

# Faith and Infertility

BY MAURA A. RYAN

**Facing the fact that one will never bear children is not just an experience of profound disappointment, but a kind of “dying,” a loss of a longed-for relationship. Can we develop a Christian spirituality for growth through infertility? What would it mean to see worship as a context for acquiring the grace to live into involuntary childlessness with hope and dignity?**

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I recall hearing the influential Jesuit moral theologian Richard McCormick say more than once that the best reason to ban reproductive cloning was that there were no good reasons to do it. By the time of McCormick’s death in 2000, Chicago entrepreneur Richard Seed had already announced his intentions to found a cloning clinic and the international debate over whether cloning should be permitted in any form loomed on the horizon.

Always a pastor, McCormick considered deeply the arguments marshaled by supporters in the name of compassion: reproductive cloning would extend the possibilities for overcoming infertility; allow gay and lesbian partners to have a genetically-related child; turn back the clock on aging; and make it possible for parents who suffered the loss of a child to see that child, in some measure, “raised from the dead.” Yet, he would remind us, no technology is an unqualified good or suffering an absolute evil; “good reasons” for developing new reproductive technologies must acknowledge our creaturely status, weigh the social and individual risks against the benefits and, especially where fundamental human practices such as parenthood are threatened with radical reinterpretation, consider alternatives.

Although McCormick was not opposed to in vitro fertilization, he was never persuaded that the losses experienced because of infertility (or even the suffering occasioned by the loss of a child) outweighed the significance of reproduction as an “enfleshed partnership” between husband and wife nor the duty of science and public policy to respect certain “natural” boundaries of human agency. While I don’t remember him addressing directly the use of cloning to “replace” a deceased child, I suspect that he would have echoed bioethicist Thomas Murray in cautioning against the illusion that technology can erase grief: “Life flows in only one direction. Science can’t reverse the steam or reincarnate the dead.”<sup>1</sup>

I think that McCormick was right about reproductive cloning. Even if the serious safety concerns that currently attend cloning technologies could be overcome, it is not obvious that the ends served by reproductive cloning justify the potential social and individual costs of ushering in the practice of asexual reproduction. Widespread international resistance to reproductive cloning signals a deep and healthy concern that the advent of cloning is not simply an incremental addition to the arsenal of technologies for serving the desire to have a child, but a shift in our way of understanding the nature of reproduction that touches the very foundations of respect for human dignity.

However, there remains the question of how to take seriously the intense desire for a child that helps to drive the development of reproductive technologies and fuels the willingness of individuals, especially women, to assume great physical, relational, and economic burdens for an outside chance of a successful delivery. If we are to say that there are limits to what ought to be sanctioned in the pursuit of parenthood (either limits to the sort of technologies we allow or limits to the medical resources we commit to addressing infertility) how are we to respond to the very real losses experienced by those who are infertile or unable to carry a child to term?

Facing the fact that one will never conceive or bear children is not just an experience of profound disappointment. Rather, those who have gone through it describe it as a kind of “dying,” a loss of both an envisioned future and a possible self, a potential role and a longed-for relationship. Infertility is rarely recognized as a personal crisis, however, and even when it is, it is treated largely as a medical or social crisis. It is seldom recognized as a spiritual crisis, a deep confrontation of meaning and belief. Yet, it is precisely when infertility is acknowledged as a question to one’s very understanding of oneself and one’s place in the universe that the pain and disappointment of infertility can become an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth. Indeed, it is only when infertility is seen as a spiritual crisis that it can initiate a *spiritual quest*, an occasion for “a blossoming of self far more rewarding than mere endurance.”<sup>2</sup> In the same way, it is

when the threat to the integrity of the self (posed by a diagnosis of infertility) is addressed that it becomes possible to say no to medical interventions that have become pointless or destructive to persons or relationships, and to explore other alternatives such as adoption in a healthy way.

How might we develop a Christian spirituality for growth or transcendence through infertility? What theological and liturgical resources exist for helping those who struggle with infertility to learn as well as to share the lessons it teaches about finitude and humility? What would it mean to see the liturgical and pastoral life of the churches as a context for acquiring the grace to live into involuntary childlessness with hope and dignity?

### **MIXED MESSAGES AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES**

There are many references to infertility in Scripture.<sup>3</sup> The birth of a son to a long-infertile or “barren” wife is a familiar symbol of God’s favor. Isaac is born to Abraham, signifying both Abraham’s reward for his fidelity and Yahweh’s guarantee of a viable future for Israel. Through the child, the covenant is established; Sarah (at the biblical age of ninety) becomes not only an improbable mother, but the “mother of nations” (Genesis 17:15-21). In turn, the Lord grants Isaac’s prayer and the barren Rebekah gives birth to Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:21). Vowing to dedicate her child to God if only God would grant her a son, Hannah is finally “remembered,” and she bears Samuel (1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20). Like Abraham and Sarah, the righteous Zechariah and Elizabeth of the New Testament, well beyond childbearing years, are sent a son who is to be “great in the sight of the Lord,” whose birth in joy and wonder is a foretaste of the redemptive events to come (Luke 1:5-25). The long-awaited child, born to this woman now at the “end” of her life, is testimony indeed that “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:36-37).

Although barrenness plays many different roles in biblical texts—sometimes standing as a sign of God’s judgment, sometimes a pretext for miraculous intervention (as in the life-long infertility of Sarah and Elizabeth)—the individual or personal suffering associated with barrenness is clearly visible. Infertility is linked to illness and famine in the promises of Sinai: “You shall worship the LORD your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you. No one shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days” (Exodus 23:25-26). The barren woman is an object of pity, because the inability to

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conceive and bear children, and in particular, to bear sons, is assumed to lie with her. We get glimpses of the pain of infertility in Rachel's cry to Jacob: "Give me children, or I shall die!" (Genesis 30:1); in Issac's plea to Yahweh on behalf of his wife (Genesis 25:21); and in the psalmist's identification of the barren woman with the poorest of the poor: "[Yahweh] raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make

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them sit with princes.... He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children" (Psalm 113:7-8a, 9a).

The most poignant glimpse is the picture of Hannah in the first book of Samuel. The second wife of Elkanah, she is taunted, year after year, by her rival because "the LORD had

closed her womb" (1 Samuel 1:6). Rising in the temple, she prays to Yahweh "in the bitterness of her soul": "O Lord of Hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head" (1 Samuel 1:11). So great is her distress that she is mistaken by the priest Eli for drunk.

It would seem that religious traditions shaped by sacred texts so rich in the imagery of fertility and infertility would provide a natural context in which to come to terms with the suffering occasioned by infertility. But Arthur Greil's study of American infertile couples showed instead that it is extremely difficult for believers to draw on their religious faith in trying to make sense of infertility. Some of the couples he interviewed reported drawing strength from the social relationships they enjoyed within their faith communities, but they were far outnumbered by those couples who viewed religious affiliation as one more obstacle to be overcome in their attempt to deal with their infertility. Overall, he concluded, "religion [did] not provide most couples...with resources upon which they can call to explain to themselves their experience of suffering."<sup>4</sup>

Why do many Christians who are dealing with infertility have difficulty finding solace and usable wisdom in religion? One reason is that for all its relative visibility in the Bible, infertility is an invisible reality in most congregations. I have attended countless liturgical celebrations on Mother's Day, Christmas, and the Feast of the Holy Family in my own Roman Catholic community. I cannot recall a single time in which, during these key

celebrations of parenthood and rededication of family life, the pain of *longing for* parenthood was acknowledged liturgically alongside the joy and struggles of its realization.

Another reason why religion can be more of an obstacle than a pathway to healing for the infertile is the ambiguous and somewhat contradictory character of fertility in religious literature. In the Roman Catholic tradition, for example, procreation is treated as one of the primary goods of marriage. The tradition recognizes what many infertile couples come to believe passionately: that reproduction “completes” or “embodies” an intimate relationship. To bring forth a child who is “flesh of our flesh” symbolizes the joining of their separate lives in a concrete and living way. The act of reproducing moves the relationship to a new level, not only symbolically but practically, as the couple makes the transition to an all-encompassing, necessarily responsible or outwardly-focused intimacy. Despite longstanding disagreements about the ethics of contraception, it is nonetheless assumed in Catholic sexual ethics that reproduction is a primary, “essential” end of sexual expression and that the transmission of life is a central dimension of the vocation of marriage. Parenting is the most celebrated channel through which lay Catholics participate in the ministry of the church. Yet, the inability to have children is readily dismissed as merely a frustrated desire, easily redirected toward adoption or other forms of interaction with children. The problem for infertile believers is not in the suggestion that the longing for children of one’s own can be tapped as an energy for service or fulfilled through adoption. It is in the dissonance between the high value placed on biological reproduction as a gift from God and the assumption that, being surrounded by and having taken in this interpretation of its significance, the infertile can simply reinterpret it.

Yet another reason why, for many people, religion provides little comfort in the journey through infertility is suggested in the brief survey of biblical references to barrenness above. The interwoven symbolisms of judgment, blessing, and mystery yield a confusing answer to the suffering occasioned by infertility. Infertile women, in particular, are tempted to blame themselves because of earlier failures of judgment or volition, or a previous short-sightedness or youthful self-centeredness, for their present inability to conceive or bear a child; some believe that they are being punished by God for their earlier ambivalence about having children. But efforts to levy blame (even self-blame) for conditions such as infertility are ultimately as unsatisfying as they are understandable. The nightly news is full of accounts of unwanted and badly cared for children, born to seemingly “undeserving” mothers and fathers. How is it that these infertile women and men, who understand as well as anyone how precious is the life of a child, are pointedly passed over when the blessing of children is elsewhere so freely and apparently indiscriminately bestowed? What exactly could they have done that warrants such a devastating punishment?

At the same time, to conclude that there is no theological answer for infertility, that we simply must regard it as a mystery to be lived obediently, is not much more helpful. Indeed, such an answer to suffering may play directly into the hands of contemporary “medical” or “scientific” theodicies. From the standpoint of reproductive medicine, impaired reproduction is not a mystery to be pondered but a technical problem in need of a technical solution. In such circumstances, argues Greil,

traditional theodicies which counsel stoicism in the face of the inevitable [or unexplainable] may lose ground to the impatient theodicy implied by the medical model. According to the medical model, suffering is not something to be understood but rather something to be conquered. Explanations that rely on such concepts as ‘God’s will’ cannot be convincing when we believe as strongly as we do in the human ability to pull ourselves out of our condition through technical knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

The difficulties infertile believers encounter in drawing a usable or healing wisdom from faith traditions stem both from how we treat infertility within communities of faith and the way we talk about infertility in theological terms. Constructing a healing spirituality, therefore, includes practical or pastoral strategies as well as theological reconstruction.

#### **CREATING A CONTEXT**

If infertile believers find religious services “among the most painful times in their week”<sup>6</sup> in large part because they feel invisible or marginalized within faith communities that place a great deal of emphasis on families and family life, much could be done to create opportunities for healing simply by “attending to the moment.” With sensitivity on the part of the celebrants, the same liturgical events that we now use for celebrating and supporting families could become opportunities for making the invisible struggle of the infertile visible. By including a prayer for all those who want to be mothers or fathers and are experiencing difficulty, for example, the liturgical celebrations of Mother’s and Father’s Day could be both a “teachable moment” for the congregation and an opportunity for the expression of solidarity.<sup>7</sup> Simply by acknowledging the varied experiences of family present in any faith community, our observances of the feast of the Holy Family could become occasions for inviting in those who feel on the margins rather than merely retracing the lines of inclusion and exclusion. Attention to the language and symbols we use in the public rituals and sermons marking religiously important moments of family life, such as baptisms, first communions, and confirmations, and an effort to listen from the perspective of those who are currently struggling with some aspect of family could go far in easing the pain of those who experience those events as excruciating.



It is also possible to create moments for reaching out to the infertile within the liturgical year. The Cedar Park Assemblies of God Church in Bothell, Washington, sets aside Presentation Sunday each year for a special blessing for infertile couples. In 1998, twenty parishes in Bothell joined Cedar Park in inviting those who were suffering infertility or pregnancy loss to come together to pray and to experience the support of the community.<sup>8</sup> Widely publicized, Presentation Sunday calls attention to the reality of infertility within congregations and gives public witness to the possibilities for encountering infertility as a spiritual journey. Although many people come to such a service to pray for a miracle, it also provides a context for exploring the challenge of living faithfully in the absence of miracles.

#### **FROM SPIRITUAL CRISIS TO SPIRITUAL QUEST**

Jan Rehner argues that healing from infertility begins with a reconception of the self: "There needs to be, in short, a new story, the creation of an alternate vision of self that is not a negation, but a statement of the wholeness and fulfillment of other equally viable possibilities."<sup>9</sup> This "new naming" of the self is not a denial of infertility, nor is it merely a matter of throwing oneself into other projects, as infertile couples are often encouraged to do. Those who have resolved the infertility crisis (whether or not they ever became parents) have learned how to tap into the vital energy which all human beings possess and of which the ability to impregnate or give birth is only one small manifestation. They have come in touch with the deep life-giving forces outside themselves and have grown to see the many possibilities for generativity in the lives they are now living. From denying and hating a body

that will not make babies, they come to embrace a body as rich as ever in capacities for love, recreation, passion, and courage, only grown wiser now through suffering. In some sense, those who successfully transcended the loss posed by infertility are those for whom the experience of infertility has become a kind

of "spiritual pregnancy," an occasion for giving birth to a new understanding and appreciation of the self.<sup>10</sup>

Self-acceptance is a critical moment in the spiritual journey through infertility. So, too, is coming to a new relationship with God and with God's purposes for one's life. "The faith that will make us well" is not principally a relentless expectation of a miracle. Rather, it is the willingness to be

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touched in our infirmity by the God who is the source of all life and all energy. Feelings of anger at God are normal and even necessary to the process of healing. But equally necessary is the movement from asking "What is God doing to me/us?" to "Where is God leading me/us?"<sup>11</sup>

Edmund Pellegrino and David Thomasma argue that the virtue of hope is necessary for genuine healing to take place. Such a hope faces "the realities of the patient's predicament, but directs the mind and heart to something much larger, the reality of God's presence in history, his promises to humanity, and his unfailing love for every one of his creatures."<sup>12</sup> As this description suggests, a transformative spirituality in the face of infertility will not be built on the expectation of miracles (as important as it may be to the infertile not to lose confidence entirely in the possibility of an unexpected blessing) but on awareness of the constant companionship of God in the experience of infirmity, disappointment, or despair. The community of faith is called to embody this transcendent hope, not by piously "denying the realities" of infertility, but by becoming a site where the "something much larger" can be witnessed and the capacity to trust that all things, even our present sufferings, are working to good can be learned.

When hope is grasped as an awareness of God's redeeming work within our experiences of illness or loss or despair, when it is not mistaken simply for a commitment to a certain outcome, it becomes possible for infertility to be the catalyst for a new and deeper relationship with God and the community. It also becomes possible to bring realistic expectations to medicine. Stopping treatment is "abandoning hope" only when success or failure is measured as the achievement of a certain result. When the experience of infertility is lived as an invitation to experience the mystery of God's care for us, God's infinite "motherhood" and "fatherhood," God's desire for our flourishing, it is not necessary to pursue "success" at the expense of the self. Indeed, it does not even make sense.

#### **REFRAMING GENERATIVITY**

Finally, we can only hint here at the directions of a theological reconstruction of the place of procreation in a theology of marriage. Three observations are worthy of reflection.

A continued emphasis on procreation as the "fullness" or "flowering" of marital intimacy tends to render the childless marriage "second class." Raising up the theological significance of marriage as first and foremost the site for the mutual self-giving of the partners reflects more accurately the reality of married life and the place of procreation within it, as well as giving rise to a norm for reproduction that respects the conditions for healthy and responsible reproduction.

Second, while privileging the family as the primary place of ministry for laypersons lends valuable support to the work of family life, it has tended to eclipse the more fundamental call to ministry and service which



all Christians share. It has the practical effect of making single Christians and childless couples invisible, not only liturgically, but as a force for effective witness in the world. What is needed is a way of talking seriously about the call to faithfulness and action that follows directly from our baptism, which we all share, and which can be lived out in a variety of equally viable forms of life. What is needed is a theology of lay vocation which treats single life or marriage without children as a unique and valuable context for ministry—not, as we tend to treat them now, simply as “holding patterns.”

Finally, looking hard at what exactly we as Christians value in parenthood is necessary if we are to create a context in which we can commend adoption or other ways of relating to children as attractive paths to resolving the infertility crisis. Christian sexual ethics is in need of a shift from an emphasis on the generation of life, the acquisition of children, to an emphasis on the sustenance of life, the care of children.

What those struggling with infertility need, and what we as communities of faith owe to them, is an inviting witness to the “something more” that lies beyond the limits of their loss. It is only then that we can turn faith or religion from “one more painful obstacle to resolving infertility” to a genuine source and context for healing.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1 R. W. Dellinger, “Cloning Can’t Replace Lost Loved Ones, Says Bioethicist,” *Tidings Online* (June 15, 2001) at [www.the-tidings.com/2001/0615/cloning.htm](http://www.the-tidings.com/2001/0615/cloning.htm). Thomas Murray is a member of the President’s National Bioethics Advisory Commission and the father of a daughter who was abducted from her college dorm room and murdered.

2 Jan Rehner, *Infertility: Old Myths, New Meanings* (Toronto, ON: Second Story Press, 1989), 112.

3 I am using the terms “infertility” and “barrenness” interchangeably here, although, of course, the terms do not have exactly the same meaning. In the biblical texts, for example, it is not always clear whether “barrenness” refers simply to the state of not having borne children (i.e., “infertility”) or also to the state of not having borne sons or descendants in the sense of followers in male lineage. However, both terms connote involuntary childlessness and it is in that sense that I am using them.

4 Arthur L. Greil, *Not Yet Pregnant: Infertile Couples in Contemporary America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 161 ff.

5 *Ibid.*, 173.

6 See Hannah’s Prayer Ministries at [www.hannah.org](http://www.hannah.org). This ministry “provides Christian based support and encouragement to couples around the world who are struggling with the pain of ‘fertility challenges’ including infertility, pregnancy loss, or early infant death.”

7 The founders of Hannah’s Prayer make the important point that Mother’s Day and Father’s Day are civic rather than religious holidays and need not be celebrated in church at all. It seems to me that these holidays provide an opportunity to highlight a primary feature of life for most members of the congregation and a valued set of relationships within religious traditions. I would argue that they should be celebrated liturgically, provided they can be celebrated with sensitivity to the various forms of

family life within the congregation.

8 "Having Faith: Service Devoted to Infertile Couples," *Seattle Times* (January 26, 1998), C1.

9 Rehner, *Infertility*, 20-21, quoting Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1980), 76.

10 Rehner, *Infertility*, 120.

11 Julie Kelemen, *Dealing With Infertility: A Guide for Catholics* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1997), 18.

12 Edmund D. Pellegrino and David C. Thomasma, *The Christian Virtues in Medical Practice* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 67-68.

13 An earlier version of this essay appears as chapter six in Maura A. Ryan, *Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction: The Cost of Longing* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 150-170.

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