

The Church Is Not Backward, But Forward

by Rebecca Taylor

It is as inevitable as the passing of time. Once there is a new pope, the world begins to wonder when the Catholic Church is going to leave its "medieval thinking" behind and join the "modern" age. It is the 21st century after all, and the Church needs to stop being so "backward." I am a cradle Catholic, and, when I was young, I subconsciously believed that the Church was "behind the times" and "out of touch." As I began my career and worked in cutting-edge biotech laboratories, there was always a nagging question: How can my Church, so rooted in the past, have something relevant to say about modern technologies like stem-cell research, cloning and genetic engineering that are coming in the future? Then I began researching these technologies and discovered something that changed the way I viewed my Church and my faith. Elbow deep in the latest biotechnology news, I discovered that the Church was far from backward, out of touch and irrelevant. It is the most forward-thinking institution I have ever encountered — and more relevant today than ever.

In 1968, *Humanae Vitae* (On the Regulation of Birth) instructed the faithful on the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital union. This document, written at a time when such things as genetic engineering and cloning were only in the realm of fiction, warned us of the dangers of separating the procreative and the unitive, saying that to do so would lead to the "lowering of moral standards." A document not simply about birth control, *Humanae Vitae* also admonished: "Consequently, unless we are willing that the responsibility of procreating life should be left to the arbitrary decision of men, we must accept that there are certain limits, beyond which it is wrong to go, to the power of man over his own body and its natural functions — limits, let it be said, which no one, whether as a private individual or as a public authority, can lawfully exceed. These limits are expressly imposed because of the reverence due to the whole human organism and its natural functions" (21).

Ten years later, the separation of the procreative and the unitive aspects of human sexuality were irrevocably severed with the birth of Louise Brown. Brown was the first baby born from in vitro fertilization (IVF). Sexual intercourse was completely removed from her conception. Artificial birth control had given society sex without babies. IVF had given us babies without sex. When Louise was born, I was only 5 years old. I can imagine that many Catholics thought that IVF was simply about giving infertile couples the chance to have a family together and that Church teaching against IVF was "out of touch." I can imagine the sentiment because that is largely the sentiment that exists today. Unfortunately, society, and many Catholics along with it, was not listening to the wisdom of Church teaching. This teaching was not a punishment for the infertile, but instead an affirmation of the dignity inherent in each and every human being.

The Church finds IVF morally wrong for many reasons (see *Donum Vitae*), among them that we all deserve the best possible start in life. We all deserve to be created out of an act of love between our parents and begin our lives in the best, most loving place on earth, our mother's womb. The Church warned us that severing the natural ties between sex and procreation would turn our own offspring into objects instead of the God-given gifts that they are. The Church told us that IVF was an ethical nightmare. If only we as a society had listened. Back in the 1970s, no one could imagine that IVF would become human manufacturing on an industrial scale, complete with tracking and "quality control." The enormity of human lives created and lost is staggering. Numbers recently released by the U.K.'s Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority (HFEA), which has been keeping records on IVF since 1991, are horrifying. Of the 3 million-plus embryos created in the U.K. with IVF, more than half — about 1.7 million — have been discarded. The numbers are likely similar elsewhere, meaning that IVF has become a manufacturing process with little regard for the massive loss of human life involved.

HFEA numbers also reveal that, for every live birth through IVF, as many as 30 embryos are created. With estimates now that as many as 5 million IVF children worldwide have been born, it may mean that as many as 150 million lives have been created by IVF. Many of those have been lost, discarded or destroyed by research. Some of those 150 million human lives are still on ice waiting for a chance to finish their lives. Many will die waiting. And it is not just the numbers. Forty years ago, no one could have envisioned we would be reading news stories about couples shipping their frozen embryos by FedEx to India to be carried by a surrogate, with the baby picked up nine months later like a special-order sports car. Or stories about young, fertile couples creating multiple offspring with IVF and freezing them as "insurance" against future infertility. (Meanwhile, the children wait on ice for their parents to be "ready" for a family.)

No one could have fathomed that enterprising fertility doctors would create embryos in bulk to be sold at a "discount" to budget-conscious couples. And no one could have imagined that abortion would become the "fail-safe" for IVF that works too well. With IVF practitioners trying to increase success rates, often, many more embryos are transferred than a woman can safely carry to term. As a result, "selective reduction" was developed. Selective reduction is a euphemism for the aborting of one or more multiple fetuses by a lethal injection, leaving the lucky former twin or triplet alive. Recently, a woman who used IVF to conceive twins with donor gametes recounted her decision to kill one of her twins to *The New York Times*. She articulated what the Church has always said about technologies like IVF when she admitted:

If I had conceived these twins naturally, I wouldn't have reduced this pregnancy, because you feel like if there's a natural order, then you don't want to disturb it. But we created this child in such an artificial manner — in a test tube, choosing an egg donor, having the embryo placed in me — and, somehow, making a decision about how many to carry seemed to be just another choice. The pregnancy was all so consumerish to begin with, and this became yet another thing we could control.

Clearly, IVF has turned procreation into a consumer-driven manufacturing enterprise, with the millions of offspring produced treated as commodities instead of the precious gifts they truly are. But most people are unaware of how IVF has gone even further and catapulted us into the science-fiction world of genetically engineered children, human cloning and even animal-human hybrids. Last year, scientists in Oregon announced they created embryos with three genetic parents using a genetically manipulated egg in the IVF process. They want permission to transfer these genetically engineered embryos to women to create genetically modified children. This technique, made possible by IVF, may open the door to other genetic modifications in the next generation.

With all of those "leftover" IVF embryos in the deep freeze all over the world, scientists began to see these little lives as treasure troves of stem cells. In the early 2000s, the intense debates over embryonic stem cells raged in earnest. But researchers realized that if they could make embryos with the genetic makeup of a patient that would be even better than getting stem cells from destroying existing IVF embryos. Scientists began cloning human embryos in the quest for "patient-specific" embryonic stem cells. Not surprisingly, the eggs and expertise needed for the cloning technique came from IVF clinics. The head of the San Diego company that claimed to be the first to successfully clone a human embryo is also a noted IVF doctor.

Cloning scientists quickly realized that the human eggs needed in large amounts for the inefficient cloning process were too expensive and too difficult to get. They began to clone human embryos with cow, rabbit and mouse eggs to see if these animal eggs could be used instead to successfully clone human embryos for research. In 2009, a Massachusetts company published the results of its attempt at creating human-animal hybrid embryos — complete with pictures. These horrific experiments, previously only performed on Dr. Moreau's fictional island, went largely unnoticed by the public. This is where my epiphany occurred: As I stared at the pictures of embryos labeled "human/bovine," "human/mouse" and "human/rabbit," a righteous indignation built up inside of me. None of this would have been possible if society had listened to the Church. I realized with perfect clarity that only the Catholic Church understood the far-reaching moral ramifications of separating procreation from sex. The human/bovine embryos that no one in the 1960s could possibly have envisioned were now a reality — the result of leaving procreation to the "arbitrary decision of men" and ignoring the "reverence due to the whole human organism and its natural functions."

I shudder to think of the evils that we will encounter if people continue to ignore the Church's warning about same-sex "marriage" and human genetic enhancements. The Church does not need to become more "modern." These days, "modern" means only a short-sighted acceptance of the latest fad or technology. The Church is already thinking well into the future, with insight farther than any single mind can fathom. The Church, more relevant today than ever, is not "backward." Instead, it is the most forward-thinking institution on earth. It is time to listen.

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Rebecca Taylor is a clinical laboratory specialist in molecular biology. She writes about bioethics on her blog *Mary Meets Dolly*.

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