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**The Child as Gift**  
**A Reflection from the Perspective of Contraception and IVF**

By Jennifer Widhalm

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**I. Introduction: Embracing the Cross**

I was invited here to speak to you about the child as gift within the context of contraception and in vitro fertilization (or any artificial reproductive technology)

The first main point I want to make (important to all of us who teach) is this:

Acceptance of the Church's teachings, especially on intimate, personal matters of love and sexuality requires conversion of heart:

1) To embrace the Cross, 2) to accept the Church's authority, and 3) to see human life as a gift

These are three exceptional challenges in a world that views suffering as an evil to be avoided at all cost, rejects absolute truth (authority), and views human life in terms of rights and burdens

Two scripture verses pretty well sum up what I have to say

**A. *"I resolved to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."* 1 Cor 2:2**

Jesus Christ and Him crucified must be the foundation and content of our teaching on the child as gift

First of all because He is the Child that was given

Secondly, because to be a Christian means to follow Jesus Christ

The path of His life was obedience and its destination Calvary

Every Christian must have a Calvary in his life -- perhaps many small ones, perhaps one great suffering

The conversion of heart required of the Christian is fundamentally the embrace of the Cross

The great difficulty in sharing this teaching is the genuine suffering of spouses

But the essential point is: Love and suffering go together

**B. “*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord*” (Job 1:21)**

Story of losing our first baby

Over and over I said to myself, “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord”

There is no love without suffering, there is no gift without pain

Run away from suffering and you miss out on love

The child is the perfect example -- is any child brought into the world without pain?

Has any child not caused his parents suffering?

Is the suffering less a gift than the source?

(Was our child any less a gift because he was only given for 9 weeks? Was our grief over the loss of our child not the gift of love? Was the act of surrender to God’s will not a gift of trust? Have I not been given more than I can know in this life by that short little life?)

Story of Mel: gift of experiencing motherhood, even for one minute; drew me closer to Mary, who is mothering my child in Heaven

**C. Crisis of Church Authority**

Also w/ Nana -- “I wish Jesus Christ were here w/ us now in the conversation; I wonder what He’d say about this”

I didn’t need to wonder -- I know what Jesus Christ has said through Holy Mother Church

**II. Child as Gift (Called to Love)**

A child is not a right, a possession, or a burden

A child is the gift of incomprehensible love (never forget that you are first and always a child)

He enfleshes the mystery of love (the love of spouse and of God -- which is all gift)

The Incarnation shows us this:

“*For God so loved the world . . .*” (Jn 3:16)

The Father gave His beloved Son for the salvation of the world

This is the essential origin and meaning of every child -- one given by the Father

**A. Given to himself -- in his freedom (original solitude)**

Every person is first a child of the Father -- sent into the world as a gift of love

Each child has a divine vocation -- a call to love

This primary *identity* and *vocation* (love) is the *source* and *end* of human freedom

Every human being belongs in the first instance to the One who is Origin and End

No one exists whose being is in the first instance related to me

This freedom of belonging to One greater objectively grounds all human relations

\*\* It must be subjectively respected for these relations to reach their proper end and fulfill the parties \*\* (return to this later)

**B. Given to his parents -- as visible image of their love (fruit of unity)**

A child is the “crowning glory” of marriage, as VII stated in GS 48

The gift of the child is the fruit of the mutual self-gift of the spouses -- a gift freely given and freely received

\*\* As gift freely given and received, the child is the substantial image of his parents’ communion

He is an incarnate “I love you”

The love of the parents is itself the fruit and seal of their original gift of being (from God to themselves and each other)

An affirmation, “It is good that you are”

Thus, true appreciation of the gift of the child requires gratitude for the gift of their love and of their very own beings

And the only proper response to such gifts is wonder and gratitude

But we confuse the natural end of marriage and the very natural desire of the spouses to be crowned with this glory with a “right” to have a child

Spouses have no more right to a child than they had to each other or to their own being

No one deserves a baby anymore than one deserved to have been created or deserved that her spouse chose her as his life’s companion

Story of lady on sidewalk -- “It’s not fair”

Entitlement attitude: right to earthly happiness (divorce and remarriage; gay marriage)

### **C. Given to his spouse/children/the world -- in his vocation (call to love)**

Human person finds himself through the sincere gift of self (nuptiality)

And this self-gift in turn is made fruitful with new life -- for spouses, for children, for world

## **III. Task of Parenthood: Educating in love**

### **A. Active Receptivity (openness to the gift)**

The conception of a child does depend on cooperation of the spouses

\*\* But it is first the creative act of God, to which He associates the spouses, but which ultimately does NOT depend on them \*\*

Story of 2nd sonogram

Waiting in anxious anticipation after losing our first baby and having discovered this fact via our first sonogram

I have NO control over whether or not a baby will appear on that screen

Just prior to the sonogram, I offered our child back to God, preparing myself for the possibility of an empty screen/womb

Seeing his little body and beating heart, he was given to me for the second time

And how many more times will my child be given to me as I offer him back God in the knowledge that he is not really mine?

## **B. Education**

The task of the parents is to educate the child in love, to teach him to recognize himself as a gift and respond generously to the call to give himself away

Mother's smile -- 1st stage of education is joyful welcome -- the delight in child's being

Education begins w/ reception of child as gift

If a child has been manufactured, his original identity as gift is distorted in his parents' eyes -- must affect his education in love

## **C. Letting go**

In the process the parents are called to give away the gift they have been given

Parents must eventually come to terms with the fact that their child is an entrustment, not a possession

The child does not belong to his parents, just as the parents do not belong to themselves

Your child is not your own, just as your own life is not your own (as I write this, I feel the small movements of the child in my womb)

He belongs to the Father; just as you belong to the Father

He has a divine vocation, just as you have a divine vocation

*"I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father" (Jn 16:28)*

Parents are the cooperators and stewards of God's gift

Our job is to say "yes" ("fiat") to God -- *"Let it be done unto me according to Thy Word"*

\*\* Contraception and IVF both say "no" to God -- "Let it be done unto me according to my word"

(As we saw in Eden -- that has severe consequences)

## **IV. Contraception and IVF: Repeating Eden**

### **A. Becoming Like God (fruitfulness)**

Contraception and IVF repeat the temptation of Eden

The lie of Satan continues: you can be like God on your terms (you can decide what human fulfillment means)

In reality, there is only one way to be like God -- sonship (= gratitude and obedience)

*Entitlement* attitude marks both sins:

I have a right to be happy according to my current perspective on happiness --

Either willfully preventing the conception of a child by or willfully forcing conception

But, as *Called to Love* points out, God is the Author of the "language of the body"

There is an intrinsic connection between conjugal union and procreation

Therefore cannot be altered by man without damaging his dignity and thwarting his fulfillment in love

The contracepting couple thinks they are securing their unity at the expense of their fruitfulness

. . . but their true communion is betrayed by their rejection of the totality of the other

The IVF couple thinks they are securing their fruitfulness at the expense of their unity

. . . but their true fruitfulness is betrayed by their grasping after what is meant to be given through the free gift of the other

Spouses end up with exactly the opposite of what they think they are getting

When Adam and Eve disobeyed the order the Creator had established, not only did they fail to "become like God" in the Satanic sense (which is impossible), but they lost the Divine gifts they had already been given

## **B. IVF: Child as Product (right)**

What is wrong with IVF?

1. *Strips the child of his dignity as gift (his original freedom)*

Gifts, by definition, are free and outside of the immediate control of anyone but the giver

We can ask for gifts, we can hint that we want gifts, we can do the necessary preparation to receive gifts (being good before Christmas)

But we cannot give ourselves a gift in the truest sense

2. *Turns the child into a product manufactured rather than a gift received*

Buying or making a gift for ourselves, de facto turns it into a product or a commodity -- something made or purchased, not received

No matter what the subjective intentions of the parents, they in fact want their children for their own sakes, not the child's sake

How to demonstrate this in the face of subjective/emotional protests to the contrary?

Besides pointing to the fact that parents of IVF babies willfully endanger, destroy, abandon, sell, give away these children,

\*\*\* The objective structure of conjugal union guards the dignity of the child as gift \*\*\*

Within conjugal union conception is always contingent upon something beyond the control of the spouse

The child is always a "may be"

The love of the spouses participates in and depends on a more powerful Love

So in the first instance, the child's existence does not depend solely on the will of his parents, but first on the will of God

Eve was the first mother to recognize this -- "*I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord*" (Gen 4:1)

And Mary, precisely b/c of her virginity, epitomizes the reality of motherhood as a gift -- "*Let it be done unto me according to Thy word*"

\*\* When a child is produced in the lab, the link between him and the invisible Divine Source of his life is blurred

\*\* We forget much more easily that the child is from the first instance not a controlled substance, but a mystery of freedom -- first God's and then our own

Manifested in temptation to genetic engineering/selection -- "the perfect child"

And we lose our wonder at the mystery of the love that has been given

And our willingness to let the other be who God intended

No child comes with a guarantee

How will the IVF parent deal with losing a child? Or deal with assisting the child to answer his vocation? Or let him go?

Freedom of receptivity -- "*The Lord giveth . . .*"

3. *This rebellion by parents against their dependence on God severs them from the source of true fruitfulness*

Only when the child is a fruit of conjugal union -- the crowning gift of the reciprocal self-donation of spouses -- is he a visible sign of love (a sacrament)

Only when the child is a fruit of conjugal union is the (free) gift of the husband contained within the gift of the child

And the wife's wonder at this gift -- her grateful receptivity and reciprocal self-gift

\*\* By bypassing the conjugal act in conceiving a child, spouses deprive each other of the true experience of fruitfulness in which the child is the superabundant, visible expression of their mutual self-gift and God's original gift

In other words, parenthood is stripped of its deepest meaning as the fulfillment of the threefold truth of the body-person as first child, then spouse, then mother/father

In my opinion, this is why IVF deepens the wound of infertility, doesn't heal it (*Called to Love*, p. 184)

### **C. Contraception: Rejection of the gift (original unity)**

What's wrong with contraception?

Story of teaching at Presentation:

Teacher using birth control asks what she should do if she doesn't think it's wrong (1st she's heard it)

I said she should meditate on why Church teaches what she does and ask HS for enlightenment

Then they all ask if I could give a brief explanation of why the Church teaches as she does (hah!)

So I said: married love is meant to be an image of Divine Love

Divine Love is always life-giving -- gives itself so fully to the other that it bears fruit in another whole person (a new person -- new life)

To be a true *imago Dei*, befitting the dignity of the person, married love must be *total self-gift open to life*

1. *Turns child into a commodity*

Same mentality as IVF -- I'll have a child when I want a child

2. *Inhibits total self-giving (true conjugal union) and turns spouses into objects of use rather than subjects of love*

Openness to new life symbolizes openness to the totality of the other as given by God

The capacity for motherhood and fatherhood

Whether or not this is their intention, de facto, this creates between spouse an ethos of use rather than of love b/c love requires a totality

3. *Act of rebellion against God*

Deliberate sterilization of an act God created to be fruitful

Leaves God out of the sacred embrace that is meant to be an image of His total life-giving love

Obscures filial meaning of the body -- rejection of gift is rejection of Giver of my being

The gift of my own self -- my relationship with God the Origin of my being -- is affirmed by openness to receive another

**\*\* And to being made anew in His image through His gift of fatherhood and motherhood (new life = new identity as father and mother) \*\***

Like IVF, contraception severs the intrinsic connection between the filial, nuptial and procreative meanings of the human body

The fracturing of the *imago Dei* -- personal identity as gift -- frustrates genuine human happiness

We forget where we come from and where we are going

## V. In the Final Analysis

“The moral aspect of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective standards. These, based on the nature of the human person and his or her acts, preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love.” (GS 51)

John Paul II concluded that the anthropological and moral difference between[Contraception and NFP], “involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality.” (FC 32)

These words can be applied equally to IVF

So we have to get Catholic couples to see that what is in question is not their intentions or motives

What is at stake is the *truth* about love, about marriage, about sex, and about babies

Their freedom is limited to the choice to act in accordance with this truth or not

They are not free to *change* the truth

This is the mistake of Eden -- I determine what it means to “be like God”

The Supreme Court stated in PP vs. Casey that . . .

Do you believe that God is the Author of these realities?

The Giver of self, spouse, child, love, freedom and every gift?

If so, either you accept that He knows best or you decide that you know best

Accept His authority, mediated by the Church, and trust in His goodness

*“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord”*

Only if our actions respect this truth -- the language of the Creator -- will our desires for love and fruitfulness ultimately be fulfilled

God promises us that over and over --

*“The Lord withholds no good thing from those who walk in sincerity.”* (Ps 84:12)

*“Take delight in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”* (Ps 37:4)

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The final answer is trust that everything is a gift -- even when He appears to be withholding or taking away the gift

*“He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him?” (Rom 8:32)*

As Giver of the ultimate Gift, why would God withhold anything else?

(Meditation on Mary and the victory of the Cross -- self-offering is offering her Son)

## Appendix A: Creative Love

The Word is the expression of all that is known about the object

A word spoken, an idea expressed is more or less perfect insofar as it captures the essence of the object/subject known (this is why Mary recognized Jesus when He said her name)

The Father, knowing Himself perfectly, expresses this perfect knowledge in a perfect Word

As Being itself, God's self-expression *is* His consubstantial Son

In this Word is communicated the essence of what is known -- the Divine Being -- the Son, the perfect image of the Father

This is how God created!

As the Giver of being (created essences), He can speak the entirety of a being other than Himself (because He knows that being before ever it is) and that word *becomes* creation

Because God knows the tree, He can say, "Let there be". He could simply have said "tree"

Without the Creator the creature vanishes

This axiom cannot be reduced to the simple fact that God made us

He is not a manufacturer

Rather, He knows us -- as no one else ever could -- and therefore we exist

In God, knowledge and love are one

I am because God knows me and His knowledge is love

[I have being because I am known ("before I formed you in your mother's womb, I knew you")]

Applied to human procreation -- our cooperation, through knowledge and love, in this great bringing into being of others like ourselves

Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived a son

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[So when a husband and wife reciprocally know each other in the marital embrace, their mutual knowledge is expressed in a word containing the essence of the spouses -- the child]

It is knowledge of the other, not technique, which is truly (pro)creative

This does not happen w/ IVF

In IVF, the knowledge that conceives the child is impersonal, it is technique

It is not knowledge of the beloved and all that the beloved is that brings the IVF baby into existence (this is most obvious w/ heterologous IVF, but true of any kind)

IVF turns the parents into manufacturers rather than pro-creators

Spouses are procreators b/c we know, second only to God (although infinitely second), the "Thou" of our spouse

And in the gift of myself to my spouse, in the speaking of his existential name ("it is good that you are), that knowledge becomes fruitful

(original unity depends on original solitude)

It generates an image of the one who is known and of the one who knows (b/c she reciprocally has been known)

And so the child is the substantial image of the mutual "let there be" of his parents

And so the child always contains the gift of the husband/wife (as I stated above)

Yet to this word of the parents, above it, must always be the "let there be" of the Creator

Since men, finite creatures, can never fully comprehend the essence of even created beings, we cannot speak a perfect word -- we cannot create

And so the child is always first known by God, who loved Him into being within his parents embrace

*"Before I knit you in your mother's womb, I knew you"*

IVF rebels against our dependence on the Giver of life

Not just for the child conceived, but for the spouse embraced -- always first given, not made

### **C. Contraception**

God loves my baby infinitely more than I

Yet entrusts him to me

Like a mother handing over her beloved child to someone she knows will not love him as much as she

Moreover, God wills that I cooperate in the very creation of this child whom He loves and desires to exist -- whom He knows

Contraception says “no” to God’s creative will

Contraception says “no” to God’s love, His knowledge of the goodness of being

Contraception says “no” to God’s creative word

What if every time a couple contracepted, God showed them the baby who was being offered

God entrusted us with His own Baby and continues to do so in every Eucharist

For the sake of love, God continues to offer us His love (salvation)

What are the parents losing by refusing these gifts?

### **Appendix B: The fallout of forgetting original solitude**

What do we do with things that we no longer have use for, that no longer please us, if they are considered possessions and rights rather than valuable in their own right?

Months ago, I came across an article on the internet titled “New IVF dilemmas make old fears seem quaint”

The author was making the case that the original fear that IVF would degrade human dignity as people became the object of mechanistic creation has proven baseless b/c modern society does not stigmatize people for the circumstances of their births

I wrote this professor an email objecting that degrading one’s dignity is not only measured by social attitudes towards those who have been born

What about those who are mechanistically produced in laboratories and then discarded, sold for research, given away to other people unrelated to them, or indefinitely frozen?

What about those who are deliberately made in a dish knowing that few survive the implantation process into a woman's womb?

What about the selective reduction of "too many" embryos surviving the transfer process?

If these are not affronts to human dignity, made graver by the utter defenselessness of the victim, I don't know what is

And this doesn't even mention the degradation of the dignity of the spouses, who violate their marital covenant through this act

Or the dignity of the scientists, doctors and lab technicians who perpetrate these offenses against human life

All of these leads to the widespread mechanistic and utilitarian view of human life which justifies embryonic stem cell research, cloning, abortion, euthanasia, and all the myriad crimes against human persons

### **Appendix C: Addressing the Suffering**

"Wait for the Lord with courage, be stouthearted and wait for the Lord." (Ps 27:14)

"The Lord withholds no good thing from those who walk in sincerity." (Ps 84:12)

"Take delight in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." (Ps 37:4)

The Paradox of the Cross -- somehow the promise is fulfilled despite the appearance of defeat; moreover the defeat itself is the victory

Faith in God's promise -- faith in the Resurrection -- the peace that surpasses understanding

I cannot give anyone this faith

I can only stand beside them and walk with them, without compromising the truth of love