

by Emily Snipes

If I had a nickel for every time a well-meaning person has asked when we were going to have another child, I'd be rich. You may think that is a far stretch, but we only have one son who is 7 years old. Now you're thinking alright, so they've probably been asked that a few times. I also teach and use Natural Family Planning. Now you believe me, because everyone who uses NFP has at least 5 kids right? The reason for the delay in expanding our family really doesn't matter, but to those who frequently ask it seems of great concern.

For most couples the question of when a baby will appear begins shortly after marriage. That question then continues again shortly after the birth of their first child and so on until they explain they aren't having any more children.

Expectations and pressure from family and friends can certainly be overwhelming. As annoying as the personal invasion may be for a fertile couple who are planning their family, imagine how frustrating and upsetting the continual line of questioning can be for an infertile couple.

The challenge infertile couples experience is coping with the natural desire of wanting a family and understanding why in our culture of instant gratification it isn't happening. Trying to deflect the good intentions of family and friends begins to add upon the burden.

So when it comes to reproductive technology and Catholic Church teaching, how does a couple who believe they are called to be "fruitful" in marriage navigate the options of treating infertility?

The most common procedure is In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) where conception occurs outside the body, which is why it is not approved by the Church. As a general rule any procedure which adds a third party into the act of conception or substitutes a lab process for intercourse, it not acceptable.

What happens in IVF is the woman is treated with hormones to stop her cycle and then stimulated to produce a number of ova. The ova are then harvested from the follicle with a needle and placed in an incubator with semen to allow fertilization. In most cases at least two embryos are implanted in the woman's uterus (and in some medical centers as many as four or more). Success rates vary from 16-20% for having a baby born.

Most people are aware of IVF given the recent media frenzy surrounding people like Nadya Suleman (otherwise known as OctoMom) who delivered 8 babies after having 7 embryos implanted. Cases such as this have brought on discussions regarding regulation in fertility treatments and ethical guidelines.

A treatment less discussed is Gamete Intra-Fallopian Transfer (GIFT) where nearly ripe ova are taken from the woman's follicles by aspiration techniques similar to IVF. One ovum, separated with an air bubble from a prepared seminal fluid sample, is immediately reinserted into the woman's fallopian tube so that conception will occur within the body. Success rates are similar to IVF, but this procedure is still under discussion within the Church and neither been approved or disapproved.

Although one new treatment which is less discussed despite its success is approved by the Church. Dr. Tom Hilgers, director of the Pope Paul VI Institute, has developed a reproductive science called NaProTechnology, which is a way of promoting women's health. Dr. Hilgers and his trained medical consultant physicians allow an alternative treatment to infertility that conforms to the moral guidance of the Church. Perhaps most impressive is the fact that NaProTechnology success rates are 1.5 to 3 times higher than IVF

Unlike artificial reproductive technologies which ignore the underlying causes of infertility, Dr. Hilgers credits the focus of NaProTechnology in diagnosing and treating issues, while maintaining the natural act of intercourse, for the success they have with helping couples.

The Catholic Church released a document in December 2008 titled, “Dignitas Personae on Certain Bioethical Questions.” It states, “The desire for a child cannot justify the ‘production’ of offspring, just as the desire not to have a child cannot justify the abandonment or destructions of a child once he or she has been conceived.”

It specifically addresses efforts infertile couples go to in adopting or implanting frozen embryos, and states those methods are equally immoral as destroying embryos for stem cell research. What it does not offer is a clear solution for currently frozen embryos. Though the 23 page text offers useful guidelines in Church teaching on procreation, I highly doubt many couples would consult it before making treatment decisions.

As a Church we have ignored this area of ministry. Infertility is a growing issue in the United States and in response there has been increasing growth in the reproductive technology industry, but not within the Church. The need is there to offer spiritual and ethical guidance, education and compassion.

Couples who face incurable infertility and those who choose adoption need the same pastoral compassion and support, just as those who seek reconciliation for turning to immoral treatments during the emotional rollercoaster.

Right now many couples seek help from treatment centers who dangle statistics and “experts” who offer hope. The more the topic of infertility is ignored, the more couples will choose the option they feel has the most to offer them. We need to be the place they look to for hope.

<p>For more information on NaProTechnology visit www.naprotechnology.com To learn more about Natural Family Planning please call the Holy Family Center for Life at (812) 421-2030 to find a practitioner near you.</p>

**The USCCB Office of Pro-Life Activities provided information regarding Church teaching and guidelines for treatment of infertility.*