

IVF: In Vitro Fertilization

Please find below a thoughtful reflection on IVF from a Catholic perspective by Catholic author and speaker Emily Stimpson Chapman.

She suffered from infertility for many years, and then adopted three children.

When you were struggling with infertility, did you ever consider IVF?

Did we consider it? No. But did I think about it? Yeah, I did. I thought about it a lot.

Infertility is one of the greatest crosses I have ever carried. During the years when we were trying and failing to conceive, I felt betrayed by my body and abandoned by God. I also felt like a failure—as a wife, a woman, and a Catholic. As a child my professional dreams changed by the month, but one dream never changed: I always wanted to be a mom. I wanted to be a mom when I was five-years-old, and I wanted to be a mom when I was thirty-five-years-old. It was the one, abiding desire of my heart. It was what I was made to do. I knew this. I knew it like I knew my own name. And when that didn't happen, when cycle after cycle passed and no baby came, I felt like God had tricked me. I felt like He had led me down some primrose path—having me study theology of the body, build a career writing about spiritual motherhood and the feminine genius, and filling my heart with all these good, holy desires for a baby, and then just leaving me with a broken body that couldn't do what it was supposed to do, what it was made to do. I was devastated, angry, and lost.

I was also envious of women who could pursue IVF.

Not once did I consider IVF a serious option for me. I knew the Church taught that it was wrong. I understood why the Church taught it was wrong. And I too believed it to be wrong. I didn't disagree with the Church; I agreed with her completely. But I was still envious of women who could pursue IVF. I found myself wishing I knew less and understood less. I resented the strength of my formation. I resented my own understanding. Which is very strange kind of resentment. It was completely irrational.

But that's how great my grief was. It blinded me to the good of knowing the truth. It blinded me to the goodness of the Church's wisdom. It made me forget, for a time, that the Church's teaching wasn't some additional cross designed to make the cross I already carried even heavier. It was a mercy. It was a kindness. It was a grace, meant to help lead me to the path that God did have for me, the path that led to life, not death.

I see that now. And I am so grateful we never pursued IVF. But I also have so much sympathy for women who do. If I, with all my faith and all my years of formation on this issue, still felt the way I did, how can we expect women who don't know or understand the teaching to choose anything but IVF? How do we expect them to walk away from what can seem like their only chance to have a baby? When science says it can offer you your dream—your best dream, your most beautiful dream, your most enduring dream—it's almost impossible to say no to that. When a doctor says he can lift from your shoulders the heaviest cross you've ever carried, it takes supernatural strength to not give him the chance to do just that.

Again, I am so glad we didn't pursue IVF. But I understand why women do. And my heart grieves for them, because they've put themselves in a moral quandary that can be hard to escape. They've created a chasm in their relationship with God that they might not even realize exists. Because when the result of your doing something wrong is a baby—a beautiful, beloved baby—it becomes very hard to admit to yourself, let alone anyone else, that you did something wrong. And if you can't admit that you did something wrong, you can't repent. And if you can't repent, this invisible rift between you and God remains, growing wider and wider, until if and when the day comes when you can finally own the wrong you did and run back to Him.

This is one of the reasons I share my story and my family life as much as I do. I want women who don't know about NaPro Technology to discover that other infertility treatments besides IVF exist—effective, morally acceptable treatments, that can help them conceive by healing their body, not manipulating their body. And I want women for whom those methods don't result in a baby—women like me—to know that adoption isn't some inferior backup plan. It's a path to motherhood that is every bit as beautiful, joyful, and salvific as pregnancy and childbirth. I am not living a lesser kind of motherhood. My children are not a consolation prize. They are God's greatest gift to me and the children I was born to mother. If I had chosen IVF, I might never have known that. I might never have known them. And that's a loss I can't fathom.

God has used the brokenness of my body and this world to make something beautiful: my family. And He drew both me and my husband closer to Him while doing so. He showed us a way to build a family that didn't require us separating ourselves from Him and His Church. That's a gift I don't want to see anyone miss the chance to receive.

Why does the Catholic Church think IVF is wrong?

In order to understand the Church's concerns with IVF, it's important to recognize that the Church teaches that the ends can never justify the means. So, even if we are pursuing something good, we can't do something wrong to achieve that good. When it comes to IVF, the Church absolutely recognizes that welcoming a child into the world is a wonderful thing. Desiring a child is a wonderful thing. But there are right ways and wrong ways to pursue that desire. IVF, she teaches, is a wrong way.

She teaches this first, because IVF goes against God's plan for the creation of new life—a creation that is supposed to take place in an act of love between husband and wife, not in an act of masturbation and egg extraction in a laboratory. She also teaches IVF is wrong because it violates the rights of a child to be created in a physical and emotional act of love between their parents, an act which affirms their dignity as a gift from God and doesn't treat them as a commodity. Finally, she teaches it's wrong because of IVF's massive collateral damage: the untold millions of human lives that have been willfully created and then frozen or discarded in the process of bringing a child into being.

Can I become Catholic if I conceived a child through IVF?

Oh my goodness, of course you can! Anyone can. The Church doesn't teach that IVF is an unforgivable sin. It's just something that needs to be sincerely repented of and confessed like any other sin. And when I say sincerely repented of, I don't mean you have to repent for the life of your child. You don't have to be sorry your child was born. You can and should be glad your child was born. Your child is a gift, just like any other child, and you don't need to repent of receiving that gift, any more than a single mom who conceived outside of marriage needs to repent of receiving the gift of her child. The proper response to a gift is thanks, not regret. The Church doesn't teach otherwise.

What the Church does ask, though, is that you examine your heart and repent of the attitudes that led to choosing IVF. Were you so desperate for a child that you chose to ignore your conscience or not do your research or not listen to the counsel of others? Were you prideful? Were you stubborn? Did you fail to trust in God's love and provision? Did you justify your decision, telling yourself that the end justified the means? Did you act hastily or thoughtlessly, not giving due consideration to all the consequences and complications of IVF? If so, those are things to be sorry for. Those are things to regret. Regret the sinful dispositions of your wounded heart, not the blessing God gave you despite those dispositions.

Life is so very messy. The Church understands this. She also understands that two very opposite emotions—regret and gratitude—can co-exist in tension with one another. Ask God for the grace to understand that, too.

What do you think people don't know about IVF, but should know?

IVF is such a tough problem to tackle because it's like an iceberg. There is the part we all see—the visible face of IVF. And that part is beautiful. It's women and men who long for a baby. It's babies themselves—cute, adorable, precious, holy children. It's prayers answered, dreams come true, a woman who finally gets to hear the words "Mama." When what you're seeing is all that, anyone who is against IVF sounds like a psychotic monster, a fundamentalist fanatic with no heart or soul. How can anyone have a problem with a woman holding a much desired, and longed for child in her arms? Isn't that what pro-life, pro-family people are all about?

But what we don't realize is that, like an iceberg, there is this whole other part of IVF that we don't see. So much is hidden from view—way, way more than what is up on the surface. And the hidden part is the heartbreaking part.

The heartbreaking part includes over 1.5 million embryos in the U.S. alone, that are currently frozen in medical storage facilities. Philosophers can debate all day long about whether or not those embryos are persons. But what constitutes personhood is a separate question from what constitutes human life. And embryos are incontrovertibly human life. They are not bird life or fish life or plant life. Each and every one is a tiny little human—

someone's child, grandchild, brother, sister, niece, or nephew—intentionally, purposefully, and expensively conceived. These tiny little humans, in the natural way of things, would keep growing and become big humans like you and me. That's their *telos*, their intended end. But they can't reach that end because they are frozen on ice. Most will remain frozen on ice until they are disposed of like medical waste.

The other heartbreaking part hidden from view is all the embryos that never even make it to the ice. For every embryo that is implanted in a woman's womb or kept in storage, there are many more embryos that have been discarded because they didn't pass "quality control." These are considered "defective" and so they are treated not as human life, but as medical waste. In the 45 years since IVF became a possibility, the number of human beings discarded by their makers at the earliest stages of life is almost unfathomable. It makes the number of abortions that take place every year look like a grain of sand on the beach.

But the deepest, most damaging, most heartbreaking consequences of IVF are in the human soul. IVF hurts the couples who conceive through it. IVF hurts the children conceived through it. And IVF hurts all of us in the culture who go along with it, accepting it as normal, as good.

IVF hurts those who pursue it because it drives a wedge between them and God. It might drive that wedge quickly or it might drive it slowly, but it will drive a wedge. You can't do something that is wrong, even if you don't fully understand that it's wrong, without hurting yourself and hurting your relationship with God. Over time, that hurt, unrepented and unhealed, can fester in your heart until it destroys your heart, keeping it forever turned away from the God who seeks it.

Now, let's talk about the children.

First, let me be clear, every child conceived through IVF is a gift from God. The circumstances under which a child is conceived have no bearing on their dignity or value. A child conceived through IVF is as precious as a child conceived out of wedlock or through rape or in the most loving and holy of marriages. All children, no matter how their life began, are precious. But all children, no matter how their life began, also have rights. Children have a right to be conceived in an act of love, by a man and woman who are committed to each and to them. Children have the right to be treated as a subject, as a person, not an object or a commodity. And children have the right to be welcomed into this

world, to be given every chance to grow and flourish and become who God made them to be. IVF violates every single one of those rights from the first moment of a child's existence.

Many of those children know this, and many are angry about it. Through the years, I've talked with IVF conceived teens and adults who struggle deeply with the way they were conceived. They love their parents. But they also are angry at their parents for putting them in the position they're in. Some feel like they started life as a commodity. Some struggle with being intentionally deprived of a father, mother, or biological parent from the first moment of their existence. Some are wracked with guilt for being the embryo who survived, when so many others—their brothers and sisters—were created then discarded or left forever frozen. Some don't know how to both be grateful to their parents for their life and be faithful Catholics who can trust the wisdom of the Church.

That's not to say it's not possible to reconcile the two. It absolutely is. But how to do that is not always immediately clear to a person who knows their existence came about through an act that the Church says is gravely wrong. Some choose anger at their parents. Some choose anger at the Church and walk away from it altogether. Some, eventually make peace with the circumstances of their birth. But frequently it's a messy process. And many couples striving to conceive through IVF don't think about the mess they're creating for their child—the issues their child will have to sort out, the wedge they are driving from the start between their child and faith and possibly between their child and themselves.

Last of all, IVF hurts all of us. One hundred years ago—heck, sixty years ago—1.5 million tiny humans on ice was the stuff of dystopian fiction. The mere thought of it was horrific. Now many of us don't even blink at those numbers. We also don't blink at people soliciting eggs and sperm from donors with very specific genetic traits—traits that increase the chance of children being tall or smart or blonde. We don't blink at embryos which don't have those traits being discarded. Or if we do blink, we quickly try to forget about it, to not think about it, reassuring ourselves that it's all worth it for a child. As a culture, we have become numb to embryos going through "quality control." And that doesn't bode well for civilization as we know it.

My brother and sister-in-law are Catholic, but contemplating getting IVF. Should I say something to them?

The short answer? Yes, yes you should. I know it's hard. I know you need to tread carefully. I know there is risk involved. But you still should say something. The ability to speak up in difficult situations on difficult topics to people with whom we actually have a relationship, even when it may cost us something dear, is both a grace of Confirmation and a duty of the Confirmed.

Confirmation, at its most basic, is the sacrament of martyrdom. It's the sacrament that enables us to bear witness to Christ in the world, even when bearing that witness might cause us to suffer. And too many of us—both lay and ordained—having been failing to do that. We been failing to call on the graces of our Confirmation and failing to bear the witness Christ asks us to bear. Which is why so many people are now so profoundly confused on issues of life, death, and human love.

But—and this is a huge but—saying *something* does not necessarily mean saying *everything*. You don't have to sit down with your brother and his wife and go through a fifty-slide Power Point presentation on the ethical and medical complications of IVF. Nor do you have to go in, guns ablazing, calling down judgement on them and scorching the earth between you. If you don't feel equipped to review all the finer points of why IVF is physically and morally dangerous, that's okay. And in a situation like this, something simple and gentle might actually be much more effective and better received.

At minimum, you could say something like this: "I know you guys are thinking seriously about IVF. You're carrying such a huge cross right now. I'm so sorry for that. This is a really big decision, though. It can affect your relationship with God and the Church in ways you might not be able to imagine right now. It can also affect your child's relationship with God and the Church, not to mention your child's relationship with you. Maybe before making the decision, you should talk to a priest, someone from the National Catholic Bioethics Center, or maybe the Pope Paul VI Institute, which helps Catholics struggling to conceive. I'll text you how to get in touch with them. Whatever you do, just know I am praying for you."

You know your brother and his wife better than I do. So you, with some help from the Holy Spirit, are ultimately going to know better than I do what is the best thing to say. It won't be easy no matter what. But affirming their suffering, while also encouraging them to seek guidance from a knowledgeable and faithful source might make a difference in what they

do. Either way, I'll be praying for you, as you are praying for them. We are in such a pickle on these issues, with such poor formation given for so long, that it's tough for everyone to make their way through them.

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Resources & Miscellany

1. To read more about what the Church herself has to say on these issues, see the following documents: *Donum Vitae*, *Evangelium Vitae*, and *Dignitatus Personae*.
2. For an excellent book on this topic, I recommend *Conceived by Science: Thinking Carefully and Compassionately About Infertility and IVF* by Stephanie Gray Connors
3. If you are looking for organizations that help couples dealing with infertility, I recommend [Springs in the Desert](#) (a wonderful Catholic infertility ministry)
4. Here is the UK please contact *Fiat Fertility Care* for infertility help and a free initial phone consultation:

www.fiatfertilitycare.co.uk/contact