

Ethics & Medics

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE ON MORAL ISSUES IN THE HEALTH AND LIFE SCIENCES

Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe

Some things in life used to be more straightforward, as a person's genetic origin, for example. There was a time when children simply presumed, adoption or adultery notwithstanding, that the parents who brought them up were the parents who conceived them. In other words, titles like "Mom" and "Dad" were not merely sociological terms but terms that reassured children of their genetic origin.

Things are different now. Thanks to the "Stork Market," with its latest reproductive technologies and related developments like sperm banks and semen donation, the uncertainty lurking behind the jingle "mama's baby, papa's maybe" is resolved. The one thing that can be said with certainty about the child conceived with the help of donor sperm is that he is *not* papa's baby.

Every year there are 10 to 20 thousand conceptions by means of donor sperm in the U.S. Because this represents a quantum leap from the traditional notion of the transmission of life (i.e., a child conceived in and from marriage), it is only natural that thoughtful people question the wisdom and validity of non-traditional forms of human conception. Is this type of noncoital intervention really for our good, personally or societally? Is semen donation, even when altruistically motivated, a wholesome solution to the human problem of infertility? Does this mode of procreative activity conform to God's plan for the transmission of human life?

The Catholic Church has addressed and will continue to address these questions. The Magisterium has been solicitous to speak without ambiguity the truth concerning those things which contribute to the well-being of the human person and the human family. In the drama of our contemporary age, with consumerism, utilitarianism and value-free pragmatism dominating the stage, the Church wisely insists that a thorough consideration of the ethical question is crucial to the promotion of personal, familial and societal wholeness and flourishing.

The objective of this essay is to raise the ethical question in regard to the specific issue at hand: what is the Catholic moral evaluation of semen donation? To be more specific, what is the morality of a circumscribed case of semen donation, viz., a single male who donates semen to a sperm bank with the explicit intention of enabling the wife of an infertile couple to conceive a child. To arrive at an objective moral assessment of this question, the essential features of this specific case of semen donation will be contrasted with the Church's teaching on marriage and marital love with regard to three distinct but related topical components: the dignity of procreation, the unity of marriage and the intrinsic meaning of human sexuality.

The Dignity of Human Procreation

In the 1987 *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*, which was written specifically to evaluate the morality of noncoital reproduction, the Church reiterates the following norm: human procreation is deprived of its perfection when it is not desired as the fruit of a loving act of conjugal union (see II, B, 4a). Or, to state the principle in reverse, the manifestation of spousal love reaches its fullest expression in the openness to and procreation of new life.

This linchpin teaching of the *Instruction*, which is based on Sacred Scripture and confirmed in Tradition, is a recent example of the vigilance of the Magisterium to reiterate God's plan for the transmission of human life, viz., that new human life should be the fruit of an act of marital love. Life flows from love. This is the pattern of divine creation; this is the standard of marital relations. Precisely because husband and wife are empowered to image God in the act of procreation, the Church can speak about the *dignity* of human procreation. Therefore, anytime a married couple engages in a self-donative act of coition that is open to new life, anytime a couple is open to the possibility of bringing into being something new outside of what is already contained in their "two-in-one flesh," they mirror God's transcendent act of creation, His gratuitous act of love which brought into being a world "outside of" His Divine nature. In so doing, they realize and promote the dignity of human procreation.

Now we must ask: does an act of semen donation, motivated at best by the desire to help an infertile couple, preserve the moral unity of the procreative act and, therefore, promote the dignity of human procreation?

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Let us examine the evidence. While the semen donor may have a "desire" for procreation and, in fact, "donate" his gametic material toward that end, he does not intend that the completion of that act be brought about in a personal embrace of spousal love. Instead of depositing his ejaculate in the body of woman as part of a complete act of self-gift, he withholds his identity from the prospective mother, depositing his semen in a sterile receptacle which will be stored in a sperm bank and sold in the manner of a product, either "fresh or frozen," to a recipient. The God-intended interpersonal dimension of the act, the pattern of new human life flowing from an act of spousal love, is conspicuously missing in any act of semen donation, despite its altruistic motivation.

The Unity of Marriage

One of the characteristics of Christian marriage is its unity. A particular man and a particular woman pledge themselves *exclusively* to each other. In reference to the transmission of human life, this unity, or the monogamous character of Christian marriage, implies that a man and a woman promise to be mother and father only with and through each other.

So, how do the dynamics of semen donation relate to marital unity? Semen donation, by its very nature, denies the husband of the recipient couple his *exclusive* right to be father of his wife's children. The wife who conceives by means of donor sperm, on the other hand, violates her pledge to become mother *only* through her husband. Any child conceived by means of donor sperm is denied the right to be born in and from marriage. What's more, because of the insistence of most sperm banks regarding the confidentiality of donor records, the child is permanently barred from any knowledge of his paternal genetic origin. The child will know this much: he is *not* papa's baby.

The Intrinsic Meaning of Human Sexuality

On November 28, 1984, Pope John Paul II completed a four-year series of Wednesday audiences thematically centered on a theology of human love in God's plan. Throughout these lectures the Pope underscores the fundamental necessity of an integral or holistic vision of man or, as the Second Vatican Council puts it, the notion of man as *corpore et animus unus* (*Gaudium et Spes*, ch. 1, n. 14).

A human person is a body/soul unity. This truth has profound implications for the meaning of human sexuality. Once we posit the body/soul unity of the human person, we necessarily assert that the body and bodily actions cannot be seen as realities extrinsic to the person. I am my body; I am a body-person. Since my body is a constitutive part of my person, it follows logically that bodily actions, including sexual actions, are intrinsic to my person. They are not "things" done outside of myself bearing no rela-

tion to my person or moral character; they arise from within me and are intended to reveal my personhood and my dignity as a rational human being.

The Pope underscores the intrinsicality of human sexuality in another way. He makes frequent reference to the "language of the body." The implication is, of course, that our bodies and our sexual activity "speak" or communicate something about man's personal nature. Our male or female bodies tell us no one of us represents the whole of humanity; we are destined for completion. Thus, whenever a husband and wife engage in a loving act of marital intercourse, they reveal the God-given nuptial meaning of the body, that male and female are maritally oriented. The "two-in-one flesh" of our first parents is the powerful Scriptural image used to illustrate this truth.

Does semen donation speak a language compatible with this intrinsic vision of human sexuality? Again, let us look at the evidence. An act of semen donation suggests that male reproductive cells can be given away in an objective way, as if things sexual can be separated from their subjective or personal meaning. The sperm donor is reduced to an object; he becomes a source for a product. The act defines him not as someone to be loved, to be completed by some other, but as someone to be used for something that he can produce—the male gamete. The language of semen donation is not a personalized expression but a depersonalized one which reflects the consumerist principle of supply and demand. Instead of entering into the "two-in-one-flesh" of marital union, the sperm donor engages in an act which only mimics the male's role in human procreation and parenthood.

Conclusion

We could say that human sexuality is God's "invention." And, like all inventions, it is accompanied by "instructions for use" which, wisely enough, are compiled by the Inventor Himself. Following the "instructions" guarantees that the created entity will function as it was intended. When God created human persons as male and female, He ordered human sexual activity to particular ends; He built into human sexuality an inherent meaning. We, human creatures that we are, cannot change that meaning; that is a "God-given." However, we can disregard the "instructions;" we can deny or deviate from the meaning and significance of our sexuality. And, to the point of our discussion, this is precisely what the act of semen donation does. Objectively considered, semen donation denies the dignity of procreation, fractures the unity of marriage and nullifies the intrinsic meaning of human sexuality.

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CENTER NEWS

Sister Renée Mirkes, a Franciscan sister of Christian Charity (Manitowoc, Wisconsin), joins the Pope John Center's staff as a Pope John Center Research Fellow for the 1988-89 season. She has recently received her master's degree in theology, with a concentration in moral theology, from the University of St. Thomas (Houston, Texas). Her acquired skills and natural talents will now be put to use to assist Father Albert in our Houston office. Sister Renée's projects will involve editing and writing as well as researching the Catholic moral position vis-a-vis selected questions and issues of medical ethics. We welcome Sister aboard and wish her God speed.