

# Children Are Not Products

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Spirit & Life with Fr. Boquet

An article in The Atlantic a few days ago had quite the eye-catching headline: “[The Anti-Abortion Activists Who Want to Stop People from Having Kids.](#)”

Now, as someone who has worked in the pro-life movement for decades, I can’t say that I’ve ever come across activists who are especially interested in preventing couples from having children. However, a quick scan of the article revealed that, as you might expect, the headline is an egregious instance of biased editorializing. The article, as it turns out, was about the pro-life movement’s moral concerns with the practice of in vitro fertilization (IVF).

At some point, someone must have complained to The Atlantic about their inaccurate (and insulting) headline, because when I revisited the article a couple days later, the headline had been changed to the slightly less egregious, but still misleading, “Who Should Get to Have Kids.” Once again, this headline suggests that the argument over the ethics of IVF has to do with whether or not certain people will be “permitted” to have children.

## Widespread Confusion on IVF

While even the updated headline is a totally unfair framing of this complex and important issue, the article does draw attention to one important fact: a lot of people are extremely confused about the topic of IVF. In particular, a lot of people are confused as to why the pro-life movement and the Catholic Church oppose IVF.

This confusion became a matter of national interest recently. Former President Donald Trump made the surprise announcement that if he became president again, he intended either to force insurance companies to pay for IVF or to have the government itself pay for the expensive procedure.

As the article in The Atlantic notes, many [pro-life activists were horrified](#) by this announcement and [publicly said so](#). However, as The Atlantic article also notes, this opposition by pro-life activists has left quite a few people confused.

“After all,” such people will say, “isn’t it the case that IVF helps infertile couples to have children? Isn’t that one of the most ‘pro-life’ things imaginable? And besides, aren’t you the same people who are concerned about the low birth rates? Shouldn’t you be celebrating the fact that couples who couldn’t otherwise have children are able to do so thanks to IVF?” In a way, it is easy to see why some people might think this way. Given how common IVF has become, a lot of people now know, or at least have heard of, some couple who is thrilled to be welcoming a new child, often after years of heart-breaking struggles with infertility. At an emotional level, it’s understandable that someone with a superficial understanding of the issues at stake might think that by opposing IVF, the pro-life movement is somehow violating its fundamental stance of celebrating the miracle of human life.

## IVF and the Destruction of Life

The key words in the previous sentences are “with a superficial understanding.”

The headline of The Atlantic’s article was content to convey the notion that the pro-life movement’s opposition to IVF is motivated by blind prejudice,

or that in opposing IVF the pro-life movement is somehow taking to itself the power of determining who “gets” to have children.

The reality couldn’t be any further from the truth. While the IVF issue is complex, the pro-life movement’s opposition to IVF is, in one respect, extremely simple. First, IVF does harm to the marital union and to the couple themselves. It goes against God’s plan for the way children are to be conceived—exclusively through the loving embrace of a husband and wife, to be “begotten, not made.” Instead of assisting the martial act to achieve its natural end, in IVF, doctors and technicians take the place of the spouses to bring about a life. They achieve pregnancy by actions performed in a laboratory, in a petri dish, where the reproductive cells (sperm and egg) of the husband and wife (or from a donor) are combined.

Human life begins at conception, the moment a male sperm cell fertilizes a female egg cell, and is sacred, bearing the image and likeness of God. From that moment onwards, what exists is a genetically distinct, living human being, who is equal in dignity to their parents and is always to be respected. Never is a human being to be used as a means to an end. Thus, a second reason for the pro-life movement’s opposition to IVF is that it leads to the death of embryonic human beings who, for whatever reason, are not desired after they have been engendered, often subjected to the arbitrary choices of those who have brought them into being.

Given this, the Church and the pro-life movement have staked out the scientifically and ethically consistent view that, from the moment of conception onwards, a human being should be treated with the highest degree of respect and never intentionally killed or treated in a reckless fashion that could produce its death.

The two fundamental problems with IVF are 1), that it does harm to the marital union and to the spouses themselves and 2), it destroys human beings and/or treats them recklessly in such a way that their destruction is foreseeable.

The reality is that, in most IVF procedures, more human embryos are created than will be implanted in the womb of the mother. The “excess” embryos are then either destroyed or are frozen in an embryo bank for an indefinite period of time, with their eventual destruction likely.

Also extremely relevant here is the extremely close connection between IVF and elective abortion. It is a common practice to maximize the “success” of an IVF procedure, in order to save money, by implanting multiple embryos in a woman’s womb at the same time. However, in cases where multiple of these embryos “take,” it is common for couples to “selectively reduce” (i.e., abort) the “unwanted” embryos.

To support IVF, therefore, is to support an industry that harms married couples and destroys countless millions of embryonic human beings worldwide, and that is intimately connected to the abortion industry.

## IVF and the Commodification of Life

However, even were it the case that IVF never led to the destruction of a human embryo (which is most manifestly not the case), there would still be grave ethical concerns with the practice.

The Catholic Church, in Her wisdom, has strenuously insisted on the fact that human reproduction should always take place via the natural sexual union of a husband and a wife (i.e., the conjugal act), and that anything that violates this order of things is morally wrong.

This seems hardline to our permissive age. However, there are a host of reasons that the Church teaches this, not least of which is that this teaching erects a strong protective wall around the family, which is the bedrock of any healthy civilization. Promote reproduction in any other context, and the institution of the family itself inevitably is weakened.

Equally important is the way that IVF attacks the sanctity of human life by treating human life as a *commodity* to be bought and sold. The Catholic

bioethicist Dr. John Haas explains this with admirable clarity in an article published on the website of the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) (USCCB). As he writes,

Human beings bear the image and likeness of God. They are to be revered as sacred. Never are they to be used as a means to an end, not even to satisfy the deepest wishes of an infertile couple. Husbands and wives “make love,” they do not “make babies.” They give expression to their love for one another, and a child may or may not be engendered by that act of love. The marital act is not a manufacturing process, and children are not products. Like the Son of God himself, we are the kind of beings who are “begotten, not made” and, therefore, of equal status and dignity with our parents.

Here, Dr. Haas points to the Vatican document [Donum vitae](#), which points to the common, and indeed logical, connection between IVF and abortion. As *Donum vitae* notes, “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.”

Dr. Haas goes on to note that, “The dehumanizing aspects of some of these procedures is evident in the very language associated with them. There is the ‘reproductive technology industry.’ Children are called the ‘products’ of conception. Inherent in IVF is the treatment of children, in their very coming into being, as less than human beings.”

Once life is treated as a product to be bought and sold, there seems to be no ethical limits on what becomes acceptable. The author of *The Atlantic* article seems horrified that pro-life activists are opposed to the idea that homosexual couples can simply purchase a child. And yet, why shouldn’t we be disturbed that it is now possible to deliberately deprive a child of knowing one or both of his or her biological parents and instead to purchase a child as if it is a “right”?

In the end, once we eradicate the idea that a human child should only be the fruit of the natural, loving union of a husband and wife, there seems to be no limit to what becomes acceptable. Take, for instance, this article in *The Daily Mail* exposing the fact that [a significant number of older men](#)

have purchased children using IVF and a surrogate, and that no one is looking into the question of why they would want to do so, and who they are?

## Hold Fast to the Truth

If we are going to be honest, we have to admit that the Church and the pro-life movement have largely lost the educational battle when it comes to IVF. A Pew Poll from earlier this year found that a full 70% of Americans say that access to IVF is a good thing, an additional 22% say that they aren't sure, and only 8% say that it is a bad thing.

With public support that strong, it's not hard to see why any politician in a modern Western democracy would want to come out in support of public funding for IVF.

In the face of such numbers, it can be easy to despair of making any progress on the issue. And yet, the truth remains the truth. And the truth is never a matter of public polls. If that were the case, the Church would have altered a huge number of its teachings centuries ago!

If one accepts the objective scientific fact that human life begins at conception, there can only be something morally horrific in the fact that our age has overwhelmingly accepted a practice that produces embryos on an industrial scale within labs, with the full knowledge that a large percentage of these will be destroyed or frozen indefinitely in suspended animation.

As the Church is always at great pains to emphasize, in no way does its opposition to IVF mean that it casts any judgment on the value of children conceived through IVF. The child is as valuable and has equal dignity as any other human. And the joy of parents who have conceived using IVF is clearly warranted and good in itself.

However, ethicists have been at pains to point out for ages that evil means cannot be used to obtain a good outcome. IVF is not a morally neutral technology. It inserts itself into the most intimate parts of the family and changes the way we think about the value and sanctity of human life.

Every technology has an inner logic that must be paid attention to. The inner logic of IVF is such that it reduces the value of the family and commodifies human life. The consequences of this shift are much more far-reaching, and much more pernicious, than most people recognize.

The Church, however, saw this coming, and warned us of the consequences. As Catholics we should be proud of the wisdom of our Church and feel confident in boldly proclaiming the truth—always in a spirit of love and compassion, but fearlessly and without apology.