

Advice of a priestly shepherd

I admitted to the couple that I wasn't certain what they should do, let alone whether I should be telling them what or how to do it. But, they insisted I give them an answer.

So I took the plunge, I said these are some quick thoughts and initial impressions I believe may be permissible but are still problematic. After a brief consideration here are the points I discussed with them:

The embryonic children are alive but in a sort of "arrested development" or suspended animation—for lack of a better description.

I told them that we, as Catholics, do not support *in vitro* technologies nor can we facilitate or participate in them.

The means in which the children are being stored is truly extraordinary, I told them, but could we really consider pulling the children out of the deep freeze and allowing them to die? Is this similar to removing someone from life support?

These are possible moral resolutions, I explained, but both are very, very problematic.

If you chose to allow others to adopt the embryos, I said, they may very well grow and live to be a healthy man or woman. But, by doing so you would, at the least, be implicitly endorsing or supporting *in vitro* which we cannot do as Catholics. If you remove the embryos from the "deep freeze" they will die naturally; but, they are not currently dying, they are not ill, their organs are not shutting down. So there is a real difference, in my opinion, between someone who is dying and is on life-support verses the embryos in a cryogenic freeze. Each seem morally licit but very, very problematic to me.

Then the couple asked the question I most feared: "What would you do?"

I told them I'd have to think about it and asked them if they could give me some time to do a little research. Fortunately they said that would be great. So I did what every priest should do...I met with a confrere. He'd never had a question like that in his many years of priesthood and had no idea how to answer the couple. So I called another senior priest I respected. He too had never faced such a question and had no answer. So I attempted to find a moral theologian in the diocese. At the time we did not have a single priest with an advanced degree in moral theology. (We currently have a priest studying bioethics in Rome.)

"Now what?" I asked myself. I called the seminary and explained the situation to my moral theology instructor. I was shocked to learn that he never had encountered the question. He promised to do some research and get back to me. I was relieved—at least the burden of providing an answer was now off of my shoulders. Later that week, he called back and said he'd spoken with two moral theologians considered to be soundly in line with the Catholic Church on issues of morality (*William May and Germain Grisez*). I was sure that these two moral theologians would have the answer. My former instructor said that they both came up with what they believed were

morally licit but problematic solutions though they differed. One said, "It would be morally licit to allow the adoption but problematic because of the connection and implied support to the *in vitro* process." The other said he believed, "It would be morally licit to allow the embryo to die naturally in the Petri dish but problematic because the embryo was really in a state of arrested development and not dying." According to my instructor, they both said, "This is so new that Rome is just beginning to study the issue."

Well, that helped me a lot...right! Actually it did. At least I was able to respond, knowing that I'd done my very best to give the couple learned and correct information for consideration. I spoke with the couple a week later.

After I shared the information, they asked, "Now what should we do?" They repeated their request, "What would you do?"

I told them the decision was really theirs to make. You are the parents of the children and thus the decision truly rests with you. They grimaced. Begging me for an answer they asked again, "What would you do?" Such is the powerful relationship we have as priestly shepherds. They truly valued my response.

I did what I said I'd never do: I answered them. "Never in my life could I imagine a situation that truly fit the definition of *choosing the lesser of two evils* until these last couple of weeks. I think I'd choose to allow the embryos to be adopted for the sake of the children. But the decision is still yours. *Things are not sinful because they have bad consequences they have bad consequences because they are sinful*. It's not your fault you had never heard the Church's teachings about human embryos and *in vitro* fertilization; it's our fault as priests that we haven't been more vocal or taught about it from the pulpit. Unfortunately, as parents, you now face a decision that is amazingly difficult."

They said, "You're right, but we could've asked before we went ahead. We wanted children so badly that we just couldn't envision anything else...let alone these consequences."

The decision ultimately did rest with them. To this day I do not know what they decided. Thank God for the pontificate of Pope John Paul II who firmly and decisively declared to the world and to the Church that the Roman Catholic Church has a vested interest in protecting the lives of every human from the moment of conception to their natural death. The Church has a vested interest in protecting the unborn, the young, the elderly and the infirm for two primary reasons:

One: The Catholic Church believes that every embryo is a human being, an individual human person, at the moment of creation. At the moment of conception a soul is infused by God into that corporeal mass of tissue; we are body-soul composites that are unique and with an individual destiny. We are made in God's image and likeness not just our parents!

Two: Children are a gift of God, received and experienced through the marital

embrace, intended to be united with our loving God from the moment of conception for all eternity. Every human person has an infinite value not because of the value you or I place on each other but because of the value God has for all humans. Because they are a gift we have no absolute right to them.

"By his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being" "This saving event reveals to humanity not only the boundless love of God who 'so loved the world that he gave his only Son,' (Jn 3:16) but also the *incomparable value of every human person*." (EV#2)

In other words, the Church is involved in defending "*the incomparable value of every human person*" because God was, is, and always will be involved in our lives as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Jesus was, is, and always will be the ultimate defender of life and those who have been abandoned by society or have no voice.

Jesus is the staunch defender of the faceless, nameless and voiceless people. John Paul II is not alone in defending the Culture of Life from the secular, faceless and ignoble vision proclaimed by the Culture of Death. The Gospel of Life is "the fruit of the cooperation of the episcopate of every country of the world...and...is therefore meant to be a *precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability*, and at the same time a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person, in the name of God: *respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life!* Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness." (EV#5)

Pope John Paul II reminds us: "The Gospel of Life is at the heart of Jesus' message. Lovingly received day after day by the Church, it is to be preached with dauntless fidelity as 'good news' to the people of every age and culture." (EV#1) The Gospel of Life is the good news calling man "to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimension of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God." (EV#2)

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Please come talk with Fr. Pete about his analysis after 7 p.m. Mass Thursday, April 12, in the Social Hall. For more information, call (480) 775-5200. Reserve free childcare at (480) 775-5238

The Church, science, *in vitro* fertilization & embryonic stem-cells in the media

by Fr. Peter Rossa

PLAYING WITH BIOLOGICAL FIRES: The media and messages about life

Fourteen years ago I sat in a dark office vault located within the walls of another vault. I wasn't alone; 300 of us occupied the space. We were as secure in our vaulted room as possible. My job was to plan the destruction of the world in the name of freedom—literally. The Strategic Air Command's motto was "Peace is our Profession" but war or its threat was the means to obtain this peace.

Little did I know that one day I'd look back on those days within the darkened secure vault with a whole new vision, a new sense of security and a new definition of freedom. Desert Storm opened the doors of life for me: Doing my job for real—not just planning for war but executing it ultimately forced me to consider fundamental questions regarding the meaning and purpose of life. It wasn't always so; at least not earnestly. The world of hypothesis and dreams was profoundly confronted with the realities of war. In that darkened vault we debated the world and actually attempted to solve the world's problems to pass the time. Many times we'd nonchalantly flip sides of an issue arguing the other side with no real conviction or purpose just to see if we could do it. As happens in debate, our verbal sparring often became more about beating our opponent than about pursuing truth. Truth was often a casualty of this chase for victory.

I now sit in a light-filled office with individuals and families who are confronting weighty personal and societal issues. As a parish priest, I deal with many topics that are one and the same as those we debated in the vault. I do so now filled with the light of hope that comes from Jesus Christ. Truth no longer is determined by the power of the argument or the ability to persuade; it is not an idea; it is not a thing.



Truth is a person—Jesus Christ. Truth is no longer a casualty; it is the cause and reason for my life. Truth also is the reason that I appeal to your conscience today for a renewed commitment to restoring the proper dignity, respect and honor for every human person in Christ's name. This appeal is not simply my own. It is an appeal fed and nurtured through my reflections on Pope John Paul II's profound and noble vision of humanity, and our relationship with God as portrayed in his *Theology of the Body, Evangelium Vitae*, and other collected works.

I appeal to you to continue reading. Do your best to read these words with an open mind and an open heart because this message is a core teaching of our Catholic faith. It is "the Gospel of Life."

So why am I writing this article now? Have you ever had that nagging, pulling sense that you are about to do something you really don't want to do? Or something you put off because you have other things that are equally or more important? I was in that sort of mood for several months as I read newspaper articles and followed the news on the Internet. As a very disturbing pattern came into view, I realized I had to do something. This pattern showed no respect for human life. Even more disturbing to me, it was presented oh so nobly.

Let me take you back to last spring when a series regarding life issues ran in *The Arizona Republic*. May 30, 2006, the Tuesday after Memorial Day weekend, Jodie Snyder wrote an article (in fact she had written a series of articles published that day) dealing with *in vitro* fertilization. In one front page article *The Arizona Republic* boldly informed us of "The High Price of Women's Eggs." I shook my head; surely on the heels of a three-day weekend more worthy front-page news must have existed.

Then on June 15—this time at the bottom of the front page—AP reporter Carla K. Johnson wrote about "Flocking to U.S. to pick baby's sex." Hardly coincidental, I believe, that similar articles were placed on page one.

Two weeks later, on June 30, this time in the middle of the main section of *The Arizona Republic*, a *Washington Post* article titled "Senate to challenge Bush over stem-cell

My Dear Family,

Over the past several months, Fr. Pete has spent many hours praying about and researching the topic of in-vitro fertilization. This is far more than a technology or a topic. It is an issue that touches the very essence of life itself. As Catholics, we must be informed and we must take a stance. I encourage each of you to take the time to read his well informed and thoughtful analysis.

research" appeared. Then July 1, 2006, *New York Times* writer Elizabeth Rosenthal reported on news from the Vatican. The headline read, "Vatican aide asks for cell-work penalty." Just as we were about to celebrate our independence and freedom as a nation, *The Republic* ran a story concerned with the Vatican seeking ecclesial penalties for people conducting scientific research on embryonic stem-cells and other medical professionals involved with *in vitro* fertilization. I was struck by the irony.

Since then, local, national and international articles pop up weekly—if not daily—regarding embryonic stem-cells. Whether we recognize it or not, we truly are facing a global issue. Here in the U.S. we often hear about these "issues" because of a cycle of get-out-the-vote politics and Congressional debate on bills allowing the use of federal funds supporting embryonic stem-cell research.

The extent of local, national and international coverage portrays a very real and a very pressing subject. Obviously *The Arizona Republic* believes its readers want to hear about scientific developments regarding fertilization medicine; after all, it ran a story on page one. I do, however, take umbrage with Ms. Snyder's presentation. I believe journalists have a fiduciary responsibility to thoroughly research material and then present the facts as news and **not** as a one-sided *advocacy* plea (unless, of course, the article appears on the opinion page). I'm not sure if Ms. Snyder intended her articles as an advocacy advertisement. Perhaps she was caught up in the fascinating possibilities and apparent hope offered by fertility medicine. In fairness to the writer, I admit that she did raise some troubling issues which I will discuss. As presented in her articles, however, these issues seemed to be little more than an after thought. Perhaps her concerns were more than that but she was unable to address them fully due to lack of space, time or research. The bottom line, however, is that these life and death issues are not simply a matter of science and scientific advancement—they are far more complex. The moral reflections and implications of our decisions and actions often are overlooked or lost in the hope offered by science. The same is true with fertility

Please look inside.

medicine and embryonic stem-cell research. Emotions often run high because of the pain that comes with infertility and married couples' natural desire for children. These high emotions, combined with other real-life issues and our increasing willingness to wear our political beliefs on our sleeves make "life issues" a sensitive topic that is potentially explosive.

During a debate over embryonic stem-cell research on the floor of the U.S. Senate, Arlen Specter (R-PA) recently—and I add, recklessly—accused the Catholic Church of standing in the way of and impeding scientific progress. His statements revealed the ignorance many people have regarding the Catholic Church's beliefs about human life, his lack of knowledge on Church History, and his unfamiliarity with Pope John Paul II's teachings on faith and reason.

While science pushes moralists and ethicists to stretch their reasoning, the moralists and the ethicists provide a healthy check and balance to scientific research. When done well, this balance protects real people from the Frankensteins and Kevorkians of today. Faith and reason, science and morality, are meant to work in unison. They need one another and are interdependent on one another. Faith and reason are not meant to be at war with each other. An either or situation does not exist, according to the principles laid out by Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor*: The Splendor of Truth and *Fides et Ratio*: On Faith and Reason. According to the Pope's noble vision of humanity, when working in unison they represent the best of morality, ethics and scientific research which ultimately truly do support, safeguard and advance the development of our nation, culture and people.

So, just what is my response specifically to the *Arizona Republic* articles and generally to the Culture of Death so pervasive in secular society? *In Vitro* fertilization seems to be a very compassionate alternative for many couples facing infertility. Embryonic stem cell research seems promising in many ways. Therapeutic cloning appears so beneficial on the surface. But are they really? Are there other consequences and unseen moral dilemmas involved with modern medicine and technology—issues not fully reported in the media? Here's what I have learned.

The Church and life issues in the media

While the blessings of *in vitro* fertilization, embryonic stem-cell research and cloning are espoused in the media, the flip side almost always is overlooked by secular news outlets.

First, what is *in vitro* fertilization? *In vitro* fertilization is the creation of a human embryo from a woman's egg and a man's sperm through scientific intervention outside of the uterus.

But, this is not just an issue of a single egg or a single sperm; multiple eggs and hundreds of sperm are involved to create multiple embryos (the actual number varies). Between three and five embryos are then implanted in a woman's womb.

Once the process is deemed successful, doctors commonly terminate some of the human embryos to enhance the survival and successful birth of one or two children.

If, however, this process of implantation fails it is repeated, further compounding the moral gravity because embryonic children are created and destroyed. When doctors and scientists using this technology fail to acknowledge the presence of the human person in the embryo, the embryo is reduced to mere biological material making its destruction permissible in their eyes. On the other hand, if they recognize this presence, then they have no moral grounds with which to justify destruction of the person.

We must remember, however, that "Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end." (Donum Vitae #5) Every embryonic child deserves our total respect. "God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can, under any circumstance, claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being." (DV#5)

As Catholics we are all involved in the struggle against the Culture of Death. The hope offered

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by *in vitro* clearly has introduced a new element into medical science—it pits the desires of men and women to possess a child against the rights of their other embryonic children to survive.

We should neither advocate, participate in nor facilitate *in vitro* fertilization, embryonic stem-cell research or cloning. Period! By fostering, encouraging or supporting them, we risk incurring the penalty of excommunication. We cannot afford to play with biological fire.

Our call is to defend the rights of the unborn, the faceless and the powerless human embryo. Commenting on the Fifth Commandment, "Thou shall not kill," the new United States Catholic Catechism for Adults reminds us: "...We are called to create the culture of life and work against the culture of death."

Ponder these questions:

What does it mean to be human? Do we have a right to children? Should science be concerned with morality? Are eugenics, cloning and embryonic stem-cell research permissible for the sake of another or society? Who makes those decisions and on what fundamental principles are those decisions based?

Scientists and medical researchers shy away from the question, "What does it mean to be human?" Why? Likely because "being human" cannot be empirically measured. Some advocates of *in vitro* and others are willing to acknowledge that the embryo is of a human genus, but do not

believe it is a "person" because it has yet to develop. "Applied biology and medicine work together for the integral good of human life when they come to the aid of a person stricken by illness and infirmity, and when they respect his or her dignity as a creature of God. No biologist or doctor can reasonably claim, by virtue of his scientific competence, to be able to decide about people's origin and destiny." (DV#4)

To my surprise, scientists are not alone. Even some clergy have asked me, "At what stage of development does an embryo become a human person?" I have a difficult time understanding this question, because both logic and reality bear out that if left to develop naturally, the human embryo has no other choice but to continue its development as a human person. It's not as if the laws of nature or the natural law will allow it to become a frog. We cannot separate our humanity from our personhood or our body from our soul.

Others are desperately afraid that if the embryo is recognized as a human person, their political or judicial philosophy will be compromised; maybe they will be out of a job or perhaps their research will be terminated because the "embryo" once declared a human person will have "equal rights" under the Constitution. Sadly, some people will be forced to confront their rolls in the taking of another human's life. All involved will need help in seeking reconciliation and healing. Should science be concerned with morality? Absolutely.

Dream babies

Couples struggling with fertility can now have the child of their dreams. While this appears like a really good and altruistic thing to do, it is fraught with complications. Do couples have a right to children? The Church says "no" in *Donum Vitae: Instruction on Respect for Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*. Why? Children are a gift; not property. The pain of infertility is a heavy burden for some married couples. *Donum Vitae* encourages the development of fertility medicine that seeks to treat and cure the causes of infertility, not the circumvention of the natural law or the laws of nature. It encourages couples and scientists to be steward's of Gods gifts and not masters and manipulators — science and medicine are meant to enhance and heal, not to dominate our cooperation in creation.

I have spoken with women who have a strong maternal desire to have children yet are not married, and are struggling to find the "right" man to marry. As their biological clocks tick, they feel increasingly compelled to consider "other alternatives." (See page 3.) Women are not alone in their desires; many men also desire children and have not met that "perfect" woman."

In vitro fertilization makes it possible for these women and men to fulfill their maternal and paternal desires; but at what expense? Do children have a right to be conceived within a loving marital relationship between one man and one woman?

In *Donum Vitae*, the Church definitively says yes—Children do have the right to be conceived

within the marital union of husband and wife. To do otherwise makes us masters and manipulators of God's gifts; not stewards and cooperators in the life of grace.

Not only is *In vitro* fertilization a manipulation of God's gifts, but also big business. Fertility clinics charge enormous fees. The technology brings both financial costs and opportunity for industry. Indeed, the costs force many couples to take out loans to pay the fees required to have children.

In Britain, for instance, couples seeking *in vitro* actually can get a government-subsidized financial discount by donating excess embryonic children for scientific research. But what happens when the remaining human embryos are not used? They are placed in a deep freeze. These embryonic children are placed in cryobanks for an indeterminate length of time, for a storage fee, of course. Then what happens to those human embryos if the couple can no longer bring children into this world? The embryonic children may be adopted. Otherwise they are kept in cryogenic freeze until someone becomes concerned or sees an opportunity.

What if the couple wants to keep their children in the cryogenic freeze until a reasonable solution can be found, but they experience financial hardship and cannot afford the storage fees? Do the children become property of the cryogenic companies? Property of the banks and credit unions? Wards of the state? Subjects of state or federally sponsored scientific research?

These unanticipated after effects of *in vitro* become problematic for us as Catholics. When Catholics avail themselves of *in vitro* technologies, what are they to do next?

One Sunday morning I was approached by a married couple who wanted me to meet their beautiful twins. The couple was elated that after many attempts to conceive they finally had received twin gifts from God. Still, they were troubled. After a few minutes they revealed that their twins were conceived through multiple attempts at *in vitro* fertilization; they loved both children and beheld them with pride and joy.

Not until after their children were born did the couple discover that every human embryo is a child according to the Church. Their dilemma was that the wife no longer could carry children to term; yet they had 15 embryos in a cryobank. They didn't know what to do and asked me for advice. Their strong desire for children led them down an unexpected slippery slope. They felt trapped. They are not alone in their quandary: In 2002, more than 400,000 embryonic children were being stored in the cryobanks in the United States alone, according to a Rand Corporation study.

The couple I spoke with that Sunday also mentioned that they had suffered severe financial difficulties because of the extreme cost of the multiple *in vitro* procedures but wouldn't relent on their need to pay the storage fees as they couldn't abandon their embryonic children. They expressed concern that if they declared bankruptcy or were unable to pay the storage fees, they wouldn't be able to live with themselves.

The link is more than casual

In vitro fertilization, embryonic stem-cell research and therapeutic cloning are directly linked.

Already, we have seen fertility clinics offering their "excess" embryos for medical research. Have you heard of embryonic stem-cell research? Where do you think the embryos used to acquire these embryonic stem-cells are coming from? Have you read recent articles about therapeutic cloning? The embryos used for therapeutic cloning come from the same sources used in embryonic stem-cell research. The embryos are from the cryobanks thanks to parents who no longer want the embryos, who have abandoned them, who can no longer afford the storage fees or who are unable to carry them to term. The fertility clinics make money from both ends of the deal—from couples and now from researchers who experiment on embryos later. Let's not forget that most couples can't afford the process of *in vitro* fertilization, especially repeat procedures. Thus, they do what every good American does—they take out a loan or a second mortgage; which means the banks and mortgage companies also are profiting. Some states, like California, see the financial opportunity in the development of new biotechnologies and industry, and also subsidize the "Culture of Death" for the sake of the state's economy. (In California alone, the amount is \$3.1 billion of taxpayer funds.) But at what expense? Will our state be next? If that isn't enough, the researchers, fertility clinics and cryobanks now want federal research money. The bottom line: It's big business!

"Eugenics," a June 15, 2006, *Arizona Republic* story reveals that the age of designer babies is here. Having a child isn't enough. Now people request children with certain hair or eye colors. Some ask that the parents of the embryos have certain IQs, education and economic backgrounds, as well as health histories.

But what happens if the screening process fails and a child is born with a hereditary disease or illness? It's not like you can "return" the child and exchange him or her for a new one. Can these companies and doctors be sued for malpractice? The answer is yes. The legal term is "wrongful birth suits." Are we and our courts talking about a child or defective property?

In the September 2006 issue of *More Magazine*, Louise Farr asks, "Whose egg is it, anyway?" In this instance, the status of embryos according to state divorce laws is being argued in a Texas court case: Roman v. Roman. The Romans are going through a divorce and Texas laws treat human embryos as community property. However, federal divorce laws protect the embryo as a human person, not community property. The Romans want the courts to determine who has rights to the embryos. While this case started over divorce, it just may turn into the ultimate civil rights case of the third millennium. Talk about unforeseen issues.

Imagine the potential coverage of these cases on Court TV, CNN or Fox News. The question of the embryo as person or property could be the next Roe v. Wade decision for our courts to decide.

Another example—this one explored in the Aug. 12, 2006, *East Valley Tribune*—involves multiple children created via *in vitro* fertilization using a common male donor, #3066. The dilemma is that this male donor was a genetic carrier of autism, a trait that apparently has been passed on to his progeny. Will this become a "wrongful birth" class action suit?

Should we and our scientists be concerned about the morality of scientific experimentation and research? Absolutely.

The advocates of *in vitro* fertilization, embryonic stem-cell research and cloning — whether human or therapeutic — are playing with fire.

So how do we get out of this quagmire? The leaders of the Catholic Church and others in our state, nation and world are working feverishly to stem the tide that has reduced human beings to mere biological material and property. While lives are at stake, it seems to me that "re-personalizing" the human embryos and emphasizing the embryos' civil rights creates the best defense against the growing culture of death.

RIGHTING WRONGS: A Catholic response to the culture of death

So what else does the Catholic Church have to say about these fertility issues? Are there some other alternatives available to couples struggling with infertility? Let's take a look.

At this point, you may be feeling a little downtrodden, overwhelmed, shocked or even elated as pieces of the *in vitro* picture come into focus. Your feelings are not uncommon. I shared the same feelings as I wrote, read, researched, prayed and wrote some more.

Actually, it's sad that the reality of what is happening can be so overwhelming and even depressing. Our culture is changing so fast—almost as fast as science itself. The temptation is to say that we are helpless because we feel helpless. But we can't succumb to that temptation. So what are we to do as Catholics? How are we to respond?

First, we need to recognize that alternatives to *in vitro* fertilization do exist. Morally acceptable options include adoption, the use of Natural Family Planning techniques to enhance the likelihood of becoming pregnant and the hope brought through NaPro Technology (see *The Catholic World Report*, April 2005.) The scope of these options is too vast to consider here; but we still haven't fully dealt with the issue at hand.

So, what did I say to the couple I met that Sunday morning? This is perhaps the most sincere, though imperfect, response I can give to emphasize the real face of faith-based decision making.

You might be surprised that people often raise deep or personal issues in a public place like outside church doors after we've celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass—topics they normally would discuss only in the privacy of their own homes or in an office. I wasn't prepared for the question let alone the answer. Prayer—really hard and really fast—is what came naturally.

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