

Moving Spirit

Church Takes Stand on In Vitro Fertilization

**Rabbi Marc Gellman and
Monsignor Thomas Hartman**
Contributing Columnist

Q: What are the Catholic Church's views on in vitro fertilization? I have two beautiful grandchildren conceived in this manner. My daughter was in the process of registering my grandson for religious instruction. But now we've heard that the Church does not view in vitro as acceptable. My daughter is confused and uncertain if she'll continue raising her children in the Catholic faith.

A: The Church believes that children should be the result of the natural procreative act of human intercourse between a husband and wife. IVF is not a natural act because the child is conceived outside the womb and in many cases the wife's egg is not fertilized with her husband's sperm.

Also, many fertilized eggs are destroyed in this process and this is of grave moral concern to the Catholic Church and to others in the pro-life movement who do not consider fertilized ova as just mere tissue.

However, the status of children conceived through IVF is not an issue. As long as they are baptized, they are kosher Catholics (to mix metaphors!). Some Catholic theologians have tried to view the realm of assisted reproductive technology with the eye and the heart to help couples who want their own children.

There are two techniques that may possibly be acceptable to the Church. The first is called GIFT, or gamete intrafallopian transfer. Using this technique, a woman's eggs are combined with her husband's sperm in a dish in a lab, then surgically injected into the wife's fallopian tubes using a laparoscope (a fiber-thin tube). Fertilization occurs inside the woman's body and the embryo implants naturally.

The other possibly acceptable technique is called ZIFT, or zygote intrafallopian transfer. As with GIFT, a woman's eggs are mixed with her husband's sperm in a dish in a lab, then surgically placed in the wife's fallopian tubes. However, as with IVF, the doctor waits until fertilization occurs before placing the embryos into the woman (unlike GIFT).

As with all these new assisted reproductive technologies, you need to consult a priest who is knowledgeable in the intricacies of both biology and theology.

Q: We always read your column and a recent question about funeral arrangements got us wondering. We've been married 28 years. My husband is Jewish and I am Catholic. Father Tom (Hartman) married us.

We agreed to raise our children Catholic, as required in order to be married in the Catholic Church. We also had a rabbi at the ceremony. Ours has been a wonderful marriage and we have both come to know and respect each other's religions and families.

It doesn't seem fair to us that we would be required to be buried in separate cemeteries, just based on our religious backgrounds. What about the fact that we have created a family in which our children know Both religions? Even though they were raised Catholic, they have participated in many seders and other Jewish ceremonies. Their aunts, uncles and cousins are Jewish.

Is there a procedure we must follow to get permission to be buried together so that our family is not broken up in death? We're hoping to live long lives, but you never know.

A: The rules of Jewish cemeteries specify that you must be Jewish to be buried there. Many interfaith families cannot take communion together, but this does not break up the family. The choice of burial sites need not break up the family, either.

The two of you could find a non-sectarian cemetery where you could be buried together. However, if, God forbid, your husband were then to die, and you remarried, he would be stuck in non-consecrated ground. If you were to bury him in a Jewish cemetery and you did not remarry, you could not be buried in the same cemetery.

Death-bed conversions sometimes solve this agonizing problem, but just as you have the integrity of your beliefs, organized religions have the integrity of theirs. Not everything we want from them can be given, and this is the result of the choices we freely make and the rules they are charged with preserving.

Q: I believe we should tithe but my wife doesn't. In the last 20 years, since we started attending church, our faith has grown and our lives have been richly blessed. But several years ago, when I mentioned that I thought it was time to honor God with the first fruits of our labor, my wife refused. She was so adamant about this that she said if I pushed it, I'd be risking our marriage.

This came as a complete shock to me and she could not explain other than to say that she thought what we gave was plenty. Growing up, she didn't have much and her family never attended church or professed any faith.

I don't think she grasps that fact that all we have is by the grace of God, but she refuses to discuss this issue. Since the confrontation, we've endured a number of financial setbacks with extensive house and car repairs, so I don't dare bring up the topic again now (even though I believe we should still tithe).

I'm more concerned that my wife's relationship with God has stopped growing since our argument. She tells me I'm in a different place spiritually than she is, and she doesn't want to be there. How do I honor both God and my wife?

A: Listen carefully. You honor God by honoring your wife. We appreciate the fact that the two of you are in different places regarding how much money to give to charity. This is a real spiritual difference but hardly an insurmountable one.

We suggest you encourage your wife to join you in non-monetary tithing, by which we mean the giving of 10 percent of your time to charitable endeavors. Perhaps you could both volunteer in a soup kitchen, help build a house for the poor, or do any one of a thousand things to help make the world a little better.

Giving money away is a good thing but it's not the only way to tithe. Perhaps, by giving in a new way, you can help your wife gently reach for a higher rung on the ladder of goodness.

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