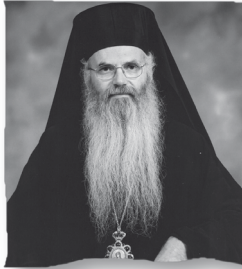


Symposium: Religion in assisted reproduction

The Greek Orthodox position on the ethics of assisted reproduction



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Abstract

In dealing with reproduction, the Church believes that every human being has a beginning but has no end; this is why conception constitutes an event of unique importance. The exact moment of the beginning of life is unknown to man, but the logic of sexual intercourse without reproduction and of reproduction without sexual intercourse must be seen with concern. Irrespective of the way it is conceived, the embryo has both a human beginning and a human perspective and in it, along with cellular multiplication, another process takes place, the beginning and development of its soul. Although modern technology has greatly contributed to health research, its irrational use threatens to desecralize man and to treat him as a machine. For this reason, all modern techniques of artificial fertilization have ethical and spiritual parameters that compel the Church to state Her reservations. The Church cannot recommend assisted reproduction as the solution to infertility; instead, She proposes a non-secularized perception on life that guarantees simplicity, peace, abstinence and mutual trust between spouses. She does not oppose resorting to medical help, but, at the same time, suggests that men and women render their life into the hands of God.

Keywords: *Greek Orthodox Church, human conception, infertility, IVF issues, nature of the embryo, spiritual status of the embryo*

Introduction

The field of technologically assisted reproduction or, more correctly stated, of artificial fertilization is of utmost importance both psychologically and socially, and bears great spiritual significance. Contemporary reproductive techniques can fulfil the expectations of sterile couples and satisfy their profound need for parenthood. Although this may strengthen the unity of marital life and increase the feeling of fulfilment and harmony of family life, at the same time it could generate unprecedented problems of an ethical, medical, psychological, legal and social character. These problems are the result of the use of modern technology in the most personal and profoundly spiritual and sacred act. Their magnitude and variety depend on the applied methods, on the conditions under which these are implemented and on the related uncontrollable possibilities and unavoidable consequences.

Assisted reproduction constitutes undoubtedly one of the most impressive achievements of medicine and biological sciences

bearing significant social consequences. It is connected with the birth of a new human being, an event that is welcomed with special admiration, awe and joy. At the same time, however, the problem of the degree of quality of life of this new human being and its parents cannot be ignored. For the Greek Orthodox Church, the quality of life of a human being does not only include biological or psychological integration and social wellbeing, but also the possibility of spiritual development. This spiritual dimension bestows on man a sense of psychosomatic harmony and the prospect of his existential fulfilment.

Basic theological positions

The Greek Orthodox Church, by embracing and cultivating our conscience, stresses and safeguards the vast possibilities and infinite perspectives that the grace of God offers to man.

Therefore, in no way can the Church be considered as a formalized authority that seeks to regulate or police our life. Her objective is not the imposition of rules and prohibitions upon our lives, but the creation of a criterion that leads to the knowledge of truth that will make us free (Saint John Evangelist, 1952 edition).

The Church has a deep knowledge of human nature and weakness to which She is very understanding and compassionate. However, She also wishes to protect the sacredness of our person; to inspire the need for God along with the desire for childbearing; to offer the integrity of Her truth along with Her philanthropy; to present the precision of God's will along with Her dispensation.

A basic element of Orthodox Christian anthropology is the recognition of the sacredness of the existence of man who unites with his existence the tangible and intangible world. The objective of man, who is made in God's image, is to become 'after His likeness' (Genesis, 1952), namely to attain theosis and sanctification. Having this ultimate objective, man works, creates a family, cultivates the arts and sciences, organizes societies. For this reason, when someone deals with man, even more so when he experiments with man, he performs a sacred act and thus ought to act with fear of God and respect.

Man is not the cause of his own existence. Every reference to the beginning of his life should be made with awe and not with hubris. We either regard God as the provider of life and draw near Him with fear, or we ignore Him and act as if we were gods ourselves. The price of such hubris, however, is very high.

The significance of man's psychosomatic coalescence

Every human being has an immortal and eternal soul, which is closely connected with his body. The psychosomatic coalescence is temporarily disrupted by the biological death and is reinstated with the resurrection of the bodies in the kingdom of God.

The biological beginning of man also marks his birth as a psychosomatic entity with the inherent potential of 'becoming a child of God' (Saint John Evangelist, 1952 edition). Thus, together with biological life and entity, fertilization attributes to man his existence, his being, his soul. Indeed, for Orthodox Christians the soul is not placed inside the body but it is born with it. The soul comes into being along with the body.

Actually, Saint Gregory of Nyssa (1892 edition) speaks extensively on the simultaneous birth of soul and body: 'But as man is one, the being consisting of soul and body, we are to suppose that the beginning of his existence is one, common to both parts, so that he should not be found to be antecedent and posterior to himself, if the bodily element were first in point of time, and the other were a later addition; ... and in the creation of individuals not to place the one element before the other, neither the soul before the body, nor the contrary'.

Every human being that is conceived has a beginning but has no end. The beginning, namely the conception of each human being, constitutes an event of unique importance for the Greek

Orthodox Church. The godly destination and the perspective of the eternal kingdom bestow to the moment of conception a uniqueness that transcends the boundaries of biological identity and ephemeral life.

The need for motherhood and fatherhood

The desire to have children is natural and sacred. The Church discerns in this desire God's plan to create man so that he become a partaker of His blessedness. Saint John Damascene (1898 edition) writes: 'Since, then, God, Who is good and more than good, did not find satisfaction in self-contemplation, but in fits exceeding goodness wished certain things to come into existence which would enjoy His benefits and share in His goodness, He brought all things out of nothing into being and created them, both what is invisible and what is visible. Yea, even man, who is a compound of the visible and the invisible, and it is by thought that He creates, and thought is the basis of the work, the Word filling it and the Spirit perfecting it.'

The anatomy, physiology, the monthly period, the hormonal balance and the overall psychology of the female sex are oriented towards motherhood. During pregnancy, the woman experiences and manifests to the utmost degree the characteristics of her sex and nature. The basic function of the female body to which the entire female existence is directed is the reproductive function. The woman exists anatomically, physiologically and sentimentally for the embryo, the pregnancy and childbearing.

Equivalent to the need for motherhood is also the need for fatherhood. For this reason, the Church acknowledges that sterility and childlessness can become an unbearable cross that often creates intense mental distress, social difficulties and, sometimes, insoluble problems affecting the harmonious coexistence of the spouses. Sterility, apart from being characterized as a biological imperfection, is regarded by the Church as an expression of God's will or even a blessing in the form of a trial.

Moreover, the Church acknowledges in every human being his infinite spiritual possibilities along with his natural identity (biological, psychological, etc.). Therefore, She is clearly set against the notion that infertility constitutes a type of disability or an incurable social weakness. Oftentimes, couples that have difficulty in having children have a well-defined spiritual orientation and are especially productive in various fields of social and spiritual life.

Observing the recent progress of science and technology, the Church realizes that people's desires, which were only dreams of the past, may now acquire justifiable hopes. She welcomes this prospect with great enthusiasm, but, at the same time, She perceives that technological progress often transforms desires into needs and thus makes the struggle for spiritual freedom harder.

The consequence of this mentality is the following paradox: although the desire of fertile couples to have children is seriously fading, the need of infertile couples to have children becomes psychologically and socially imperative. The problem

becomes more acute in closed societies, where social pressure has a negative impact. However, infertility sometimes acts as nature's safety valve so that couples that would have difficulty in raising children are freed from this heavy load. Oftentimes, when the latter insist and finally have children, they also come face to face with insoluble problems (psychological, unexpected illness, sudden death of one parent, etc.).

The contribution of the Church and clergy would be essential in eliminating unhealthy viewpoints and unjustified social pressures. Simultaneously, they could assist in cultivating the belief that while the birth of a child is a blessing – and indeed a great one – infertility does not degrade spouses, neither does it harm their relationship or abolish their marriage.

The persistent effort to overcome sterility conceals the risk to transform the natural and sacred desire for childbearing into a stubborn will that is set against the will of God. Every attempt to cure sterility ought to leave room for the humble acceptance of a probable failure.

Although the beginning of every human being as God's image originates from human will, it is also the will of God. Contemporary technology is a great blessing of God to man, if it is used with prudence and respect; at the same time, however, it could give man the possibility to oppose God's will as this is expressed through His natural laws. In this case, man can either hinder the realization of God's will, or he can insist on doing his own will even though God refuses to consent.

The purpose of every newborn person is neither to adorn the life of his/her parents nor to add to their wealth in this life or become their biological and psychological extension. He/she belongs to God and is intended for eternal life. He/she is a gift of God to the parents for this earthly life. He/she is born first in order to express God's kenotic and communal love, secondly to live in truth and lastly to satisfy sentimentally or socially his/her parents.

For these reasons, the conception of every human being should constitute an asserted expression of God's will and not the exclusive result of man's decision. In other words, every human being should be the fruit of the humble and free compliance of his/her parents' will with the will of God. The greatest gift of God to man is free will; the most dangerous threat to man is his own human will.

The sacredness of the beginning of human life

The way that life begins is sacred: physiologically speaking, the exact moment of the beginning of life, within the context of physiology, is unknown to man. This event is performed secretly. It reflects the most intense expression of love between spouses and honours the human body in the best possible way. The reproductive function is also sexual. It is the only autonomous function of the human body. It is the psychosomatic function par excellence that requires the participation of both genders.

Modern technology introduces us to the logic of sexual intercourse without reproduction and of reproduction without

sexual intercourse. The dynamism of technology takes the beginning of life out of the warmth and darkness of the maternal body, out to the coolness and transparency of the test tube. It replaces the unknown moment with the accurate knowledge of this sacred beginning. It abolishes the uniqueness of the spouse's presence by substituting them with the medical staff. During the sacred moment of human beginning the parents are not together; they are not even present. The child is 'manufactured' by doctors and nurses. He/she is not directly conceived by his/her parents. Moreover, it may not have the parents' genetic material since a third person, a donor, may have been used.

Spermatozoa are obtained in ways that are neither natural nor ethical. It results from orgasm without normal sexual intercourse, a fact that insults the sacredness of the reproductive function. However, when the aim is childbearing, this act cannot be considered as a sinful act of sperm loss, provided it is performed in ways that do not disgrace human dignity. Nevertheless, it requires special sensitivity and attention.

Status and nature of the embryo

The embryo has both a human beginning and a human perspective. Its cells, genetic material, morphology and physiology are entirely human. Moreover, its potential to develop solely into a perfect human being, and nothing else, confirms its human nature.

A fertilized egg cannot be fertilized again with another spermatozoon. The characteristics of a new human life have been irrevocably determined. Fertilization is final and irreversible.

The spermatozoa come from the father while the egg comes from the mother. Yet, the embryo acquires its own identity right after fertilization. The embryo belongs to its parents as far as their responsibility and obligation of its protection is concerned – they were the ones who wanted it and created it – but it is independent in regards to the right of its developmental integration so it can express its own volition.

A human being in all stages of its development – namely as zygote, blastocyst, few-weeks-old embryo, 9-month fetus, newborn infant, young child, teenager, adult, elderly – has the same perfect human identity. From the very beginning of conception, the embryo is not simply a fertilized egg; it is a perfect human being in regards to its identity and is constantly being perfected as per its phenotypic expression and development.

Spiritual status of the embryo

All of the above lead to the conclusion that the beginning of man's biological life is identified with a unique event of utmost importance: the birth of a new soul. In every embryo, along with the cellular multiplication, which indicates the growth of its body, and the transmission of the inherited characteristics, which form its person, another process is also carried out: the birth and development of its soul. With its soul the embryo will pass from the condition of human 'clothing' to the state of the 'garment' of divinity, from time to eternity, from decay to incorruptibility, from the physical resemblance to its parents to

the spiritual likeness of God. Within the embryo, the image of God humbly exists.

Just as the development of man's body requires a 9-month biological preparation, namely pregnancy, the process of his ensoulment and the manifestation of his soul also require a certain time; it begins with conception and is completed thereafter. The more complete the process of man's biological development, the greater the degree of manifestation of the soul's functions. According to Saint Gregory the Theologian (1862 edition), as the body grows and becomes perfect, the wisdom, prudence and virtue of the soul is progressively being unfolded.

The encounter of the Theotokos with Elisabeth and the leaping of the embryo, Saint John the Baptist (Saint Luke Evangelist, 1952 edition), after recognizing the embryo Jesus, refer not only to the embryo's biological mobility, but also to the spiritual expression of the soul within the embryo.

Similar passages in the texts of the Old Testament speak about significant spiritual events that occurred in the lives of important persons (David, Isaiah, Jeremiah) 'from the womb', indicating that the embryonic status constitutes a stage of human evolution during which the grace of God acts upon man.

Moreover, Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians, claims that his calling dates back to the period of his gestation; 'when he who had set me apart before I was born, and has called me through his grace' (Saint Paul Apostle, 1952a edition). Therefore, God calls, sanctifies, designates and nominates prophets and apostles from their embryonic age.

Conception is not only considered a major event but it is also blessed and sacred. The Orthodox Church underlines Her faith in the sacredness and significance of conception by honouring and celebrating the conceptions of the persons involved in the divine economy. At first, on 25 March, the mystery of the conception of the Lord on the day of the Annunciation of the Theotokos; on 9 December, the conception of the Theotokos and, finally, on 23 September, the conception of Saint John the Forerunner (or Baptist).

The ethical rights of the embryo

The rights of an embryo emerge from the fact that the embryo is a person under development; it is an entity, which depends on and results from the will of third persons and is unable to take care of and defend itself.

The first one is the right to human identity. The embryo has the ethically indisputable right to show its own identity and develop its personality. We should not be the ones to decide about its nature and status; instead, we ought to give the embryo itself the opportunity to reveal it to us; to prove that it is a human being and display or the traits of its body and soul, which differentiate and distinguish it from any other human being. Science and society must protect this right.

The second right is the right to life. The embryo's natural course of development is the same as that of every human being. We should acknowledge its right to life, and protect and care for

the embryo itself. The embryo should reach its own status of autonomous life under the best possible circumstances. The sole aim of its existence should be its life, not the experiment (experimental embryos), or surplus embryos (spare embryos), or waiting under freezing conditions (frozen embryos). The fact that for thousands of embryos the warm maternal womb has been replaced by the frozen environment of a freezer, and the potential for life by the prospect of experiments and death, undermines human value and violates the right to life.

The third right is the right to eternity. The embryo has the prospect for immortality. Since the moment of its conception it is destined to pass to the life of eternity. This reveals the right of God to repeat His image in man.

Issues connected with IVF

All of the above prove that modern IVF techniques have ethical and spiritual parameters that compel the Church to keep Her reservations that are based on the four following points: (i) the conception of man through contemporary techniques is asexual in the sense that it lacks the sacredness, safety and reassurance of marital sexual intercourse. Man is no longer being born naturally, but he is being manufactured artificially; (ii) contrary to the embryos and spermatozoa, the eggs cannot be easily frozen, although rapid progress in this field is occurring (Manipalviratn and Decherney, 2008). Therefore, present practices facilitate the retrieval of eggs, the fertilization of which leads to the problem of surplus embryos and frozen embryos; (iii) the fact that fertilization is performed outside the maternal body and in the absence of parents creates multiple choices of unnatural and unethical fertilizations that are accompanied by serious problems; and (iv) IVF offers vast possibilities of preimplantation genetic processing and intervention (invasion) bearing serious consequences.

Asexual conception

This modality deprives the moment of man's psychosomatic beginning of the atmosphere of the spouse's intense love and their complete psychosomatic union. The law of God designates that each human being be born out of profound marital love and not just out of the artificial union of genetic cells (gametes). The fact that man has 'his being borrowed' is incompatible with his demand to determine by himself the beginning of his own being; namely, to detach the creation of his existence from his parents' loving relationship and process it in medical laboratories according to his personal preferences and choices.

Surplus embryos

An immediate consequence of IVF is the creation of 'surplus embryos'. The Church rejects this term because She cannot accept that there are surplus human beings whose fate is determined by third parties. Each human being – and therefore each embryo – possesses the uniqueness of personhood, the sacredness of God's image and the need of other persons to be in communion with it.

The so-called 'surplus embryos' are preserved in a frozen state (cryopreservation) so as to be used in the future by the natural

parents; or to be donated to other 'parents'; or to experiment with; or to be used for organogenesis so as to cover transplant needs; or, finally, to be destroyed. The Church cannot give Her blessing for any of the above. Christian Orthodox anthropology and theology cannot justify the existence of embryos that are independent from the pregnancy procedure. Each embryo constitutes the image of God and should be given the chance to become like Him.

The freezing of embryos, however, is combined with other insurmountable problems. For example, for how long is it legitimate to preserve embryos in a frozen state? Or, what will happen in case of the parents' divorce or death, or, if their parents neglect them? Is it better to destroy them or donate them to another couple? Who is responsible to choose the lesser between two evils?

Gamete donation

IVF provides novel possibilities bearing ethical and social consequences that are hard to define. Thus, for the first time the idea of sperm and egg donation and the reproductive potential of surrogate mothers appear to be practically feasible. This may lead to the weakening or questioning of the relationship between parents and child; or to the unequal relationship between the two parents and the child – since one of the parents is natural while the other one is a stepmother or stepfather-; or to the intervention of a surrogate mother (see e.g. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2008) in the sacred relationship between the genetic parents and the child; or to the creation of brothers or sisters unknown to each other; or to the risk of unknown incestuous relationships, etc. Basically, every form of heterologous assisted fertilization degrades the concept of motherhood and fatherhood. Moreover, the requirement of a third person's intervention in the sacred procedure of human reproduction – and therefore in the mystery of marriage – makes it impossible for the Church to accept such a practice.

The biological participation of only one spouse in the birth of his/her child reminds us of an adoption case. However, it differs since one of the parents is the natural parent and the other one is the step-parent. On the contrary, embryo donation seems to be like a typical adoption case.

Multiple embryo transfer

The transfer of extra embryos in the womb so as to increase the success ratio often results in multiple pregnancies. In these cases, when we suggest a 'selective reduction of the number of embryos' for the success of the pregnancy, we actually mean the destruction of living embryos; the Church will never consent to such an act.

Heterologous insemination

Heterologous fertilization (see e.g. Weinberg, 2008) sometimes is identified with adultery; however, it is different since an extramarital relationship is not required, which is mainly the reason why adultery is characterized as a sinful and unethical act. Therefore, on the one hand, the Church ought to maintain Her reservations in regards to heterologous fertilization, but on the other hand She ought to avoid its being considered as adultery.

Surrogacy

The potential of childbearing by a surrogate or substitute mother could have a positive side, since in this way childbearing is accomplished with love. However, since the developing bond with the embryo during pregnancy is an essential and indispensable part of motherhood, as well as of embryonic development, the continuing relationship between surrogate mother and embryo is unjust towards the genetic parents. Moreover, the interruption of this relationship is also unjust towards the surrogate mother, but most of all towards the child. For this reason, but most of all due to the fact that family unity is disrupted, the Church has difficulty in giving Her blessing to such a deviation from the natural pregnancy procedure.

Single parenthood

IVF also gives the opportunity to unwed mothers to have children. The Church ought to reject this alternative, because, on the one hand, it implies that children be born out of unwed parents, and, on the other hand, it is unfair for the child to grow up without a father. The practices of fertilization with the spermatozoa of a deceased husband and of frozen embryo transfer after the husband's death fall within the same category.

Pregnancy in the menopause

The same applies to the pregnancy of older women (see e.g. Antinori *et al.*, 2003). This type of conception focuses on the woman's egoistic desire to have a child, even though chances to care for the child throughout its developmental stages are limited by nature. The child will offer the joy of its birth to its parents, but it will have limited possibilities to profit from their physical presence and almost none to enjoy the peak of their youthful age. Childbearing by older women constitutes a narrow-minded will and is unjust to the newborn child.

Homosexual parenting

Invasive fertilization techniques give the opportunity to homosexual couples to have children. The Church should by all means express Her opposition to this option, because it is not only a physical abnormality, but also an ethical perversion, bearing destructive psychological consequences upon the child and society.

Preimplantation genetic diagnosis

Preimplantation embryo testing is connected with the application of IVF (see e.g. Ehrich *et al.*, 2008). When the aim of testing is therapeutic or preventive intervention, then it is compatible with classic medical perception. However, at present, not only are therapeutic cases very few, but they also carry all related IVF consequences. In fact, when the tests are positive – namely, when a genetic disorder has been diagnosed – the affected embryo will not be transferred. If no unaffected embryos are produced, then the chance of a pregnancy is prevented.

Moreover, preimplantation testing could eventually lead to selection of special traits (e.g. gender, colour of hair or eyes),

or even to destruction of embryos bearing undesired traits; consequently, it may generate a eugenic perception of life.

Although preimplantation testing forms a modern diagnostic method that is very promising, the Church ought to maintain Her explicit reservations.

Reproductive cloning

Cloning is a technique that abolishes the natural procedure of conception (see e.g. Benagiano and Primiero, 2002); in essence, it undermines the male gender since it may put an end to its participation and role in reproduction. It also affects the mother's participation since it may not be necessary for her to offer her genetic material. Finally, it disrupts the balance between the two genders, offends the sacredness of the person and constitutes more an insult than an achievement.

Intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI)

This is a method that improves the results of artificial invasion in reproduction (see e.g. Neri, Takeuchi, Palermo, 2008), but at the same time it limits even more the role of natural selection – that many times operates protectively, since fertilization of the ovum often does not occur with abnormal spermatozoa that compete poorly with normal spermatozoa.

The fact that presently it is impossible to diagnose in advance probable genetic disorders in spermatozoa, the selection of which is done only with biological criteria, results in the substitution of nature in regards to its responsibility for the creation of genetically ill embryos. This constitutes one more reason for having ethical reservations concerning ICSI.

Although these practices are not explicitly eugenic in their expression, they are eugenic in their perception. They do not manage to stop the emergence of disability, but usually they eradicate the disabled person. When the disability cannot be differentiated from the disabled person, it seems that the only solution is the latter's death at his weakest and most sacred and sensitive stage and expression of his life. The suggested 'therapy' appears to be the destruction of the unhealthy embryo.

The removal of the gametes' fusion, namely of conception, from the maternal body, offers immense possibilities for genetic interventions that may alter fatally human species both biologically and socially (on a biological basis and in terms of social expression) and are to a great extent uncontrollable. The combination of the inability to impose control mechanisms with the vast possibilities for genetic interventions may prove to be destructive.

The role of technology

Undoubtedly, modern technology has greatly contributed to health research and promises even more achievements. This is considered an exceptional blessing from God. Nevertheless, its irrational use threatens to 'desacralize' man and treats him as a machine with spare parts and accessories.

Although man regulates technology, he could ultimately be governed by it, unless he is prudent. He may be easily enchanted

by technological achievements and, consequently, may become subjugated by them. He risks destroying his own freedom in the name of the freedom of scientific and technological progress that aim at expanding human dominance over nature.

The use of technology and human intervention, to the extent that it safeguards and assists in the sacredness of human fertilization, is not only acceptable but also desirable and pleasing to God. However, technological progress is not considered successful when it imposes choices contrary to nature, affects family unity, interrupts the co-operation of spiritual and natural laws and replaces God. Success is not only the discovery of a new revolutionary technique within the wide context of genetic engineering; it is also the effective confrontation of numerous problems (genetic, psychological, social, ethical, financial, etc.) that emerge from an irrational practice, particularly in the field of invasive fertilization.

The Church is not afraid of changes, neither is She against novel discoveries. Nevertheless, She firmly rejects disrespect for creation and the human person as well as desecration of the institution of family. Fertilization forms the holy altar of life; therefore, entering inside it, requires respect and fear of God.

Financial interests, psychological consequences

The new techniques of assisted reproduction often defile the parents' pure desire to have children with uncontrollable financial interests of physicians, clinics and companies (i.e. the high cost of gonadotrophins) may eventually become the basic reason for which ovulation induction by the administration of hormones is preferred to the collection of ova during the natural cycle). Therefore, it is advisable not to resort to these techniques hastily or under the influence of psychological pressure coming from persons with relevant interests.

Moreover, changing the act of donation into a practice of trading, which is very easy and basically uncontrollable, tends to downgrade the sacred character of reproduction to an act of financial transaction and, thus, turn love into a business agreement.

When the methods of assisted reproduction started being applied, the eventual psychological problems of the conceived embryos were unknown and unpredictable. Although the parents' psychological need was taken into consideration, the probable negative overtone in the embryo's psychology was ignored, a fact that devalues the embryo's life. Orphans, adopted children and children of divorced parents usually present problems of adaptation and psychological balance. It is possible that the various IVF applications, particularly when they include heterologous procedures or donors, may create human beings with congenital or hereditary mental disturbances or diseases. This constitutes one more unfavourable factor that prevents the Church from accepting unreservedly IVF.

Consequently the progress of genetic technology raises a relevant question: is there any psychological impact due to the fact that children will be able to know the method of their conception, as well as whether they were born as a result of

sperm or ovum donation. There is a high probability that the child may experience a serious identity crisis and problems of socialization; particularly when it is informed that it is not the carrier of its parents' genetic characteristics and does not know its genetic parents; or when it realizes that it has a different degree of kinship with his parents and has two or eventually even three mothers, etc. These problems become even more intense in the case of a crisis within the family unity and there are legal matters pending.

Parents may also present similar psychological problems, particularly when it concerns heterologous fertilization techniques, disputes over parental rights and relationships, unsuccessful methods of artificial fertilization and abrupt loss of hope and anticipation.

Legislation

In general, modern legal perception seeks to harmonize and balance the common prevailing principles in a country with the individual civil rights. Recently, two new laws were passed in Greece. First, the law on medically assisted human reproduction (Republic of Greece, 2002). Second, a law that adjusts practical details (the operation of assisted reproduction centres, gamete and embryo banks, etc.) (Republic of Greece, 2005).

The spirit of the first law – which actually has an impact upon the second law – is the most progressive in Europe, its writers claim. The law avoids systematically and insistently to name the embryo by its name (instead, terms such as 'reproductive material' and 'fertilized egg' are used which obviously are vague, inaccurate, disrespectful and wrong). It makes no reference to the child's rights and interests; it accepts heterologous fertilization in its various forms; it adopts single motherhood and accepts the birth of children with the deceased father's spermatozoa. Moreover, it introduces surrogate motherhood and allows embryo experimentation. Despite the publicly expressed reservations and objections of the Church, it basically undermines the institution of marriage, weakens the family bonds and alters the character of family ethics.

In criticizing the law, the Church bears in mind that the main cause of the conflict of interests concerning assisted reproduction is found in the relationship between parents and embryos. Since embryos are unable to support their right to express their will, the probability of legalizing unjust acts is so high that it obliges the Church to express Her reservation and restraint.

We are unable to predict accurately the legal nature of the inheritance status and biological perspective of the embryos in case the parents die prior to implantation. Moreover, the difficulty to determine the form of authority and rights upon the frozen embryos in case of divorce highlights the perplexity and difficulty of the emerging problems. Ultimately, the only solution to these problems is the destruction of the embryos, which, of course, is an unacceptable act.

It is absolutely necessary to enact specific laws based on the principles of bioethics and deontology that will facilitate and protect the application of the basic invasive fertilization techniques. The contribution of the Church to this end is essential. She ought to present on each occasion Her official

position that consists of specific proposals and legislative adjustments that are not unrealistic theories. In fact, almost all of them, partly or wholly, are included in the applicable laws in most European countries.

Spiritual perspective

The Church embraces pain, illness and disability within the context of man's fall. At the same time, however, She respects medicine. Although She blesses every ethically acceptable medical human attempt to restore health, She entrusts the final outcome in each different case to God's love for every person separately. The epitome of Her mentality can be found in the Ecclesiasticus (Book of Sirach, 1952 edition): 'My son, in thy sickness be not negligent: but pray unto the Lord, and he will thee whole'. She faces everything with patience, humility and faith. She does not differentiate trials from the love of God, but views them as opportunities for salvation and sanctification.

The Church avoids specific rules or excommunications when dealing with bioethical matters, including those concerning assisted reproduction. Basically, She leaves them open, while, at the same time, She indicates the direction and ethos of approaching each specific case. She does give a generalized definition of God's will, but offers everyone the opportunity to detect it in his or her own life.

Furthermore, She regards the birth of each human being within the context of the mystery of marriage. Consequently, She also feels that the mystery of human beginning ought to occur within an atmosphere of a monogamous, heterosexual intercourse blessed by the mystery of marriage, of a union in 'one flesh' (Saint Paul Apostle, 1952b edition). A conception that takes place in a laboratory instead of the maternal body and through a procedure other than the spouse's intercourse is definitely deprived of the mystery's character.

The counterproposal of the Church

The sanctification of man is not only effected through childbearing. The Church blesses childbearing, but, at the same time, She also acknowledges the wholeness of childless marriages. Biological sterility may become the cause of rich spiritual fertility for the spouses, when they accept humbly God's will in their life. On the contrary, when the desire to have children becomes a stubborn will, it reveals spiritual immaturity.

The Church ought to exercise Her influence so that the erroneous social perceptions on sterility are eradicated and the indiscreet pressures from the family environment towards the sterile couples are limited. She ought to help sterile couples realize that an inadequacy in such a vital sector of life is usually accompanied by numerous opportunities in other fields that wait to be fulfilled. Our happiness and calling are not accomplished by forcing nature or by persisting in our wills, but by taking advantage of our possibilities.

The sterility problem of certain couples could be solved with the prospect of adoption. The Church should recommend the improvement, promotion and simplification of adoption. In

this way, the pain of many sterile couples will be soothed, the danger of an unsuccessful pregnancy will be limited and human volition will be subdued to the way of love.

Suggesting to infertile couples to adopt and give birth to 'surplus embryos' whose origin is unknown to them is a matter for further examination. In this way, some embryos are saved and the mother may experience the pregnancy bond with the child. Moreover, the child that will be born will feel more related to the parents rather than being adopted. Nevertheless, problems concerning the child's unclear biological identity may emerge, which are absent from standard adoption cases.

Pastoral guidance

The most faithful as well as confessors ignore some very crucial details concerning the issues of modern reproductive technologies. Consequently, there is an imminent need for a thorough update on all aspects. Knowing the methods of assisted reproduction as well as the Church's basic positions will significantly help the interested parties confront sensibly the relevant issues.

The Church can neither recommend assisted reproduction as the solution to the problem of sterility, nor is Her role to approve resolutions. Nevertheless, it is Her duty to confront this reality that has emerged irrespective of Her will or desire, on the basis of Her spiritual dispensation and not on the basis of Her theological precision. Thus, when asked, the Church ought to give the ethos of Her teaching with clarity and freedom.

Taking into consideration all of the above as well as the fact that present-day parents are not only found under pressure before the great challenge of reproductive techniques, but also have limited endurance, faith and inner strength, the Church could suggest the following steps concerning the spiritual guidance of Her flock: (i) She ought to express and put into practice Her love and understanding. Her word should be filled with spirit and truth but also be sympathetic and compassionate; (ii) She should express the tremendous importance of the need to preserve the sanctity of marriage; namely, to leave room for the energy of God's grace. Usually, trials and deprivation form unique opportunities for confirming God's presence in our life; (iii) She ought to be informed regularly and thoroughly of the new methods and detect the ethical and spiritual problems that they usually create; (iv) the Church should clarify that She finds it difficult to bless the practice of assisted reproduction (unnatural and asexual conception, surplus embryos, preimplantation genetic intervention and modification, etc.) and adopt policies foreign to Her spirit; (v) when childbearing disturbs the normal family order (unwed mothers, fertilization with deceased husband's spermatozoa, childbearing by older women, heterologous fertilization techniques, surrogate motherhood, etc.) it is evident that the Church cannot possibly agree; and (vi) the Church should eagerly suggest adoption as an alternative to those couples that are unable to accept, for various reasons, their sterility problem. If this is not possible, then She could accept, within the spirit of Her dispensation, fertilization techniques that do not involve surplus embryos, or include any form of donation or embryo destruction. For example, the Church could accept homologous intrauterine insemination, thus considering the couple as suffering from a common illness, provided both

spouses are in agreement and the entire procedure is carried out with the aforementioned ethos. She could also accept assisting the reproduction procedure by using only the parents' gametes and fertilizing as many embryos as will be implanted.

Spiritual fathers ought to preach to the faithful, with humility and faith, the need to resort to more natural and spiritual ways of living. It is a fact that the present way of living, the tension and stress, the distrust between people and other related factors are considered responsible for the rise of infertility to very high levels (Alpern, 1992). The Church proposes a non-secularized perception of life that guarantees simplicity, peace, abstinence and mutual trust between spouses. She does not oppose resorting to medical help, but, at the same time, suggests that we render our life into the hands of God.

Liturgical and personal prayer, spiritually guided participation in the Church's mysteries, cultivation of love, asking for the saints' intercession, humble pilgrimages, for example, constitute the Church's long-established means that should be brought back to the lives of the faithful. When the Church asks couples to avoid certain reproductive techniques that increase hopes for childbearing, at the same time, She ought to inspire trust in the will of God and introduce the faithful to the experience and the different logic of prayer and miracles. The Church indicates the way of precision but treats pastorally the falls of Her children, when, for various reasons, on the one hand, they are unable to implement Her teaching and, on the other hand, they sincerely repent.

Moreover, the Church faces the issue of human reproduction within a broader perspective. Thus, although having children constitutes a gift and a blessing from God, the parents ought to focus on a much more important fact; along with their own perfection in Christ, they should concentrate on the proper upbringing of their children and their development and progress in Christ, so that one day they may say 'Here am I and the children that God has given me' (Saint Paul Apostle, 1952c edition).

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