respect for this right of the child, and also out of awe and reverence for the intrinsic beauty and dignity of marital intercourse, “the generation of a child must therefore be the fruit of that mutual giving which is realized in the conjugal act wherein the spouses cooperate as servants and not as masters in the work of the Creator who is Love” (Instruction *Donum Vitae* (“The Gift of Life”), Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, II. B. 4, 1987).

A more readily comprehensible argument against IVF has to do with the consequences of the procedure. IVF is the Wild West of women’s health care—essentially unregulated at the federal level and minimally regulated in most states. There are well-documented health risks to women who, in the course of pursuing IVF, undergo hormonal super-ovulation for the retrieval of their eggs. Furthermore, mounting scientific evidence points to the potential for genetic abnormalities (leading, for example, to obesity, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes) in the 4 million babies born in the US through IVF in the last three decades.

And even if these risks were nonexistent, since IVF normally requires the creation of multiple embryos for each attempt

at implantation, this means that for the 4 million successful IVF births, millions more embryos have been rejected and destroyed in the process. (Let no one suggest that IVF is a “pro-life” option just because those involved want to create a baby.)

That being said, the Church teaches that it can be morally licit to assist the act of marital intercourse to achieve procreation—as long as the marital act of the couple remains the principal cause of pregnancy. Tell them that you will help them locate a doctor who will uncover the root causes of their infertility, try to overcome those obstacles, and help them get pregnant—all with techniques that are morally unproblematic.

The Church fully supports, for example, the endeavors of physicians such as Dr. Thomas Hilgers, director of the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction. His natural methods of overcoming infertility, known as NaPro Technology, have helped hundreds of couples to achieve a pregnancy without recourse to IVF. Other resources for locating NaPro-trained doctors include The National Gianna Center for Women’s Health, with locations in New York and New Jersey (SaintPetershcs.com/giannacenter/), and the One More Soul website with its directory of NFP-only physicians (Onemoresoul.com/nfp-directory). 

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