**What’s Wrong With In-Vitro Fertilization** by Tim Drake

SACRAMENTO, Calif. - Catholic teaching has called in-vitro fertilization techniques immoral for decades. But most Catholics still haven't heard the news. California attorneys Anthony and Stephanie Epolite found out the hard way that in-vitro fertilization wasn't all it's cracked up to be. After years of marriage, and facing her 39th birthday still without a baby, Stephanie turned to a fertility clinic. Two years and $25,000 later, the couple had nothing but frustration and embarrassment to show for the time spent on in-vitro fertilization.

"We were emotionally, financially and spiritually spent," Stephanie Epolite said. "The clinic did no diagnostic tests. They loaded me up with fertility medication and determined the right time for retrieval of my eggs." But, after the retrieval and the mixing of the eggs with Anthony's sperm in the laboratory, still no embryo developed. "In the end, they told me I just had old eggs," Stephanie said. She wishes she had known at the beginning what she has since learned: The Catholic Church forbids fertility techniques that try to make babies outside of marital intercourse. "There is no education out there about the alternatives," she said, "so Catholics are flocking to the fertility clinics."

According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, infertility affects more than 6 million American women and their spouses, or about 10% of the reproductive-age population. About 5% of infertile couples use in-vitro fertilization. As to how many Catholic couples are among them, figures are hard to come by. But many Catholics seem unaware of the immorality of the procedure.

"Anecdotally, from our consultation experience here. Catholics using reproductive technologies are generally unaware of the Church's moral teaching in this area," said Dr. Peter Cataldo, director of research with the Boston-based National Catholic Bioethics Center. "They're not hearing it from the pulpit or elsewhere." In her teaching on human reproduction, the Church seeks to safeguard human dignity. God wants life "to be the result of an act of love by those committed to loving each other," philosophy professor Janet Smith has written. Anything that assists the conjugal act achieve its purpose of procreation is licit; anything that substitutes for it is not.

In No. 2377, the Catechism explains why the Church opposes methods that separate marital love-making from baby-making.

They dissociate the sexual act from the procreative act. The act which brings the child into existence is no longer an act by which two persons give themselves to one another, but one that entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person. Such a relationship of domination is in itself contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children. Under the moral aspect procreation is deprived of its proper perfection when it is not willed as the fruit of the conjugal act, that is to say, of the specific act of the spouses' union.

In successful in-vitro fertilization, a human life comes into existence outside the conjugal act and outside the womb. Conception is the result of a technician's manipulation of "reproductive materials." The process for the collection of sperm often necessitates masturbation, which is itself immoral.

Father Tadeusz PachoIczyk, director of education at the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, explained that the Church teaches that the procedure is immoral for several reasons. "It undermines the meaning of sex. It violates the exclusivity of the couple's marriage covenant," Father Pacholczyk said. "It says that it is okay to manufacture life in a laboratory as if it were a commodity, when it should be the result of human love."

"There's also the ancillary evil of freezing embryonic humans that are later abandoned or poured down the sink if they are not useful," he added. In addition, Father Pacholczyk noted that babies created through in-vitro fertilization have an elevated risk of birth defects. "Studies have shown a six fold elevated risk for in-vitro fertilization children contracting an eye disease called retinal blastoma versus normally conceived babies," he said. "In-vitro fertilization is very unnatural. You're extracting ova from the woman, culturing them and inspecting the developing embryo in a laboratory setting. They are in a completely unnatural environment for a very long time before they are put back into the womb.

"Commercial interests offer in-vitro fertilization as standard practice," Father Pacholczyk said. "The Catholic Church is the only voice opposed to it." But there are morally acceptable alternatives to in-vitro fertilization, and Dr. Thomas Hilgers is trying to let more Catholic couples know that.

In response to *Humanae Vitae*,Pope Paul VI’s encyclical reaffirming the Church’s opposition to contraception, Hilgers devoted his life to the study of human reproduction, developing the Creighton Model System of Natural Family Planning and eventually opening the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction.

In 1991, Hilgers coined the term NaPro Technology (Natural Procreative Technology), a reproductive and gynecologic medical science that seeks to evaluate and treat a host of women's health problems without the use of contraception, sterilization, abortion or artificial reproductive technologies, thereby making it consistent with Church teachings.

NaPro Technology first identifies the causes of infertility and then seeks to treat them. That's not always the case at fertility clinics. "The aim of most fertility clinics is to skip over the abnormality to try to get women pregnant," Hilgers said. "Yet when you skip over the causes, you end up dealing with them one way or another.

"It's ludicrous to promote in-vitro fertilization as the help for the vast majority of 6.62 million with impaired fertility," he said. "When you listen to the national news and morning television shows, you think that in-vitro fertilization is the only thing available to infertile couples, yet less than 0.5% of infertile couples in the U.S. are helped by in-vitro fertilization each year."

Catholic theologians and ethicists would agree that NaPro Technology is morally acceptable Cataldo said. Cataldo pointed out that "certain drug therapies and egg-stimulating medications at doses that don't have disproportionate risks for the children engendered or for the mother" also are acceptable. But other technologies, such as intrauterine insemination (IUI) and gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT) fall into a gray area. "Some moral theologians and ethicists see these techniques as assisting the conjugal act. Others see it as replacing it," he said. "Until such time as the Vatican speaks, Catholics contemplating the use of IUI or GIFT should inform themselves of both sides of the moral and theological argument and then make a decision in good conscience."

Regardless of the artificial method chosen, the cost of such techniques remains high and the success rates low. According to the 2001 Assisted Reproductive Technology Success Rates report compiled by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a survey of 384 fertility clinics showed a clinical pregnancy success rate of 32%.

In a 1990 article published in Social Justice Review, then-associate director of the U.S. Catholic bishops' Pro-Life Secretariat Richard Doerflinger noted that a survey of in-vitro fertilization clinics discovered that half of the clinics had never had a live birth after being in business at least three years, collectively treating more than 600 women and collecting $2.5 million for their services.

"Those with the extraordinary emotions that engulf infertile couples are extremely vulnerable," Hilgers said. "They are easy prey." Not only do natural and morally acceptable alternatives such as NaPro Technology cost far less, but they also are more successful. The Pope Paul VI Institute boasts success rates ranging from 38% to 80%, depending upon the condition being treated.

Following the Epolites' experience with in-vitro fertilization, Stephanie learned about the Pope Paul VI Institute from a Natural Family Planning counselor. In the fall of 2000, the couple applied to the institute, gathered charts they had kept that outlined vital signs related to fertility, and underwent diagnostic testing. As it turned out, both had reproductive issues that their previous fertility clinic had never diagnosed. Anthony's sperm count was low, and Stephanie suffered from endometriosis and blocked fallopian tubes.

Six months later, following treatment of their conditions at the Pope Paul VI Institute and at the age of 42, Stephanie conceived naturally. Their daughter, Claire Marie, was born Oct. 3, 2002.

"At the Pope Paul VI Institute, we saw compassion, concern, help and love," Stephanie said. "They provided individualized treatment, versus the empty feeling that we felt from the fertility clinic. Whereas the fertility clinic bypasses all the laws of nature, the Pope Paul VI Institute works with the laws of nature."

Marriage Statistics

DID YOU KNOW?

* 50% of all new marriages end in divorce.
* Poor communication skills and the inability to resolve conflict are leading causes of divorce.
* Couples who participate in marriage preparation programs experience a 30% increase in marital success over those who do not participate.
* Of those couples who pray together in their homes on a regular basis, the divorce rate is 0.3% (or one divorce out of every 300 couples).
* A healthy marriage contributes to greater physical and emotional health, greater job stability and satisfaction, higher wages, and increased life expectancies.
* Many couples today are seriously lacking in conflict resolution and communication skills, which can strip marriage of intimacy and satisfaction.
* Married people (43% very happy) are happier than unmarried couples (24% very happy) and this has been a consistent finding over the years.

COHABITATION

* From 1960 to 1998 the number of unmarried, cohabitating couples increased nearly tenfold from 439,000 to 4.2 million. In 2008 6.8 million unmarried opposite-sex couples were living together.
* By age 30, three-quarters of women in the U.S. have been married and about half have cohabitated outside of marriage.
* Cohabiting couples and unmarried families report greater rates of unhappiness, dissatisfaction and high amounts of conflict.
* Cohabitation before marriage significantly increases the chances for divorce later on, with a divorce rate of 73%.
* Only 53% of first cohabiting unions result in marriage.
* 80% of women who cohabitate before marriage will end up divorced.
* Those living together before marriage do not experience the best sex.
* The probability of a first marriage ending in separation or divorce within 5 years is 20%, but the probability of a premarital cohabitation marriage breaking up within 5 years is 50%.

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

* Couples report that Natural Family Planning is a marriage building experience. There is a less than 5% divorce rate among couples practicing NFP. It improves communication and gives the couple a deeper respect for each other.
* NFP has a 99.5% method effectiveness rate for couples avoiding pregnancy.
* Using NFP is very helpful in aiding in the evaluation and treatment of infertility.
* There are many benefits to NFP including: it is medically safe, proven reliable, flexible, natural and cooperative with your body, a shared system between husband and wife, comparatively inexpensive and respects the dignity of women and men.

WHEN IT COMES TO KIDS…

* Children of divorce and single parent homes are three times more likely to drop out of school or to have a baby as a teenager, five times as apt to live in poverty and are 12 times more likely to be incarcerated.
* Children of divorce are at increased risk for an array of emotional and psychological problems that can extend well into adulthood.
* Divorce can cause serious emotional and psychological scarring, and overwhelming financial burdens.

When divorce happens once, it’s more likely to happen again with a second marriage.

Frequently Asked Questions About Marriage

(USCCB)

1. *Why does the church teach that marriage is a sacrament?* The sacraments make Christ present in our midst. Like the other sacraments, marriage is not just for the good of individuals, or the couple, but for the community as a whole. The Catholic Church teaches that marriage between two baptized persons is a sacrament. The Old Testament prophets saw the marriage of a man and woman as a symbol of the covenant relationship between God and his people. The permanent and exclusive union between husband and wife mirrors the mutual commitment between God and his people. The Letter to the Ephesians says that this union is a symbol of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

2. *Do Catholics ever validly enter into non-sacramental marriages?* Yes. Marriages between Catholics and non-Christians, while they may still be valid in the eyes of the Church, are non-sacramental. With permission, a priest or deacon may witness such marriages.

3. *What is the difference between a valid and an invalid Catholic marriage?* Just as individual states have certain requirements for civil marriage (e.g., a marriage license, blood tests), the Catholic Church also has requirements before Catholics can be considered validly married in the eyes of the Church. A valid Catholic marriage results from four elements: (1) the spouses are free to marry; (2) they freely exchange their consent; (3) in consenting to marry, they have the intention to marry for life, to be faithful to one another and be open to children; and (4) their consent is given in the presence of two witnesses and before a properly authorized Church minister. Exceptions to the last requirement must be approved by church authority.

4. *If a Catholic wants to marry a non-Catholic, how can they assure that the marriage is recognized by the Church?* In addition to meeting the criteria for a valid Catholic marriage (see question #3), the Catholic must seek permission from the local bishop to marry a non-Catholic. If the person is a non-Catholic Christian, this permission is called a "permission to enter into a mixed marriage." If the person is a non-Christian, the permission is called a "dispensation from disparity of cult." Those helping to prepare the couple for marriage can assist with the permission process.

5. *Why does a Catholic wedding have to take place in a church?* For Catholics, marriage is not just a social or family event, but a church event. For this reason, the Church prefers that marriages between Catholics, or between Catholics and other Christians, be celebrated in the parish church of one of the spouses. Only the local bishop can permit a marriage to be celebrated in another suitable place.

6. *If a Catholic wishes to marry in a place outside the Catholic church, how can he or she be sure that the marriage is recognized by the Catholic Church as valid?* The local bishop can permit a wedding in another church, or in another suitable place, for a sufficient reason. For example, a Catholic seeks to marry a Baptist whose father is the pastor of the local Baptist church. The father wants to officiate at the wedding. In these circumstances, the bishop could permit the couple to marry in the Baptist church. The permission in these instances is called a "dispensation from canonical form."

7. *If two Catholics or a Catholic and non-Catholic are married invalidly in the eyes of the church, what should they do about it?* They should approach their pastor to try to resolve the situation.

8. *When a Catholic marries a non-Catholic, must the non-Catholic promise to raise the children in the Catholic faith?* The non-Catholic spouse does not have to promise to have the children raised Catholic. The Catholic spouse must promise to do all that he or she can to have the children baptized and raised in the Catholic faith.

9. *Is it required that a wedding celebration have expensive flowers, clothes and other accompaniments?* The Rite of Marriage makes no reference to any of these cultural elements. The focus of the couple should be on the celebration of the sacrament. Pastors repeatedly point out that a couple do not have to postpone the celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage because they cannot afford such things.

10. *How much does it cost to get married in the Catholic Church?*   Dioceses often regulate the stipend, or offering to the church, that is customary on the occasion of a wedding. Depending on different areas, this might also include the fee for the organist and vocalist. In a situation of true financial difficulty, couples can come to an agreement with their pastors so that true financial hardship will never prevent a Catholic marriage from taking place.

11. *What is a Nuptial Mass and when can a couple have one?*  A Nuptial Mass is a Mass which includes the celebration of the sacrament of marriage. It has special readings and prayers suitable to the Sacrament of Marriage. The Sacrament of Marriage between two baptized Catholics should normally be celebrated within Mass.  If the situation warrants it and the local bishop gives permission, a Nuptial Mass may be celebrated for a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized person who is not a Catholic, except that Communion is not given to the non-Catholic since the general law of the church does not allow it. In such instances, it is better to use the appropriate ritual for marriage outside Mass. This is always the case in a marriage between a baptized Catholic and a non-baptized person.

12 *What should a couple do when they decide that they want to marry in the Catholic Church?*  They should contact their parish as soon as possible and make an appointment to talk with the priest, deacon or staff person who is responsible for preparing couples for marriage. This person will explain the process of marriage preparation and the various programs that are offered.

13. *Why does the church require engaged couples to participate in a marriage preparation program?*  Marriage preparation offers couples the opportunity to develop a better understanding of Christian marriage; to evaluate and deepen their readiness to live married life; and to gain insights into themselves as individuals and as a couple. It is especially effective in helping couples to deal with the challenges of the early years of marriage. 14. *What kinds of marriage preparation programs does the church offer?* Depending on the diocese and the parish, several may be available. Programs include a weekend program with other couples, such as Catholic Engaged Encounter (www.engagedencounter.org), a series of sessions in large or small groups or meetings with an experienced married couple. Some programs may be offered in Spanish and other languages. Specific programs address particular circumstances, such as remarriage, children brought into the marriage and marriage to a non-Catholic. As part of their preparation, many couples complete a premarital inventory, such as FOCCUS, to identify issues for further discussion.

15. *What key issues are covered in marriage preparation?* Marriage preparation programs help couples to understand the Christian and the human aspects of marriage. Typical topics include: the meaning of marriage as a sacrament; faith, prayer and the church; roles in marriage; communication and conflict resolution; children, parenthood and Natural Family Planning; finances; and family of origin.

16. *Is there a cost for marriage preparation programs?* Most programs charge a modest fee to cover the cost of materials. Programs that require an overnight stay will include an additional cost for rooms and meals. Assistance is frequently available for couples who would otherwise be unable to participate.

17. *Does the church offer any programs to help couples to improve their marriage?* Yes. Peer ministry for married couples is widespread. Many couples meet in parish-based small groups; ministries such as Teams of Our Lady, Couples for Christ, and Christian Family Movement also use the small group approach. The Marriage Enrichment Weekend Program (www.tmewpi.org) is offered in several states. Some parishes sponsor a retreat day or evening of reflection for married couples. Others offer a mentoring system that matches older couples with younger ones. Throughout the country, many couples participate in Marriage Encounter (www.wwme.org), which offers a weekend experience and ongoing community support.

18. *What can a couple do if their marriage is in trouble?* Parish priests, deacons and other pastoral ministers are available to talk to couples and to refer them to counselors and programs that can assist them. Retrouvaille (Ree-tru-VEYE) (www.retrouvaille.org) is an effective program that helps to heal and renew marriages in serious trouble.

19. *What is an annulment?* An annulment is a declaration by a tribunal (Catholic church court) that a marriage thought to be valid according to Church law actually fell short of at least one of the essential elements required for a binding union (see question #3). Unlike civil divorce, an annulment does not erase something that was already there, but rather it is a declaration that a valid marriage was never actually brought about on the wedding day. A declaration of nullity does not deny that a relationship ever existed between the couple, or that the spouses truly loved one another.

20. *How can a couple married 20 years get an annulment?* The annulment process examines the events leading up to, and at the time of, the wedding ceremony, in an effort to determine whether what was required for a valid marriage was ever brought about. While a marriage of 20 years provides evidence that a couple had some capacity for a life-long commitment, the duration of their relationship in itself does not prove or negate the existence of the marriage bond.

21. *If a marriage is annulled are the children from it considered illegitimate?* No. A declaration of nullity has no effect on the legitimacy of children, since the child's mother and father were presumed to be married at the time that the child was born.

22. *Are annulments expensive?* Fees associated with the annulment process vary within the U.S. Most tribunals charge between $200 and $1,000 for a standard nullity case. Fees are typically payable over time, and may be reduced or even eliminated in cases of financial difficulty. Other expenses may be incurred when consultation with medical, psychological, or other experts is needed.

23. *How long does it take to get an annulment?* It usually takes 12 to 18 months to complete the entire process.