

What
Does the
Catholic Church
Have to Do
with Infertility?

Faith is a sounder guide than reason. Reason can only go so far, but faith has no limits.

Blaise Pascal

Angelique's Story

My wedding day was a blur to me, filled with so many wonderful memories that they all blend together into one big, happy event that flew by in an instant; but there is one particular moment during the sacrament that stood out to me: when the priest asked if I would “accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church,” I remember knowing that my “I do”

would mean a huge responsibility, one that, truth be told, I was a bit fearful to undertake.

But there was one word in that important vow I took that I seemed to have overlooked: *receive*. My husband and I didn't realize the importance of that little word *receive* until we faced month after month of dashed hopes as we tried to *have* our first child. Confronted with the possibility of another word we had never paid any attention to—infertility—we began to realize that children are not ours to have; they are God's to give. We are mere recipients of this gift. Thus began our quest to learn the ins and outs of infertility—and what the Catholic Church has to say about it.

Informing and Forming Our Consciences

Though it may seem like a recent phenomenon, infertility has been around as long as humans have. We can see many examples of this in the Bible, such as Sarah (Gn 16–18, 21) and Elizabeth (Lk 1). Infertility has changed through the years, however. It used to be that there wasn't much an infertile couple could do except pray and maybe try some old wives' tales. Now, technology has given couples a much greater degree of perceived control and power. Advances in science have created an array of temptations to pursue treatments that were not readily available to previous generations. Though advances in technology are generally good, we cannot assume that what is technically possible is always morally right.

This is why it is extremely important to educate ourselves on various infertility treatment options and their moral implications. By doing so, we will be properly forming and informing our consciences, which requires consulting God's wisdom in the form of the scriptures, the catechism, papal instructions, and Church documents. We list many of these documents and passages in this book. We should also pray for God's help to internalize and be obedient to the teachings that most challenge us.

Unfortunately, the word *obedience* has a negative connotation. We may think of our parents scolding us as children or even of possibly training a dog, but we don't think of it as something we want to do ourselves. Yet, as challenging as this is, we are each called to be obedient. It is a crucial part of our relationship as God's creation. Interestingly, the word *obedience* comes from *oboedire*, which includes the root word for "to hear." Obedience simply means hearing or listening.

God doesn't only work through us and what we think. He uses our friends and family as well as the Church to speak to us. The scriptures tell us, "Oh, that today you would hear his voice: Do not harden your hearts" (Ps 95:7–8). We know how hard it can be to see the truth in the Church's teaching. The pain of infertility can be so profound it can cloud our vision and make us only focus on one goal—having a baby. But in the end, "what profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mk 8:36). With obedience, we can properly hear God's voice as we walk along this infertility journey instead of allowing society to dictate our decisions.

This is particularly challenging when one considers all the competing voices in the world. We must know God well enough to recognize his voice above all others in the stirring of our consciences. God should first be our friend, as Blessed Teresa of Calcutta said. The Lord is our Good Shepherd, and "the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers" (Jn 10:4–5). When reading Church teaching, we form our consciences and learn to recognize God's loving voice. In a similar way, if we learn to recognize God's voice and his promptings in our everyday life, we will be better equipped to hear his voice while navigating the confusing world of infertility treatments, instead of the voice of the stranger that we do not recognize.

As we continue the process of forming our consciences, we may begin to question some of the treatments that were previously acceptable to us. We have friends who, after pursuing multiple rounds of artificial insemination, began feeling uneasy about their situation and halted treatment. They didn't

know why they felt this way at the time because their deeper Catholic formation didn't come until later, but they had a nagging sense that something just wasn't right. In our faith tradition, this instinctual feeling that our actions are wrong is called natural law, which "expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 1954). The truth of natural law is written in our hearts, and as St. Augustine says, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. So, it is likely that, in the instance of our friends who halted treatment, their original feeling of uneasiness was the Holy Spirit tugging on their hearts to make a change.

In addition to the natural law with which we are all imbued, scripture and Church teaching also help guide us in knowing right from wrong. The sixth Beatitude proclaims, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that "pure in heart" refers to those who have attuned their intellects and wills to the demands of God's holiness, chiefly in three areas: charity; chastity or sexual rectitude; love of truth and orthodoxy of faith (CCC 2518). Thus, we are reminded that purity of heart, of body, and of faith are intimately connected and that the faithful are called to live out these beliefs "so that by believing they may obey God, by obeying may live well, by living well may purify their hearts, and with pure hearts may understand what they believe" (CCC 2518).

This teaching reminds us that the Church is for us, not against us, when it comes to helping us walk this arduous path of infertility. The Church is our mother, and just as the loving parents we also desire to be, it seeks only our good. We need only open our minds and our hearts to understanding why it teaches as it does. Angelique explains her initial encounter with Church teaching on infertility treatment:

I had always heard that the Church did not accept some infertility treatments, but before we were faced with infertility, I never knew why. I am an avid researcher by nature and as the months continued to pass without a

positive pregnancy test, I began doing online searches on the Catholic Church and infertility. I don't know what surprised me most about what I found: the wealth of Church materials on the subject or the fact that the information is not widely known. Initially, what I read overwhelmed me because of how profound it was; later, as I continued to read it and pray about it, that same material overwhelmed me because it made me realize God's profound love for me.

Imago Dei

It is with this profound love that God created each of us. "God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them" (Gn 1:27). Human life is therefore sacred, and the Church speaks out of love in defense of human dignity. We are different from the rest of God's creation, and the creation story in Genesis reminds us of this truth. Every human life, from the moment of conception until death, is sacred because the human person has been willed for its own sake in the image and likeness of the living and holy God (CCC 2319). It makes sense then that the propagation of humans would also be special.

St. Ignatius of Loyola begins his seminal *Spiritual Exercises* with what he calls the Principle and Foundation. This is the starting point of the Exercises because, in order to make wise decisions and follow Christ, St. Ignatius felt we first needed to have the appropriate vision of our purpose. Like Genesis, the Principle and Foundation points to being created in God's image.

Spiritual Exercise 23

Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means embrace salvation. The other things on the face of the earth are created for us, to help us attain the end for which we are created. Therefore, we should use these other things insofar as they help us

attain this goal, and turn away from these other things insofar as they impede us from attaining this goal.

As long as we are allowed free choice, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things. Our one desire and choice should be that which leads us to the end for which we are created.

The Principle and Foundation can be studied in great detail and meditated upon for hours, but let's focus on the first sentence: "Human beings are created . . ." St. Ignatius wants to emphasize our creaturehood and, as such, remind us of the fact that we are not God, despite our desire to become like God (Gn 2:16-17). Because we are not God, we cannot create on our own accord. So when we conceive a child, we co-create with God and could not do so by any other means. "In [God's] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind" (Jb 12:10).

Endowed with Dignity

Though we are not gods, we are endowed with God-given dignity. A human embryo is conferred all the dignity given to creatures made in the image and likeness of God (CCC 2274). As such, our bodies are extremely important, and God's incarnation reveals this to us, as Jesus was the Word made flesh, completely human and completely divine. Because of the Incarnation, our bodies have taken on a special role. "Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh, the body entered theology . . . through the main door" (Tb 23:4). We need to understand that our spirituality is incarnational in that it is lived in and through our bodies; hence, what we do with our bodies is of utmost importance. The Church places such incredible value on each human being, which is why it defends so strongly its right care, from conception until natural death.