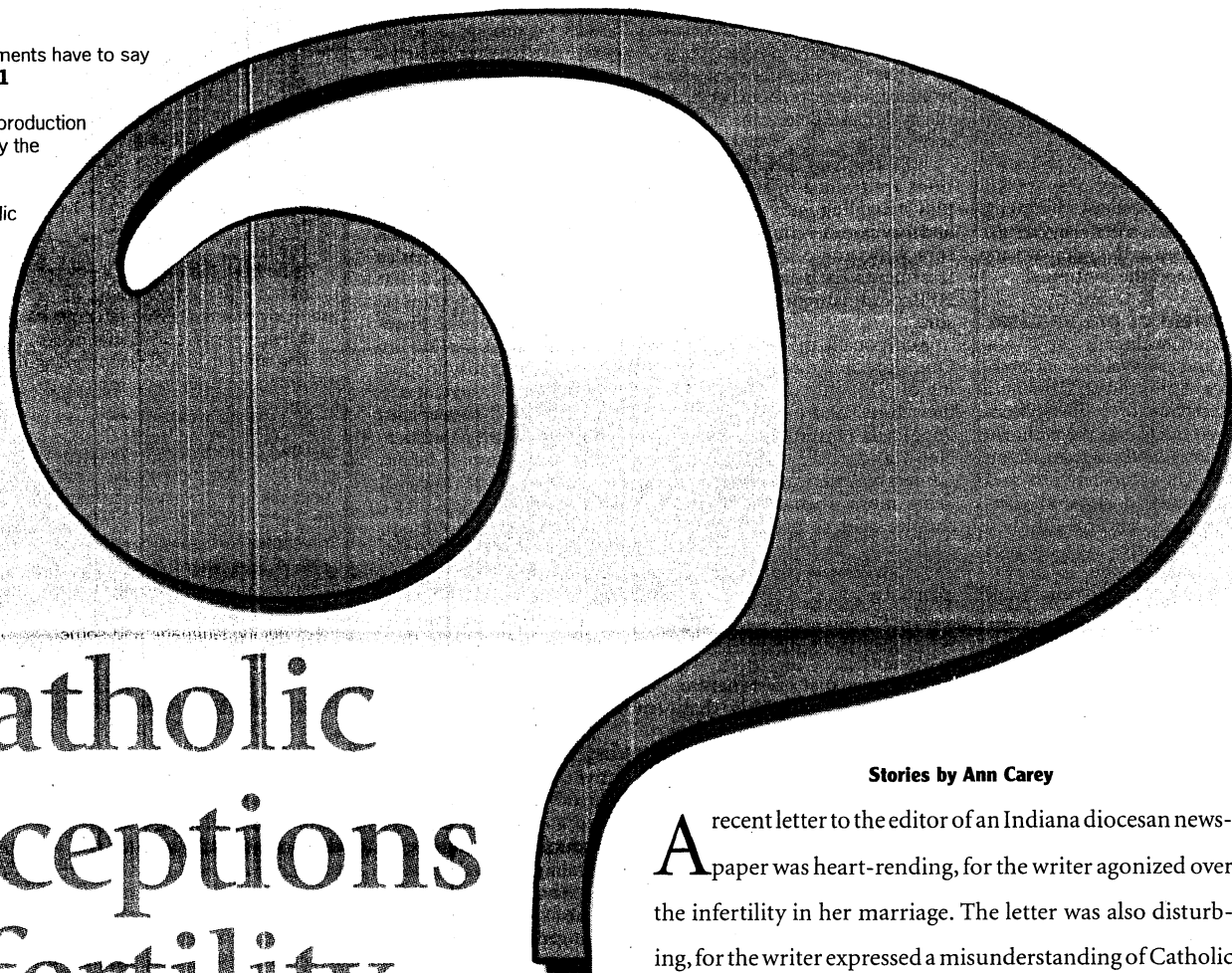


Inside

■ Read what Church documents have to say about conception. **Page 11**

■ Learn which forms of reproduction assistance are approved by the Church. **Page 11**

■ Find out what one Catholic center is doing to help couples who struggle with infertility. **Page 12**



Catholic conceptions of fertility

Stories by Ann Carey

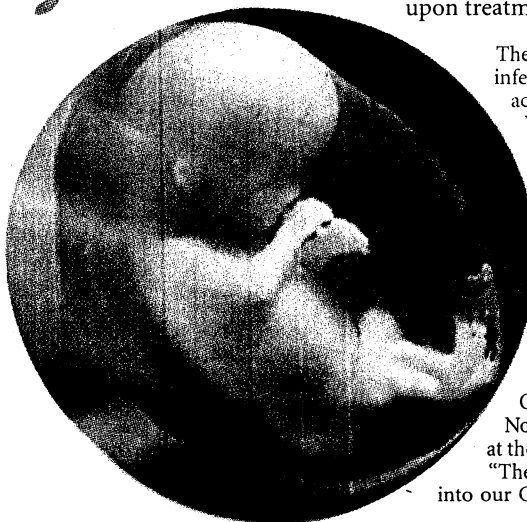
A recent letter to the editor of an Indiana diocesan newspaper was heart-rending, for the writer agonized over the infertility in her marriage. The letter was also disturbing, for the writer expressed a misunderstanding of Catholic Church teaching when she wrote that the Church “frowns” upon treatment for infertility.

The truth is, the Church encourages and supports infertility treatments that assist a married couple in achieving pregnancy through normal intercourse. What the Church rejects are treatments like in-vitro fertilization and artificial insemination that separate conception from the marriage act.

Unfortunately, many Catholics are confused or ambivalent about these Church teachings, and Catholics at the other extreme from the letter writer see no problem with undergoing treatments like IVF.

“It seems that the IVF industry gets lots of press, but many Catholics aren’t aware of Church-approved fertility assistance, and Catholics don’t seem to know or care that the Church doesn’t approve of IVF,” said Theresa Notare, assistant director for Natural Family Planning at the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. “There was, as we all know, a terrific silence that set into our Church after *Humanae Vitae* that left too many

The pain of not being able to have a baby may be great, but there are moral implications to seeking reproductive treatments that separate conception of a child from the marriage act



people in great ignorance about human sexuality, birth control in particular, even the plain, old-fashioned issue of chastity," Notare said, referring to Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* ("Of Human Life") that caused worldwide controversy when it condemned the use of birth control.

"We have to find a way, even within marriage-preparation courses, to give couples some kind of information that they can take home, keep in their drawers and go back to," she continued.

Problem of pragmatism

Contributing to the confusion and ambivalence about the ethics of infertility treatments is the fact that most people still look at their doctors as the authority on what is good and right, Notare noted. Unfortunately, she said, many medical doctors today have little ethical concern with these issues and instead just focus on providing a service.

Dr. Hanna Klaus, founder and executive director of TeenSTAR (Sexuality Teaching in the context of Adult Responsibility), agreed.

"People are so pragmatic," Klaus said. "When the Holy Father was talking about 'the tyranny of relativism,' he was not just whistling 'Dixie.' People think that the only thing that matters is whether something works or not."

However, those pragmatic people should be aware that the immoral methods don't work as well as advertised, Klaus warned, noting that among the IVF clinics reporting statistics, none get better than a 30 percent success rate.

The method also can be dangerous for women because the hormones for inducing ovulation can cause later health problems, Klaus noted.

Furthermore, IVF is fraught with abuses, she said, such as substituting sperm or ova, implanting the wrong embryo, creating millions of "excess" embryos, and causing legal nightmares over parental rights.

"It's unbelievable the mess we've created," Klaus said.

A more natural way

Klaus and Notare both advised that the best way to begin to address an infertility issue is to learn natural family planning (NFP), because that helps the

woman know more about her fertile cycles and determine if she is ovulating.

NFP teachers and organizations are trained to assist couples struggling with infertility, and they can refer couples to doctors who can provide moral treatments. Each diocese has an NFP coordinator or contact person.

Additionally, the organization One More Soul maintains a listing of NFP-only physicians on its website. And places like the Pope Paul VI Institute in Omaha, Neb., and the FertilityCare Centers of America specialize in using moral methods to help couples achieve pregnancy by addressing underlying health issues that may contribute to infertility.

So, how does one determine the morality of an infertility treatment?

"Anything that assists nature is acceptable; anything that replaces nature is not acceptable. That's your bottom line," explained Klaus, who also is a medical consultant to the U.S. bishops' Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning. (See story on Page 11 on Church-approved methods.)

Life objectified

Janet Smith, an ethicist who holds the Father Michael J. McGivney Chair of Life Ethics at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, explained further: "The crucial point for the Church is

that conception must take place as the direct result of an act of sexual intercourse between spouses; their loving act of self-giving must be the direct cause of the gift of life."

Smith sees a strong connection between society's acceptance of

immoral reproductive technologies and the acceptance of contraception and abortion.

"Contraception leads people to believe that they should totally be in control of how many children they have and when," she said. "Children are not seen as gifts from God, but objects that we choose."

The same is true with abortion, she continued, for "We are willing to kill children who show up inconveniently." And that attitude has hardened society into accepting the deaths of numerous embryonic human beings involved in procedures like IVF, she said.

Smith believes the Church could and should do a better job of communicating its teachings on these issues, but the Catholic people, too, have a responsibility to increase their understanding of the faith. They can do that by reading or attending conferences, she said.

Loving outwardly

And what about Catholic couples who exhaust all the Church-approved treatments and still cannot conceive?

"I certainly sympathize with them," Smith said. "The desire for children is natural and strong."

"It is important, however, to keep things in perspective: Many people have strong desires for what is natural and right, and can't get what they want. Many single people want spouses and can't find them; many single people

Multiple problems with in-vitro fertilization

One of the most popular forms of assisted reproductive technology — in-vitro fertilization — has been judged by the Catholic Church to be immoral.

As explained in *Donum Vitae* ("The Gift of Life"), a 1987 statement from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that was approved by Pope John Paul II, "The connection between in-vitro fertilization and the voluntary destruction of human embryos occurs too often. This is significant: through these procedures, with apparently contrary purposes, life and death are subjected to the decision of man, who thus sets himself up as the giver of life and death by decree."

Aside from the obvious theological problems with the procedure, there are many practical issues to consider:

- It is expensive, with one cycle costing around \$12,400, according to the American Society of Reproductive Medicine.

- Overall, only 28 percent of assisted reproductive technologies, of which IVF is most common, resulted in successful pregnancy, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- IVF and other assisted reproductive technologies increase the likelihood of multiple births, which are linked with higher rates of caesarean section, prematurity, low birth weight and infant disability or death.



In addition to separating co-act, in-vitro fertilization often results in the creation of countless embryos and the subsequent abortion of "excess" fetuses. MEDISPHERE

want children; many ailing people want good health. But we shouldn't steal the spouses or children of others, or engage in medical practices that are immoral to meet our desires."

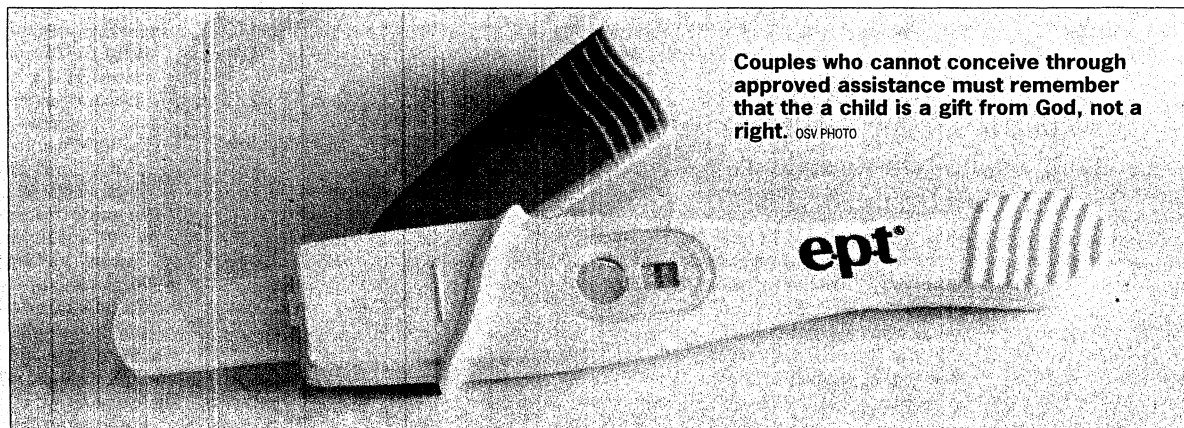
The answer is for people to find good ways to cope with the crosses they carry, Smith said, perhaps through adoption or by being good uncles and aunts or coaches and mentors.

Klaus said she tells infertile couples that "God doesn't mean for you to have the gift of a child,

and you will have to use your paternal or maternal powers and desires in what is called 'spiritual motherhood' or 'spiritual fatherhood.'"

"You can either adopt, if it's possible, or do so many other things. But you need to turn not just in on yourselves, but to turn that love outward. And there are so many ways of expressing Christ's love in the world."

Ann Carey is a senior correspondent for OSV.



Couples who cannot conceive through approved assistance must remember that the child is a gift from God, not a right. OSV PHOTO

MORAL SOLUTIONS

Church approves of some methods

Treatments that assist married couples to conceive through normal intercourse are OK

Much of what the Catholic Church teaches about respect for human life and the dignity of procreation is found in *Donum Vitae* ("The Gift of Life"), a 1987 statement from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that was approved by Pope John Paul II. The document should be read in its entirety, but here are two key paragraphs:

"In reality, the origin of a human person is the result of an act of giving. The one conceived must be the fruit of his parents' love. He cannot be desired or conceived as the product of an intervention of medical or biological techniques; that would be equivalent to reducing him to an object of scientific technology. No one may subject the coming of a child into the world to conditions of technical efficiency which are to be evaluated according to standards of control and dominion."

"The moral relevance of the link between the meanings of the conjugal act and between the goods of marriage, as well as the unity of the human being and the dignity of his origin, demand that the procreation of a human person be brought about as the fruit of the conjugal act specific to the love between spouses."

Thus, the Church does not approve of in-vitro fertilization or artificial insemination, even when the sperm and ova are those of the married couple.

However, the Church does

Infertility in America

Of the 62 million women of reproductive age in 2002, 2 percent had had an infertility-related medical appointment in the previous year. Another 10 percent had sought infertility services at previous times in their lives.

Source: CDC's 2003 Assisted Reproductive Technology Report

approve of treatments that assist in achieving conception in normal intercourse. These would include:

- Training in determining and taking advantage of high fertility days (natural family planning).

- Moral medical testing of both spouses to determine their overall health and any abnormalities in their reproductive organs.

- Medication to provide more normal functioning of the reproductive system, such as improving ovulation or the quality of sperm.

- Surgery to enable normal functioning of the reproductive system, such as removing obstructions from the fallopian tubes or reversing a vasectomy.

- Low tubal ovum transfer (LTOT). If a fallopian tube is blocked or damaged, the ovum may be transferred past the blockage and into the lower part

Further reading

- **"Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life,"** by William E. May (Our Sunday Visitor, \$17.95)

- **"Catholic Sexual Ethics,"** by Father Ronald Lawler, O.F.M.Cap., Joseph Boyle Jr. and William E. May (Our Sunday Visitor, \$14.95)

- **"Fertility, Cycles & Nutrition,"** by Marilyn M. Shannon (CCL, \$12.95)

- **"Sex and the Marriage Covenant,"** by John F. Kippley (Ignatius, \$16.95)

- **"Theology of the Body,"** by

Pope John Paul II (Pauline Books & Media, \$24.95)

- **"Women Healed,"** edited by Jean Blair Packard (Pope Paul VI Institute, \$11.95)

Two papal encyclicals also provide insight into the topic:

- ***Humanae Vitae* ("Of Human Life"),** by Pope Paul VI

www.osv.com/morereading

- ***Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"),** by Pope John Paul II

www.osv.com/morereading

of the tube.

Theologians disagree over the morality of some other treatments about which the Church has not yet spoken.

One of these disputed techniques is gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT), in which an ovum from the wife is separated by an air bubble in a tube from semen of the husband that has been gathered after intercourse, and both are placed in the woman's fallopian tube for con-

ception to take place within her body.

Since there is theological disagreement over the morality of GIFT, some bishops do not permit GIFT in Catholic health institutions in their dioceses.

For further discussion about the morality of various infertility treatments, see the comments of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at www.osv.com/morereading.

What Church says about sterility and treatments

"Many researchers are engaged in the fight against sterility. While fully safeguarding the dignity of human procreation, some have achieved results which previously seemed unattainable. Scientists therefore are to be encouraged to continue their research with the aim of preventing the causes of sterility and of being able to remedy them so that sterile couples will be able to procreate in full respect for their own personal dignity and that of the child to be born." *Donum Vitae* ("The Gift of Life")

■ ■ ■
"On the part of the spouses, the desire for a child is natural: it expresses the vocation to fatherhood and motherhood inscribed in conjugal love. This desire can

be even stronger if the couple is affected by sterility which appears incurable. Nevertheless, marriage does not confer upon the spouses the right to have a child, but only the right to perform those natural acts which are per se ordered to procreation." *Donum Vitae*

■ ■ ■
"Research aimed at reducing human sterility is to be encouraged, on condition that it is placed 'at the service of the human person, of his inalienable rights, and his true and integral good according to the design and will of God.'" Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2375

■ ■ ■
"A child is not something owed to one, but is a gift. The 'supreme gift of marriage' is a human person. A child may not be considered a piece of property, an idea to

which an alleged 'right to a child' would lead. In this area, only the child possesses genuine rights: the right to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his parents, and 'the right to be respected as a person from the moment of his conception.'" Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2378

■ ■ ■
"The Gospel shows that physical sterility is not an absolute evil. Spouses who still suffer from infertility after exhausting legitimate medical procedures should unite themselves with the Lord's cross, the source of all spiritual fecundity. They can give expression to their generosity by adopting abandoned children or performing demanding services for others." Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2379

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Contact information

- Directory of diocesan IFP coordinators, on the website of the U.S. bishops: www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/coordinators.shtml

- The Pope Paul VI Institute, 6901 Mercy Road, Omaha, NE 68106, (402) 390-1600 for the clinic, (402) 390-1812 for the ethics center or www.popepaulvi.com

- FertilityCare Centers of America (Creighton Model fertilityCare System): www.fertilitycare.org

- NFP-only physicians: www.onemoresoul.com/nfp-ny.php

- Billings Ovulation Method of NFP: www.boma-usa.org

- The Couple to Couple League: www.ccli.org

- Family of the Americas Association: www.familyplanning.net

INTERVIEW

Center assists couples in conceiving naturally

Ethics director of Pope Paul VI Institute explains technology that identifies pathologies that can prevent pregnancy

The Pope Paul VI Institute in Omaha, Neb., is dedicated to studying, developing, practicing and promoting Church-approved methods of family planning and reproductive medicine.

Franciscan Sister of Christian Charity Renée Mirkes, who has a doctorate in theological ethics, is the institute's ethics director. She teaches the philosophical and theological foundations of the institute-developed Creighton Model FertilityCare System and NaPro Technology (NaPro stands for natural procreative technology).

She also lectures and writes on bioethics topics and works with people who have moral questions on marriage and family, sexuality, procreation and birth issues.

Sister Mirkes spoke with Our Sunday Visitor about her work in the field of family planning and reproductive medicine.

Our Sunday Visitor: Do you find that Catholics are well-informed on what the Church teaches about the morality of various treatments for infertility?

Sister Renée Mirkes: Couples struggling with infertility who consult with me fall roughly into three categories in terms of understanding Church teaching. The first group is composed of folks who know next to nothing about the specifics of what the Church teaches. Usually, they are nudged — sometimes by others, sometimes by their conscience — to investigate the morality of the particular technique they are contemplating.

The second group has some general idea about the immorality of technologies that involve conception in the lab like in vitro fertilization, but are confused about procedures that allow for conception in the woman's body, like GIFT (gamete intrafallopian tube transfer).

The third and smallest group of infertile couples is not only knowledgeable about what kind of reproductive techniques are moral, but they also know why. So they are committed to pur-

suing moral techniques and want to know whether they could be helped by the NPT approach.

OSV: Do you see any progress in developing and improving the moral methods of addressing infertility?

Sister Mirkes: High-tech reproductive technology gives every appearance of an unstoppable anti-life juggernaut. IVF, for instance, is now done in conjunction with pre-implantation genetic diagnosis. Only eggs that are genetically free from the defect being tested are brought to the final stages of fertilization, or only embryos that are free from the genes or gender that the couple is trying to avoid are transferred. The latter practice, of course, leads, first, to the practice of destroying any early IVF embryos with the "wrong" genes.

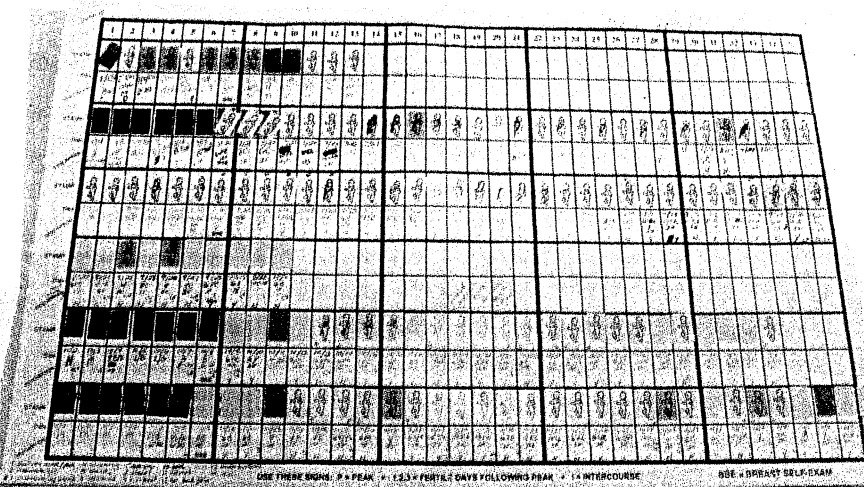
Second, it facilitates the production of so-called "savior siblings" who will supply a tissue match for an already existing sibling who suffers from a serious genetic disease.

OSV: Do you think there is a connection between society's acceptance of contraceptives and the acceptance of immoral reproductive technologies?

Sister Mirkes: I think it's important to underscore the connection between society's ready acceptance of contraception or sterilization as the first domino that triggers the collapse of a series of other dominoes, including that of so-called assisted reproductive technology (ART). Once society accepted sterilization or sex separated from procreation — that is, agreed that it is OK to have sex without babies — it didn't have a leg to stand on when it came to protesting ART, which separates sex from procreation by advocating having babies outside of sex.

OSV: Tell us about the different approach of Natural Procreative Technology.

Sister Mirkes: The NPT disease-based approach to infertility provides an elegant ethical and medical solution, which IVF fails to do. NPT treatment constitutes good ethics because it affords the infertile couple the chance of achieving a pregnancy naturally, that is, within their acts of sexual union. This is the only context, as the Church points out,



The Creighton Model FertilityCare System, developed by the Pope Paul VI Institute in Omaha, Neb., allows a woman to track her fertility with a chart like this one. OSV PHOTO

"I think it's important to underscore the connection between society's ready acceptance of contraception or sterilization as the first domino that triggers the collapse of a series of other dominoes."



— SISTER RENÉE MIRKES

that is worthy of the conception of a new human being.

By curing the pathologies preventing the couple from conceiving, NPT treatments unambiguously assist their act of sexual union to achieve its natural end, namely, pregnancy. This approach constitutes good medicine, excellent medicine, because the NPT approach to infertility addresses the etiology of the problem. It diagnoses the disease or diseases causing infertility and treats them so the couple is empowered to achieve pregnancy naturally.

OSV: When a couple contacts the Pope Paul VI Institute because of infertility, what is the sequence of events the institute would take them through?

Sister Mirkes: If the couple accesses NPT through the ethics

center, we first examine the morality of the treatment being considered by the couple and contrast it with the morality of NPT protocols for infertility. Then, if the couple decides to pursue our program, we suggest they contact a FertilityCare practitioner in their area and begin to chart their cycles.

At their first visit, Dr. Hilgers [Pope Paul VI Institute founder and director Dr. Thomas Hilgers] takes the infertile patient's history and determines her cycle category. The subsequent visits are taken up with reviewing her most current charts and ordering various tests for both husband and wife.

In the third visit, Dr. Hilgers shares the laparoscopy videotape with the couple, reviews all test results and gives a comprehensive case management review with NPT medical and surgical solutions in mind.

OSV: Are infertility problems usually with the woman?

Sister Mirkes: About 30 percent of the infertile couples who present at the institute have female-factor infertility, 30 percent have male-factor infertility and 40 percent present with a combination of both.

OSV: What is the institute's success rate in helping infertile couples?

Sister Mirkes: Not every couple gets pregnant as a result of coming to us, but the NPT approach to infertility is one-and-one-half to three-and-one-half times more effective than IVF in helping couples achieve a pregnancy.

OSV: What would you tell couples who cannot conceive, even after trying all the Church-approved technologies?

Sister Mirkes: I always advise infertile couples to follow the wisdom of *Donum Vitae* [the 1987 Instruction on respect for human life and the dignity of procreation, issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith]. If and when they have exhausted all the reasonable means of getting pregnant naturally, they should seriously consider whether God is calling them to bring their love to perfection by giving life to someone else's children. Adoption, foster care and Big Brother, Big Sister programs provide just such opportunities.