

When A Couple Is Unable to Conceive

FOR YOUR MARRIAGE

With Christian Meert

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Last November, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter on marriage titled "Love and Life in the Divine Plan" (<http://usccb.org/laity/loveandlife/>).

The letter contains valuable insights for married and engaged couples as well as those involved in marriage preparation.

In this fourth of six parts, Christian Meert, co-director of the diocesan Office of Marriage and Family Life, examines the bishops' pastoral letter and how it relates to practical realities of married life.]

In life, there are few experiences that can compare to the birth of a child. The joy of a mother holding the little one on her chest for the first time is indescribable.

Openness to life is one of the fundamental norms of marriage, and often couples take for granted that they will be able to have children.

But that is not always the case. Today, the number of married couples who can not conceive children is increasing due to several factors. The average age of couples getting married has gone up, and prolonged use of chemical contraception can have a negative impact on fertility in some cases.

Infertility can pose a big challenge for married couples, but those who face it should not lose hope.

The Catholic Church has long been a proponent of adoption. In their November 2009 letter, "Life-giving Love in an Age of Technology," the USCCB stated that "Adoption is a gift to the child who receives a new family, to the parents who receive a child to love and to raise, and to the biological parents . . . Adoption also benefits society by contributing to a culture of life in which the inherent dignity of every child is recognized."

Couples who are unable to conceive also should consult their doctors. In the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI wrote that it is perfectly licit to seek healing for the physical causes of infertility. What

the church is against is any procedure that separates the unitive and procreative aspects of the conjugal act, such as in-vitro fertilization (IVF), surrogate motherhood, and cloning.

"By safeguarding these essential aspects, the unitive and procreative, the conjugal act preserves in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its ordination toward man's most high calling to parenthood," the pope wrote in *Humanae Vitae*.

In the case of IVF, for example, the success rate is very low, and embryos are often treated as commodities, not human beings. Only three percent of embryos fertilized survive to produce a heartbeat, and only 15 percent of embryos transferred to a womb are born alive. Often, fertilized embryos are discarded or frozen for future use.

There are also many disturbing cases in which mistakes are made at fertility clinics, leading to an embryo being implanted into the "wrong" mother. In such cases, the parents who mistakenly received the embryo may have the option of terminating the pregnancy.

Parents are also given the option of choosing sperm donors according to their physical characteristics and intellectual accomplishments. How can we not be revolted? A child is a gift from God, not a product!

For couples who have been physically unable to conceive a child, God may be calling them to bear children in a different way. By participating in the life of the church, for example by sponsoring catechumens in the RCIA program or serving as godparents, they can have spiritual children. Remember, there are many ways of being fertile!