

ARTIFICIAL REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY AND THE TEACHINGS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON MARRIAGE: AN EVALUATION

SR. JOYCE MARY SALIFU (PhD)

ABSTRACT

This study was an evaluation of Artificial Reproductive Technology and the Catholic Church's Teaching on Marriage. Marriage, procreation and child upbringing have a special place in Catholic theology. Upon marriage the couples are naturally expected to procreate and ensure the responsible growth and development of their children. However, in some cases the couples remain childless against their wish. As a solution to the problem of childlessness, Artificial Reproductive Technology (ART) was evolved. This has however come with mixed feelings as it is ethically against the Church's teaching on marriage and procreation, hence the need for its evaluation. For methodology, this study relied on primary and secondary sources. The descriptive and evaluative methods of data analysis were also adopted. The study found out that Artificial Reproductive Technology has given joy to many families. However, while Artificial Reproductive Technology (ART) seems to have given hope to many couples suffering from infertility, it was also discovered to have had implications on the Church's teaching on marriage and procreation, albeit, the Catholic Church's position on Artificial Reproductive Technology has various criticisms. For instance, the church has not found adequate solution to the plight of childless couples in the face of contemporary realities. This study is significant to Catholic Christian couples who are childless, as it will appropriately guide them in their choices. The study recommended that couples should seek out more ethical and religious ways of dealing with infertility rather than resort to unethical reproductive technologies. The study concluded that spouses should reconsider their quest for procreation as the sole aim of marriage. Instead, in the face of infertility, they should harness the other benefits of marriage which the church equally consider as sacred.

Keywords: Artificial Reproductive Technology, Catholic Church, Magisterium, Marriage, Family Values.

Introduction

One of the purposes of marriage is procreation. But experience shows that in some families, this favour and advantage of marriage is not possible. This failure is not without consequences among couples especially in Africa, where children are greatly treasured. With the advent of Artificial Reproductive Technology, many childless couples were happy that they had found the solution. But this happiness was short-lived for Catholic Christians who were infertile. This is because the implications that accompany ART seem to be a clog in the wheel of the advantages that Catholic couples ordinarily ought to benefit from this opportunity. Some of these implications are in the social, ethical, psychological and religious spheres. Various criticisms have trailed this Catholic Church's stance on ART. It is these impacts of ART on the Catholic Church's teaching on procreation that this study seeks to analyse.

Catholic Teachings on Marriage and Family

Over the centuries and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Church has reflected upon marriage. Christian marriage or matrimony is one of the seven sacraments of the church. This was officially declared at the Council of Trent (1545–1563). According to Hanks, “this teaching was partly to counteract Martin Luther's claim that there were only two sacraments: baptism and Eucharist” (97). Naming Christian marriage as one of the seven sacraments of the church meant that the act of marrying another, with the intent that the marriage be faithful, exclusive, and open to the creation of new life, creates a sacramental relationship between the wife and husband that participates through the working of grace. Marriage was not only a human or secular relationship. It was part of the dynamic life of being a Christian. Pope John Paul II puts this succinctly,

It was drawn into the energizing presence of God's spirit that continuously breathes life into the church. Marriage is a sanctified state of life. It renders the wife and husband holy through all those acts that constitute the marriage. This graced dynamic begins with the exchange of marriage vows and through the consummation of the marriage in sexual intercourse. The process of sanctification continues though their life together (68).

After Christian marriage was officially incorporated as part of church life, there followed a whole series of changes in church practice. First of all, the Catholic Church established rather detailed laws concerning who could marry, what dispositions or attitudes were required for marriage, how the sacramental ritual of marriage should be enacted, and when and where marriages should take place when celebrated in the church.

As the Catholic Church found itself in situations where the population was religiously diverse, it also faced the issue of marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics. These were commonly referred to as mixed marriages. Up until the Second Vatican Council, these marriages were clearly thought of as second class. Usually they were not celebrated in the church building, and the non-Catholic party had to promise that any children from their marriage would be baptized and raised Catholic. After the Second Vatican Council, the church took a more pastoral approach to these marriages, sometimes creating special programs for marriage preparation and enrichment. Also, the non-Catholic partners are no longer required to promise that children of the marriage become Catholic. Nevertheless, the Catholic partners are asked to promise to do all within their power to ensure this result. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, just under one half of the marriages that are celebrated in the church are mixed. Sometimes leaders of each one's respective religious community jointly celebrate the weddings of these people (Meeks 93).

Over the years, various popes have in their encyclicals and exhortations provided guide to the sanctity of Christian marriage and family. Pope Pius XI in his papal encyclical *Casti Connubii* (On Christian Marriage) of 1930 teaches about the virtue of chastity, specifically “marital chastity.” The Holy Father includes a reflection on the threats to marriage and holds up God's will for marriage as the defense. The dignity of marriage and its spiritual benefits are also treated. The Holy Father encourages Christian couples to embrace the call of Christ in their daily lives, especially in living martially chaste lives (<http://family.jrank.org/pages/212/Catholicism-Catholic-Teachings-on-Marriage-Family-Life.html>).

In the same light, Pope Paul VI published his papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (On Human Life) in 1968. Pope Paul VI teaches in this encyclical about God's design for married love and the gift of life. The Holy Father teaches, among other things, that the modern question about spacing and limiting births in marriage is important. It must, however, be considered within the context of God's design for married love. Married love is faithful, total, permanent and fruitful. Its nature exists to create a "Communion of Persons" (the marriage) and to participate with God in bringing new life into the world (procreation). Included in the teaching is a discussion of the immorality of contraception, direct sterilization and abortion (which are always intrinsically evil) and the morality of Natural Family Planning (Meeks 121).

Ajiki caps it up beautifully in the following words, "Catholic theological tradition insists that the generation of human life, if it is to respect the dignity of both parents and children must be the fruit and sign of the mutual self-giving of the spouses, of their love and fidelity" (69).

Implications of ART on the Catholic Church's Teaching on Marriage and Procreation

There are several implications of ART for the Catholic teaching on marriage and procreation. Some of these implications are treated in this section. Prominent among them are the ethical, legal, social, psychological and religious implications. There is no doubt that the advent of IVF in the 1970s sparked intense debate about the use of ART and the social and legal implications it was predicted to have. Many of the ethical questions raised then are still debated today, and with each innovation in the technology a new dimension is added to the debate. ART whether it is fairly simple artificial insemination or intracytoplasmic sperm injection, separates reproduction from sexual intercourse, but still involves a man and a woman. In addition, in IVF and related techniques, fertilization takes place outside the body, which means that gametes and embryos are potentially available for testing, manipulation and research. Whichever method is used, the following implications are imminent:

i. Ethical Implications

Some people reject ART as intrinsically morally unacceptable. Such objections are typically based on either religious belief or traditional assumptions about the nature of relationships and the role of the family. Even those who accept the idea of *in vitro* fertilization as treatment for an infertile heterosexual couple in a stable relationship might have reservations about making such treatment available to other individuals. e.g. single women, postmenopausal women, or homosexual couples. Indeed, in many countries, such people are excluded from receiving ART services. The objections are often based on preconceived ideas of what should constitute a family unit" (*Instruction on Respect for Human Life* 16). The basis for this assertion is the Catholic Church's belief that "it is only the promised stability and fidelity of marriage which provides an appropriate context for bringing up a child" (Gleeson10).

Equally, the techniques themselves raise a number of problematic issues. When embryos are formed from the stored embryos, sperm or eggs, a process known as cryopreservation, what becomes of the legal status of the frozen egg or sperm? In fact, embryos are now being screened *in vitro* for a wide range of genetic disorders, and those found to be affected discarded. PGD also makes it possible to select the sex of the offspring. While most people would accept this as a way of avoiding the transmission of serious sex-linked impairments, many Catholics would regard it as ethically unacceptable.

ii. Social Implications

As the techniques of ART become more widely available, however, the social questions need to be resolved. It is vitally important that the general public be closely involved in all aspects of the debate. Infertile couples need to be aware of the social, ethical implication of the services rendered to them. It is over 25 years since the first human baby resulting from *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) was born. At the time, the event was a widely publicized, celebrated, and controversial landmark. Since then, IVF has become routine and widely accepted, and is now only one of a number of potential treatments for infertility. "Since 1978, more than one million babies have been born as a result of IVF, and it has been estimated that, in some European countries, up to 5% of all births are now a result of ART" (Ozar 93).

One concern that has been expressed since the early days of assisted reproduction is that the children will be somehow disadvantaged, physically or psychologically, by the process of their conception. One apparent difference is the higher incidence of multiple births following IVF, and the resulting higher proportion of preterm and low-birth-weight infants. However, allowing for these factors, the evidence so far indicates no difference in physical health between children conceived using ART and those conceived naturally. "The physical development of children born as a result of ART has also received considerable attention" (94). It has, for instance, been suggested that the stress associated with the experience of infertility and its treatment may result in parenting difficulties when a child is eventually born. Or that the parents may be overprotective, or have unrealistic expectations either of their children or of themselves as parents.

iii. Psychological Implications

A recent review of research on parenting and the psychological development of children concluded that, from the evidence available so far, such concerns that there may be psychological distance between parents and children born through ART are unfounded. Parents of children conceived by ART appear to have good relationships with their children, and there is no evidence of cognitive impairment in singleton children born at full term. Nevertheless, experience so far is limited. Most studies have included only children before adolescence, and the quality of the studies has been variable. Samples are often small, unrepresentative and poorly defined, and without appropriate controls. In addition, for some types of ART, such as surrogacy and embryo donation, very little is known about the children's development (Elias and Annas 64).

iv. Religious Implications

Various religious reasons have been cited for total ban on cloning technology to human reproduction. Roman Catholicism is one of the most conservative in issues related to human reproduction. The Church stresses that all forms of human life should be respected from the time of fertilization. So, in 1987, Roman Catholic scholars averred that the Bible and Canon Law were against cloning of any kind. Catholics were told that cloning was considered contrary to the moral law, since it is in opposition to the dignity of human procreation and the conjugal union. Recently, W. Brennan cites the Pope as declaring that

Methods that fail to respect the dignity and value of the person must always be avoided; in particular of attempts at human cloning with a view to obtaining organs for transplants. These techniques, insofar as they involve the manipulation and destruction of human embryos, are not naturally acceptable,

even when their proposed goal is good in itself. What is technically possible is not for that reason alone morally admissible (731-746).

The position of the Catholic Church regarding assisted reproduction follows the proclamation issued in 1956 by Pope Pius XII who defined artificial fecundation as immoral and illegal, because it separates procreation and sexual normal function (Pope Pius XII, 1956). These views were reinforced by Pope Paul VI in 1968 and again in the report issued by the Roman Catholic Church in 1987 entitled "Respect for Human Life and the Dignity of Procreation" which stated that "Children are a gift and a blessing from God and that although science makes some things possible it does not make them right. Research must continue into the causes of infertility, but the morality of these should be carefully considered" (Pope Paul VI, 1968). Consequently, all forms of assisted reproduction including IUI, IVF, ICSI, ET and surrogate motherhood are not accepted. IUI can be accepted if the semen is collected by sexual intercourse while AID is forbidden because it involves a third party.

Moreover, the Catholic Church offers its respect and protection to the human being starting with its first seconds of existence; it therefore considers the zygote, pre-embryo, embryo and foetus as persons and strongly disapproves research on embryos, cryopreservation and abortion (Ozar 108). When Pope John Paul II approved genetic enhancement in 1983, it was based on its therapeutic value affecting chromosomal deficiencies. The intervention was meant to promote well-being without causing harm to the biological integrity of the human person or caused increased suffering rather it was to improve the human biological condition (386-389).

Reacting to this emerging trend Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*, insisted that "transmission of human life is ordained by God to result from the union of a man and woman in marriage". The key value in the instruction is respect for the dignity of the human person. The implication of the above stand is that childbearing is the fruit of parental love. A child cannot be conceived as the product of an intervention of medical or biological techniques which are evaluated in accordance with standards of control and dominion. It is clear that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae* warned that "the moral relevance of the link between the meanings of the conjugal act and between the goods of marriage, as well as the unity of the human being and the dignity of his origin, demand that the procreation of a human person be brought about as the fruit of the conjugal act specific to the love between spouses" (4).

Possibly, the criteria the Church uses for evaluating these interventions is the respect, defense, and promotion of a human being with a primary and fundamental right to life and dignity, as a person who is endowed with a spiritual soul and moral responsibility. On this ground, the Church only allows fertilization when it is the result of a conjugal act. This simply means that sexual intercourse is required between husband and wife. Anything outside of this normal process is prohibited. This method of conception violates the rights of the child, compromises his or her parental origins, and can interfere with the development of personal identity. This position eliminates any use of donor semen for artificial insemination or for IVF. Furthermore, artificial fertilization of a woman who is unmarried or a widow, whoever the donor may be, cannot be morally justified. The practice of ovum donation is prohibited on the same basis as

sperm donation. The use of sperm donors is viewed as “being equal to committing adultery and is therefore regarded as a grievous crime and a great sin” (119).

Pope Francis’ *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), which was published on April 8, 2016 is another milestone teaching on ART. The Pope begins his reflections with the Holy Scriptures where he avers that “the Bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises” (AL 8). The pope recognized that today,

Families face many challenges, from migration to the ideological denial of differences between the sexes (“ideology of gender”); from the culture of the provisional to the antibirth mentality and the impact of biotechnology in the field of procreation; from the lack of housing and work to pornography and abuse of minors; from inattention to persons with disabilities, to lack of respect for the elderly; from the legal dismantling of the family, to violence against women (AL 56).

He stresses the themes of indissolubility, the sacramental nature of marriage, the transmission of life and the education of children. The document dwelt on love’s fruitfulness and procreation in the fifth chapter. It speaks in a profoundly spiritual and psychological manner about welcoming new life, about the waiting period of pregnancy, about the love of a mother and a father. It also speaks of the expanded fruitfulness of adoption, of welcoming the contribution of families to promote a “culture of encounter”, and of family life in a broad sense which includes aunts and uncles, cousins, relatives of relatives, friends (AL 187).

Pope Francis recognizes irregular situations in contemporary marriage. Here he calls for mercy and pastoral discernment in situations that do not fully match what the Lord proposes. The Pope uses three very important verbs: guiding, discerning and integrating, which are fundamental in addressing fragile, complex or irregular situations. He reaffirms what Christian marriage is and adds that “some forms of union radically contradict this ideal, while others realize it in at least a partial and analogous way” (188). As far as discernment with regard to “irregular” situations is concerned, the Pope states: “There is a need ‘to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations’ and ‘to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition’” (AL 296). For him, infertility is one of such irregular situations in marriage which need to be handled in good spirit and in accordance with the Catholic Church’s stance.

Evaluation

No doubt, Artificial Reproductive Technology should have been a way of bringing joy and stability to many families in Igala who suffer impotency or sterility or infertility in their marriages. However, some widely accepted technologies and procedures for overcoming infertility continue to raise troubling ethical issues. While the desire to overcome infertility is certainly legitimate, there are still important moral considerations to take into account especially as regards the church’s teaching on procreation.

ART has had huge implications on the teaching and practice of Catholic Christianity generally. The first major concern in this regard is double standard. Catholic couples who are infertile, accept the Christian teaching yet they go ahead to engage in ART due to their quest for children. Thus, even though are highly placed members of the Church and accept the

Catholic teachings, yet they engage in ART. Most times they remain Christians, but do not abide by the Catholic teaching on ART. Wood buttresses this by stating that some Catholic Christians have abandoned Christianity for this reason, while others have remained Catholics but do not subscribe to the Catholic ban on ART (91).

Good as the desire for children among Africans may be, in itself, it does not justify any and every means of “getting” children. For example, kidnapping another person’s child is wrong no matter how desperately a couple desires children. The Catholic Church upholds this view and teaches that manufacturing children through technological procedures is wrong. In both cases, we are dealing with a good end (the desire for children), but through a wrong means. This does not mean, however, that the pains and anguish of infertile couples must be dismissed, but much more is at stake in the laboratory generation of human life than is first apparent (136). Infertility is a disease or more aptly, a disability. Seeking ways to cure it is a praiseworthy service to the many married couples who suffer greatly because of it. But there are limits to what can be done. Correcting this disability must be done with respect for the order established by God. As soon as we “replace” the marital embrace as the means of conception, we act outside the scope of God’s order (141).

Some moralists condemn the technological way of generating human life based on the dignity of the child to be conceived. They argue that the immorality of homologous in-vitro fertilization and embryo transfer is that, the child cannot be conceived, but seen as the product of an intervention of medical or biological techniques and that would reduce the child to an object of scientific technology. Pope Paul also condemned the use of technology to generate human life because such a child is brought about outside conjugal love between the couples; as such, such a child lacks the “language of the body”. The language of the body is the central message of the Pope in his “Theology of the Body” (73). The Catholic Church considers the dignity of the child generated. Christopher West writes:

While there are many acts through which a child can be conceived, only one is in keeping with the dignity of the child. Humanity’s great dignity is found in our imaging of God. Love is our origin, vocation, and end. Thus human dignity demands that a child be conceived through that act of love that images God. Technological fertilization entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person. Spouses who engage in technological generation of human being and the technicians who assist them set themselves up as ‘operators instead of co-operators, creators instead of procreator. They deny their status as creatures and make themselves ‘like God’ (137-139).

The above statements have generated a lot of controversy among scholars and they ask whether children conceived from these technologies are not created by God, or whether they are not made in his image? To this question a very concrete response was given in this way:

There is not a single person on the planet who would exist if God did not will for him to exist. As soon as sperm meets eggs, even if it is in a petri dish, God is there to create an immortal soul. But even though God wills for

technologically conceived children to exist, and allows them to come to be in this way, it does not mean that God wills for us to use these technologies (140).

This entails that the children brought forth technologically still belong to God, since everything else belong to Him. However, it is not in God's design that children should be thus manufactured.

While both philosophical and biblical traditions portray childbearing as valuable and as a good legitimately pursued by spouses, it is not an absolute good, that is, a good whose accomplishment overrides all other considerations. The Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) envisions children as a blessing and a gift of God (Psalm 128), not a human achievement, much less a value which supersedes fidelity and obedience to the Lord. Abela shares his disgust against certain reproductive technologies thus:

An overemphasis on individuals' liberty to procreate, and to manipulate the reproductive process according to each person's taste, connotes the idea of the child as a product rather than a human being. In fact, there are some reproductive objectives such as those requiring the use of genetic screening, selective embryo transfer, abortion or generic engineering that can only be accomplished by treating the potential offspring as an object to be created, manipulated, and destroyed according to the terms of the reproductive contract. When the baby becomes a commodity, all of its personal attributes like sex, eye colour, predicted IQ, predicted height, and the like, becomes commodified as well (85).

This means that having a child through the assemblage of materials depersonalizes procreation and could leave negative lasting consequence on both the child's and couple's lives. While parents may satisfy their desire to have a child, by replacing the experience of child birth with technical means, they may in the long run damage unconsciously the couple's loving relationship. As a consequence, the child so born through these technical means will be deprived of that conjugal act which is not only a biological fact, but the fruit of a loving encounter between the spouses though reproduction finds its true meaning (86).

Catholic teaching on the subject matter of procreation can be found largely in the Instruction *Donum Vitae*, issued in 1987 by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In that Instruction *Donum Vitae*, the discussions were on the issues of respect for human life in its origin and reflection on the dignity of procreation in the light of the rapidly spreading reproductive technologies. In the Instruction, it was acknowledged that:

Advances in technology have now made it possible to procreate apart from sexual relations through the meeting in vitro of the germ cells previously taken from the man and the woman. But what is technically possible is not for that very reason morally admissible. Rational reflection on the fundamental values of life and of human procreation is, therefore, indispensable for formulating a moral evaluation of such technological interventions on a human being from the first stage of development (*Donum Vitae* no. 4).

The Instruction on one hand praises the progress of biological and medical science which can be used for more effective therapeutic purposes, and on the other hand warns that this

progress, if not checked, can acquire new powers with unforeseeable consequences over human life at its very beginning to the point that various procedures now make it possible to intervene not only in order to assist but also to dominate the process of procreation. The Instruction also acknowledges that medical science is a gift from God to be used for the service of the good of human life and should respect its dignity as God's creature. Therefore, biologists and doctors were warned thus: "No biologist or doctor can reasonably claim, by virtue of his scientific competence, to be able to decide about people's origin and destiny. This norm must be applied in a particular way in the field of sexuality and procreation, in which man and woman actualize the fundamental values of love and life" (no. 3).

Based on the concept of respecting human life right from its early beginnings, the Instruction further evaluates the performance and morality of prenatal diagnosis, that is, therapeutic analysis carried out on the embryo, and other experimentations on human embryos and fetuses in the same way as the analogous procedures would be evaluated if there were performed by physicians on children or adults. In each case, the procedure in question is said to be legitimate if and only if, it is performed with the parents' consent and for the benefit of the embryo or foetus. Procedures that are performed in view of possible abortion of the foetus, or which would invariably destroy the embryo or foetus, even a nonviable embryo or foetus, are condemned (no. 2). According to Basterra, Artificial Insemination within marriage or outside marriage is not condemned out of hand simply because semen is obtained by masturbation, as is sometimes claimed. The real reason is that, even if the semen were obtained differently and legitimately, the Congregation's moral rejection would still be absolute because a scientific technique is replacing the conjugal act as the origin of human life (72-73).

To choose to have a child by IVF is to choose to have a child as the product of a making, but it should be understood that the relationship of product to maker is a relationship of radical inequality, of profound subordination.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, this study has made an analysis of the implications of ART on the Catholic Church's teaching on marriage and procreation. The study showed that to some extent ART has proved to be effective as an option for overcoming infertility and childlessness. However, given that human beings are variously involved in the different moments of these procedures, the morality of ART was considered, especially with regard to whether it respects and promotes the true good of the human person, especially the most vulnerable. It is in this light that the Catholic Church along with some others argues against all ART methods that substitute the natural conjugal act and encourage destruction of human life. This is so because they are immoral, as such dehumanizing and disrespectful to the dignity of the human being as a person created in the image and likeness of God.

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