

# Living a Catholic Life

## *There Is No Right to a Child*

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“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between dioceses, parishes, Knights of Columbus councils, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

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Frequently, in discussions about fertility and the use of such techniques as in vitro fertilization, the claim is made that a married couple has a moral right to a child. After all, one of the goods of marriage is the procreation and education of children. Therefore, if a married couple is not able to have a child through normal genital activity, why should they be prevented from using contemporary biological techniques?

The Church, as is well known, teaches that it is morally wrong to generate human life outside the marital act (see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum vitae*). Many people, both Catholic and non-Catholic, can readily understand why it is morally bad for a couple to generate human life by inseminating the wife with sperm provided by a man who is not her husband or by inseminating a woman other than the wife with sperm from the husband. They recognize that the choice to generate human life in these ways does violence to marriage and to human parenthood and does a serious injustice to the child.

But many of these same people find the teaching of the Church on the immorality of in vitro fertilization a different matter. There is no use of gametic materials from third parties; the child conceived is genetically the child of husband and wife, who are and will remain its parents. There need be no deliberate creation of excess human life which will be discarded, frozen, or made the subject of medical research. Nor need there be the use of immoral means (masturbation) to obtain the husband's sperm, since it can be retrieved in morally acceptable ways. There is apparently only the intent to help a couple, despite their physical incapacity, to have a child with whom they ardently desire to share life and to whom they are willing to give a home. Why, many people reasonably ask, is it morally bad to make use of in vitro fertilization in such cases? Is not the Church's position here too rigid, too insensitive to the agonizing plight of involuntarily childless couples who are seeking, by making good use of modern technologies, to realize one of the goods of marriage? Do not married couples in this situation have a right to make use of these methods?

It is true that married men and women have rights (and responsibilities) that nonmarried men and women do not have. They have the right, first of all, to engage in the marital act, which is not simply a genital act between two persons who happen to be married but an act of interpersonal communion in which they give themselves to one another. In contrast to genital sex between unmarried people, which merely joins two individuals who are,

in principle, replaceable, the marital act unites two persons who have made one another absolutely non-substitutable by giving themselves to one another in marriage. In addition, husbands and wives, by doing this, have capacitated themselves, as St. Augustine put it, “to receive life lovingly, to nourish it humanely, and to educate it religiously” (*De Genesi ad litteram* 9.7). God, in short, wills that human life be given in the marital embrace of husbands and wives, not through the random copulation. Husbands and wives, thus, have a right to the marital act and to care for life conceived through this act, but they do not have a right to a child. A child is not a thing to which husbands and wives have a right. It is not a product that, by its nature, is necessarily inferior to its producers but rather a child like its parents. And this is the moral problem with the laboratory generation of human life.

When a child comes to be in and through the marital act, it is not a product of the spouses' act but “a gift supervening on and giving permanent embodiment to” the marital act itself (Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, *In Vitro Fertilization: Morality and Public Policy* [1983], n. 23). When human life comes to be through the marital act, we say quite properly that the spouses are receiving a life. They are begetting or procreating but not making anything. But when human life comes to be as a result of in vitro fertilization, it is the end product of a series of actions undertaken by different persons. The spouses produce the gametic cells that others use to make the end product—in this case, a child. In such a procedure, the child comes to be, not as a gift crowning the marital act (see Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 51), “but rather in the manner of a product of a making and, typically, as the end product of a process managed and carried out by persons other than his parents” (Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, *In Vitro Fertilization*, n. 24). The life generated is made, not begotten. But as noted already, a human child is a person equal in dignity to its parents. It is not a product or a thing and, therefore, ought not to be treated as if it were.

In the Nicene Creed, we profess that God's eternal Word was “begotten, not made.” Human beings, as beings made in God's image and likeness, are, as it were, the created words, brothers and sisters of God's eternal and uncreated Word, that manifest the depths of God's personal love for every human person. Thus, human beings also ought to be “begotten, not made.” Husbands and wives have no right to make a child. They have the right to give themselves to one another in the marital act and, in and through this act, to *receive the gift of life*.