

Moral Questions About *In Vitro* Fertilization. Can There Be a Pastoral Approach?

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ABSTRACT. For Christian communities, medically assisted procreation is an active challenge. Whether we are talking about techniques that use *in vivo fertilization*, or whether we are talking about techniques that use *in vitro fertilization*, the reservations from the perspective of Christian morality are obvious. However, in the last 25 years, the Orthodox Church (at least the one in Greece and the one in Russia) has felt the need to compose documents that evaluate these techniques and that provide pastoral guidance to those who cannot assume life without children or adoption. This study outlines the steps that the Church recommends before using *in vitro* fertilization techniques and invites to reflect on embryo adoption.

Keywords: IVF, Orthodox Church, pastoral approach, human embryo

Introduction

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are marked by numerous scientific advances, including in the medical field. Some discoveries make it possible to intervene in areas of life that until now were inaccessible to humans. Resuscitation, for example, makes it possible to postpone the moment of death. Organ transplantation broadens the idea that a person's body can belong to a single subject. *In vitro* fertilization techniques have been developed to make it possible for an infertile couple to have a child. The latter techniques change the way a person relates to the way of procreation.

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In the face of this biotechnological offer, we can note how loaded the agenda of contemporary man's moral questioning is, but also the fact that the speed with which technologies develop exceeds man's ability to respond to the ethical implications due to the new human situations. In this context, the present study tries to re-evaluate in vitro fertilization from the perspective of Christian morality and to emphasize the importance of a pastoral vision of this technology with the help of official documents of the Orthodox Church in Greece and Russia.

Moral Interrogations

Today, more and more people are turning to in vitro fertilization (IVF) to overcome the consequences of infertility. IVF, however, opens the way, based on the principle of the slippery slope¹, to other practices such as: preimplantation genetic diagnosis². Given that modern society seems to emphasize the quality of life, that some genetic diseases make you "less human", then the prenatal diagnosis is not a simple "diagnosis", but an eventual concrete decision of the parents to keep the child or not if he does not pass this quality threshold. Therefore, the prevention of genetic diseases is no longer a pre-conception reality, but a post-conception one, sometimes resulting in "therapeutic" induced abortion (in the case of prenatal diagnosis) or with the destruction of embryos (obtained in vitro). Prospective parents can also utilize preimplantation genetic diagnosis to prevent the transmission of certain mutations to their offspring and thereby reducing the need for terminating pregnancies affected by these mutations. Some parents-to-be regularly choose to select their child's sex and decide whether to have twins. However, preimplantation diagnosis can also be used in order to obtain a child with certain characteristics³: for example, "savior brothers" children⁴, who following preimplantation diagnosis and immunological

¹ "A moral position through which a small first step that violates a general moral and ethical principle inevitably leads to a chain of events that are often immoral, and this not only through the simple passage of time but through exponential growth and the circular effect of habituation and escalation" – Sebastian Moldovan, *Eseuri de Bioetică* (Sibiu: Editura Astra Museum, 2013), 20.

² There are 2 types of prenatal diagnosis: invasive and non-invasive. For a detailed medical explanation see: Maria Luisa di Pietro, *Bioetica, educația și familia*, traducere de dr. Gema Bacoanu și pr. Iosif Agiurgioaiei (Iași: Editura Sapiientia, 2019), 178.

³ Robert Klitzman talks extensively about the impact of these technologies on human procreation in Robert Klitzman, *Designing Babies. How Technology is Changing the Ways We Create Children* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴ The first child – "savior brother" was born in 2011 in France. See: Fr. Cosmin Lazăr, *Homo fabricatus? Statutul embrionului uman din perspectiva ortodoxă, în contextul biotehnologiilor contemporane* (Alba Iulia: Editura Reîntregirea, 2022), 179.

compatibility are used utilitarianly as donors for already born children suffering from certain diseases⁵.

Thus, in the face of infertility, man can choose between four paths, some of which are of Life, others of death⁶:

- “(1) the continuation of natural procreative behaviour, with the hope that this will one day produce a birth, possibly with recourse to other medical procedures, which do not entail a risk of further loss;
- 2) resorting to IVF in conditions of maximum efficiency, with the acceptance of practically inevitable losses;
- 3) resorting to IVF with a protocol for conceiving and transferring as few embryos as possible, with the risk of not having one birth per pregnancy.
- 4) the renunciation of procreation”.⁷

On the one hand, in the practice of the Christian life, those who take the first or last path are urged to direct their energy towards helping poor families, supporting children at school, creating a spiritual family (godparents), or even adoption. On the other hand, Christian Tradition speaks of the weight of a childless life and of the tensions that can arise between husband and wife because of this:

“You all know, of course, that the absence of sons is a misfortune for women that is difficult to bear, especially because of their men. For many men are foolish enough to blame their wives for not being able to bear children.... Even though they know that their reproaches are unjust, they are carried away by anger, they are contemptuous and they treat their wives badly.”⁸

The child is the gift of God received as a result of the conjugal union of the two spouses. The separation between sexuality and procreation remains a challenge of extracorporeal fertilization despite the biotechnological development and refinement of this technique. The birth of a child is not only a mechanical act of the joint between an egg and a spermatozoon, (*opus naturae*) which denotes a biological reductionism, but it is the joint between two persons (*opus personarum*), and the fruit of this meeting is the child⁹. Artificiality is not in itself negative. The two spouses can resort to medical treatment against infertility, stimulation of ovulation, various surgical procedures. Artificiality becomes negative since it

⁵ Sebastian Moldovan, “Și care este copilul meu? Opțiuni parentale în fertilizarea *in vitro* și relevanța lor pentru o etică a procreației,” *Revista Teologică* 30/3 (2019): 153-154.

⁶ It is understood that from the perspective of Christian morality.

⁷ S. Moldovan, “Și care este copilul meu? Opțiuni parentale în fertilizarea *in vitro* și relevanța lor pentru o etică a procreației,” 150.

⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. Anne*, I, 4.

⁹ Maria Luisa di Pietro, *Bioetica, educația și familia...*, 132.

excludes the person. That is why homologous intrauterine insemination procedures or homologous IVF¹⁰ are accepted by some Orthodox and Catholic bioethicists¹¹ under the conditions of the golden rule of *in vitro fertilization*: any embryo obtained must be assumed and transferred to implantation.

Fr. John Breck wonders if the moral act is absolute or relative, that is, if the circumstances in which the action is performed somehow influence the morality of an action and if all our actions can be moral, good or moral, bad without circumstances¹². In relation to the subject of our study, we wonder if the problem of separation between procreation and sexuality established by *in vitro fertilization* is clearly immoral, regardless of the circumstances in which it is performed. If the wife and husband live in Christ and in the Church, the unitive dimension is present in every conjugal act, the conscience with which they resort to medically assisted procreation has resources in their love and in their love for God. The way in which they resort to the *in vitro fertilization* procedure is not a selfish one, “with rights over the child”, but with respect for any human embryo that, being brought to life, necessarily is transferred to implantation.

As it was emphasized, those who resort to IVF will be different people than in the version in which they would have waited for the nature to express the will of the Creator on its own, and those who decide to resort to IVF only if they can avoid its specific losses will be other parents than in the version of accepting a procedure with maximum medical chances of success, but with the inevitable selection of some unborn in favor of others. If the results of the options of the parental project, which follows the number and biological quality of children, are uncertain, what is certainly acquired is a certain moral quality of the parents¹³. According to the Christian moral tradition, especially that of Eastern Christianity, the true victim of an evil deed is not the one who suffers it innocently, but the one who commits it. This is because, in general, the first and most important implication of any human action is its effect on the one who performs it, since through every choice and every action we determine ourselves¹⁴.

¹⁰ Which uses biological material from within the couple.

¹¹ Лев Ляуш, “Этические проблемы аспекты «суррогатного материнства»: Православие и проблемы биоэтики,” Дмитрий Смирнов et alii (eds.). *Издательский Совет Русской Православной Церкви* (Москва, 2017): 430; Isidor Chinez, *Bioetica. Responsabilitatea față de viața umană* (Iași: Editura Sapientia, 2015), 148.

¹² John Breck, “Privire asupra Bioeticii: punctul de vedere al unui teolog creștin,” John Breck et alii., *Bioetica și taina persoanei*, traducere de Nicoleta Petuhov (București: Editura Bizantină, 2006), 57-70.

¹³ S. Moldovan, “Și care este copilul meu? Opțiuni parentale în fertilizarea *in vitro* și relevanța lor pentru o etică a procreației,” 160-161.

¹⁴ S. Moldovan, “Și care este copilul meu? Opțiuni parentale în fertilizarea *in vitro* și relevanța lor pentru o etică a procreației,” 160-161.

Towards a pastoral approach

The new technological possibilities undermine the mystery of the life and holiness of the human being and affect interpersonal relationships. Thus, they increasingly influence the lives of believers who feel the need for guidance and support from the Church. At the same time, representatives of society, legislative bodies, parliamentary groups, as well as the medical world need a well-justified word from the Church.

The field of artificial fertilization, according to the 2005 document of the Greek Orthodox Church, is of great importance, from both a psychological and social perspective, and has a huge spiritual significance. The document acknowledges that modern reproductive techniques can fulfill the hopes of infertile couples and satisfy their profound desire for parenthood. But also point out that, while this can strengthen the cohesion of the married couple and intensify the sense of harmony in family life, it can also give rise to various ethical, medical, psychological, legal and social problems. These problems are the result of the mechanization of one of the most personal and deeply spiritual and sacred acts of the human being. Their extent and diversity vary according to the techniques used, the conditions under which they are applied, and the inherent uncontrollable possibilities and inevitable consequences¹⁵. Therefore, in *the introduction* of the document it is recalled that the purpose of taking a position is not to restrict the freedom of believers within the limits of certain guidelines, but rather to contribute to a deep and thorough understanding of the various problems arising from assisted reproduction, which can lead them to a more mature and responsible decision-making. Moreover, although the document received the approval of the Holy Synod, it does not represent a circular and has not been officially distributed to the clergy and faithful. It is not a text with an undeniable ecclesiastical authority, but, on the contrary, its publication is meant to initiate the debate on the issue of assisted reproduction¹⁶.

The document starts with the fact that the desire to have children is natural and sacred. This is also confirmed by the bodily constitution of the woman, which expresses the fact that the entire existence of the woman is oriented towards the reproductive function: “the woman exists anatomically, physiologically and

¹⁵ Bioethics Committee of the Holy Synod of Greece, “Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction,” I, 1, translated from English by Mihaela Draghici, *Revista Teologică* 30/3 (2019): 254.

¹⁶ The analysis of the document is also presented by Metropolitan Nikolaos Hatzinikolaou, “The Greek Orthodox position on the ethics of assisted reproduction,” *Reproductive biomedicine online* 17 (2008): 25-33.

sentimentally for the embryo, pregnancy and the birth of children".¹⁷ As a result, infertility and childlessness can become an unbearable burden, which can cause intense mental disorders, social difficulties and disruption of harmony between spouses. At the same time, however, the Church sees man not only in his natural biological identity, but also in his infinite spiritual possibilities, which is why she opposes the idea that infertility is a form of disability or an unsolvable social defect. Often, couples who do not have children show a clear spiritual orientation and are prolific in various areas of social and spiritual life¹⁸. From this derives the vocation of the Church and priests to help both to cultivate the faith that, while the birth of a child is a great blessing, infertility does not place couples on a lower level, nor does it harm their relationship or annul their marriage, and to minimize the indiscreet pressures coming from the family environment towards infertile couples¹⁹.

Like any other absolutization of a human desire, the desire to have children at any cost also hides the risk of transforming a natural desire into a stubborn will that can oppose the divine will. Any attempt to cure infertility would also leave room for a humble acceptance of eventual failure. Orthodox anthropology shows that the origin of every man who bears the seal of the image of God is based on the human will, but, equally, on the divine will. Contemporary technology is a great blessing for man, if it is used with prudence and respect; at the same time, however, it can also give man the possibility of opposing God's will, as it is made known in His natural laws. In this case, man can either hinder the fulfillment of God's will, or he can persist in doing his own will, in defiance of divine approval. Thus, technological progress often turns desires into needs, which makes the struggle for spiritual freedom more difficult²⁰.

In evaluating IVF techniques, the document reveals the reasons why the Church expresses its reservations: asexual conception (dissociation between the conjugal act and reproduction), surplus and cryopreserved embryos, extracorporeal fertilization (in the absence of parents, it can open the way to infinite possibilities of unnatural and immoral fertilization), the possibility of intervention and genetic modification before implantation²¹. Beyond these reservations, the Orthodox Church cannot agree²² with heterologous IVF²³, surrogacy, IVF in the case of

¹⁷ "Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction," IV, 11-12, 256.

¹⁸ "Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction," IV, 13-14, 256.

¹⁹ "Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction," IV, 17, 257; XIV, 72, 268.

²⁰ "Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction," IV, 15; 18-19, 257.

²¹ "Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction," IX, 37, 260-261.

²² N. Hatzinikolaou, "The Greek Orthodox position on the ethics of assisted reproduction," 28-30.

²³ It involves egg and/or sperm donation.

single women, the use of male biological material frozen after the death of the husband, IVF during menopause, IVF in the case of homosexual couples, preimplantation diagnosis, ICSI,²⁴ reproductive cloning.

Of particular importance is the answer regarding the creation of surplus embryos (which can be cryopreserved, used for a subsequent pregnancy, donated, destroyed or used in experiments): “Orthodox anthropology cannot justify the existence of embryos that are independent of the state of pregnancy”.²⁵ These restraints and prohibitions do not stem from the Church’s fear of change or from the fact that it would be against new discoveries. She strongly rejects the lack of respect for creation and for the human person, as well as “the desacralization of the institution of the family. Conception is the altar of life; it is not fitting to step into it without being animated by respect and fear for God”.²⁶ For this reason, the Church avoids establishing rules or pronouncing excommunications in bioethical matters. In principle, she leaves them open to reflection, while indicating the direction and spirit of the approach to each individual case. It does not give a generalized definition of God’s will, but gives everyone the chance to find it in their own life²⁷.

In a pastoral spirit, the Church recognizes that in principle she cannot recommend medically assisted procreation as a solution for infertility because it is not within her competence to approve such decisions. However, it is her duty to face this reality that has arisen independently of her will, basing her attitude more on her spiritual dispensation than on her theological precision. Thus, if she is asked for her opinion, she must express her teaching freely and clearly. Thus, because today’s parents are not only under the pressure of the immense challenge of reproductive techniques, but also show limited patience and reduced reserves of faith and inner strength, the Church proposes several steps: 1) her word must be full of spirit and truth, but at the same time it must also be full of empathy and compassion; 2) to emphasize the importance of preserving the sacredness of marriage and to teach those who are married to leave room for the manifestation of God’s grace upon them; 3) to inform believers thoroughly and regularly about the new methods and to highlight the spiritual

²⁴ Intracytoplasmic sperm injection - a method that improves the results of artificial intervention in reproduction, but, at the same time, it further limits the role of natural selection - which often works in a protective manner - since the fertilization of the egg is not done in a sperm environment with many spermatozoa, but with a preselected spermatozoon - Samir N. Babayev, Chan Woo Park, Orhan Bukulmez, “Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection Indications: How Rigorous?,” *Seminars in Reproductive Medicine* 32/4 (2014): 283-285.

²⁵ “Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction,” IX, 40, 261.

²⁶ “Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction,” X, 58, 265.

²⁷ “Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction,” XIII, 69, 267.

problems they cause; 4) clearly explain why they find it difficult to bless the practice of assisted reproduction; 5) to recommend adoption in the case of couples who cannot accept, for various reasons, the problem of their infertility; 6) if adoption is not possible, then the Church can accept, in the spirit of her dispensation, fertilization techniques that do not involve the problem of surplus embryos, or any form of donation or destruction of embryos. For example, the Church could accept homologous intrauterine insemination in the case of couples suffering from the same condition, provided that both spouses agree. She could also accept the assisted reproduction procedure by using exclusively the gametes of the respective parents and by fertilizing only as many embryos as will be implanted²⁸.

Certainly, this pastoral openness to infertile couples does not mean weakening trust in God's will, which is why priests must introduce the faithful to the logic and experience of prayer and miracles.

“The Church indicates the way of precision but treats pastorally the falls of Her children, when, for various reasons, on the one hand, they are unable to implement Her teaching and, on the other hand, they sincerely repent”²⁹.

Another example of the attempt to outline a pastoral vision of medically assisted reproduction techniques is the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2000, in a document entitled “Foundations of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church”,³⁰ adopted by the Holy Synod, it is mentioned that infertile couples, if they cannot assume a childless life or adoption, can resort to artificial insemination with the seminal cells of the spouse (homologous), since it does not violate the integrity of the conjugal union and does not differ mainly from the natural conception and takes place in the context of conjugal relations. On the other hand,

“from the Orthodox point of view, all types of extracorporeal fertilization, including the deliberate production, preservation and destruction of surplus embryos, are morally inadmissible. It is precisely on the recognition of human dignity even of the embryo that the Church's judgment is also based on the moral evaluation of abortion.”³¹

²⁸ “Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction,” XV, 77, 269-270.

²⁹ “Fundamental Positions on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction,” XV, 80-81, 270.

³⁰ The document is translated by Ioan I. Ică jr in: Ioan I. Ică jr, Germano Marani, *Gândirea socială a Bisericii. Fundamente, documente, analize, perspective* (Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2002), 185-266.

The part that interests us for this study is chap. XII, entitled “Problems of Bioethics”.

³¹ “Foundations of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church,” XII, 4, 244.

This decision will begin to be nuanced starting with 2021, when the Synodal Commission for Bioethics of the Moscow Patriarchate compiles a draft document entitled “Ethical Aspects of the In Vitro Fertilization Method”, available and proposed for discussion to all dioceses on the official website of the Patriarchate³².

The draft document reiterates that if therapeutic and surgical treatment methods do not allow infertility to be avoided, the Church calls for the acceptance of childless life as a special call from God. Godly spouses have the opportunity to demonstrate their Christian love and sacrifice by dedicating themselves to the upbringing of adopted children. At the same time, taking into account the significant development of reproductive technologies since the publication of the official document “Foundations of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church”, which led, among other things, to the emergence of the opportunity to form only one or two embryos during IVF and transfer to the mother’s uterus, the Church can also allow spouses of childbearing age, VF possibility with the mandatory exclusion of the following medical methods³³:

- 1) obtaining “surplus” embryos;
- 2) cryopreservation of embryos;
- 3) fetal and embryonic reduction;
- 4) gamete donation;
- 5) prenatal diagnosis.

The exclusion of these methods must be indicated in the documents recording the agreement between the parents and the fertility clinic. An acceptable alternative to embryo freezing is cryopreservation of oocytes for a second IVF attempt if the first IVF fails.

The draft document³⁴ shows that the above-mentioned requirements are met in the following IVF options:

1. IVF in the natural cycle, performed without hormonal stimulation of the future mother with extracorporeal fertilization of one or two eggs obtained from her and their transfer to her womb after fertilization.

2. IVF in a partially modified natural cycle, in which minimal hormonal stimulation is used to obtain one or two oocytes.

3. IVF in a stimulated cycle, when, as a result of hormonal stimulation, a greater number of oocytes are taken, provided that all of them undergo

³² <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5768019.html>, accessed in 15.06.2024.

³³ ***, Этические проблемы, связанные с методом Экстракорпорального оплодотворения [“Ethical Issues Related to the In Vitro Fertilization Method,”] <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5768019.html>, accessed in 26.05.2024.

³⁴ It is still under debate today, so it is not officially adopted.

extracorporeal fertilization, and the viable ones are then transferred to the mother's womb without cryopreservation.

In each concrete case, the document emphasizes, the decision to use IVF or not can be made together with the confessor, who knows the spiritual state of the married couple, the ability of the spouses to continue to carry the cross without children. At the same time, since there are fears that the improvement of reproductive technologies and their widespread introduction could lead to the loss of family values and the destruction of family and conjugal relationships, the Church recalls the fundamental value of the family and that a child should be born into such a family.

After going through the two mentioned documents, another question remains: what solution can the Church offer for embryos already conceived and cryopreserved, but abandoned? Can the Church recommend or bless embryo adoption?

If in the case of adoption itself, the abandoned child is adopted, in the case of pre-natal adoption, the mother also participates biologically in its upbringing even if genetically different from him. There is a major difference between the two types of adoption. First of all, the gestational bond also involves the spiritual and physical bond with the child from the first moments of embryo implantation, compared to adoption itself, in which this bond is established postnatally and involves several complications. Secondly, post-natal adoption involves a vulnerable child with spiritual and material needs, while pre-natal adoption refers to the adoption of a potentially vulnerable child. Thirdly, the difference is also given by the intention. Their intention to adopt a child depends on its coming into existence in the case of embryonic adoption³⁵. The possibility of embryo adoption exists mainly in the United States of America, but also in Europe: Great Britain, Germany (it is the country with the most possibilities of prenatal adoption, where there is also a network of embryo adoption centers).³⁶

Conclusions

1. In principle, the Orthodox Church cannot recommend IVF as a solution for infertility because it does not fall within its competence to make such a decision. However, it is her duty to face this reality that has arisen independently of her will. Thus, because today's parents are not only under the pressure of the immense challenge of reproductive techniques, but also show

³⁵ Oliver Hallich, "Embryo donation or embryo adoption? Conceptual and normative issues," *Bioethics* 33/3 (2019): 653-660.

³⁶ Felicitas Kraemer, "Perspectives on embryo donation," *Bioethics* 33/3 (2019): 633-640.

limited patience and reduced reserves of faith and inner strength, the Church can propose a few steps towards a pastoral approach to these techniques.

2. The Orthodox Church cannot bless in vitro fertilization on a large scale, but only in the confessional chair, on a case-by-case basis, the confessor can make such a decision, knowing the spiritual state of the couple. The confessor is called to recommend adoption in the case of couples who cannot accept, for various reasons, the problem of their infertility.

3. The Orthodox Church has a duty to explain why it has reservations about the technique of in vitro fertilization and to inform the faithful thoroughly and regularly about the new methods and to highlight the spiritual problems they cause.

4. Orthodox anthropology shows that the human embryo is a person from the beginning of its existence and any attempt on its life means murder.

5. In the context in which there are cryopreserved surplus embryos, the Church is called to express herself on the possibility that infertile couples will no longer try to obtain their own embryos, but may prenatally adopt one that has already been abandoned. Can embryo adoption be accepted from the point of view of Christian morality?

6. This study does not propose sentences, but invites those who are faithful to reflect on the challenges associated with medically assisted procreation and to propose an interpellation with the help of the Spirit of Christ.

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