

Islamic Ethics and Infertility

WISH, November 18, 2020

It is with great pleasure that I speak today at the beginning of this panel dedicated to necessary ethical reflection on the exquisite act of bringing new human life into the world. I would like to thank the rapporteurs of this meeting and all those present, albeit in a virtual form, which, while on the one hand, it still allows effective interaction, does not offer us that personal contact whose value I consider irreplaceable. Special thanks go to Ms Sultana Afdhal, Chief Executive Officer of WISH, who kindly invited me to participate in this important event and who once again wanted to highlight the collaboration between the Pontifical Academy for Life and WISH.

The cooperation between our two academic realities is a strong and clear sign of how the religious dimension of human experience strongly supports scientific research, particularly in the medical-healthcare field. It does so passionately committed to men and women, their existence, their lives, especially when they are attacked, threatened, weak and in need of attention and care. It does so by committing itself, and urging everyone, to act responsibly, so that the human dignity of every concrete life is fully protected, in every activity that sustains and cares for it.

The theme that is addressed in this round table is of great importance, because it touches, on the one hand, the suffering of couples who wish to have children and cannot; and, on the other, the first moment of human life. It is therefore an issue where medicine is at a crossroads in which different threads are intertwined, not only clinical but relational as well. The relationship between wife and husband, as well as between generations, is at stake. Even more, we know how great an impact the family has as the fundamental nucleus of social coexistence and as a place where kinship structures are formed, on which human societies are based. Assisted reproductive technology that is available today can modify the way parenthood has been made possible until now. In fact, it is possible now to individualize and separate the different elements that result in fertilization, which in the ordinary ways of procreation, the only ones practicable until a few decades ago, could not be realized other than in a unified interaction. Just consider the various now-existing forms of heterologous in vitro fertilization, in which the egg

and sperm donors are not husband and wife. We must act with great caution and with a comprehensive understanding vision, because at stake are the pillars that hold up all our social structures.

In Catholic thinking, the transmission of life occupies a position of great importance and is understood within the relationship of factors that unify sexual activity, the love between spouses, and generation. Our tradition considers this unity as a fundamental anthropological truth, one that moreover is engraved in the experience common to all cultures. The bond between spousal love and generation, is a gift more than a duty, and as such it calls for our protection. In fact, every child is generated in an encounter between a man and a woman, involving all their existence and history, not simply their bodies or the cells provided by their reproductive organs. The experience of birth helps us understand the meaning of human sexuality. Each child is born within an alliance that hosts him or her. Generating is welcoming a child who, although coming to us, does not belong to us. The time of gestation is of enormous importance for parents to be able to process their welcome of the other person who develops within the woman's body, recognizing him or her not as a foreigner, an opponent, but as a guest.

The human sex act therefore has a profound symbolic reach which goes far beyond what happens in a process that can be described in physiological categories and medical definitions, even though those categories and definitions do provide us indispensable information and knowledge. The meaning of corporeal union is this: in it, a mutual gift is given. It is in the tenderness of an encounter between two bodies that two persons discover, with surprise and joy, that they can become parents of a third, a person other than them and their expectations. In the act of mutual giving, man and woman discover that generation is not the creation of something out of nothing. Each child comes "from afar," as a "favor," which parents themselves have no power over.

Parents are actors and spectators at the same time, active and passive. They not only offer a gift; they receive one as well. Father and mother are accountable for the gift they receive, which becomes real only through them in fidelity to their covenant and in their commitment to educate this other about the gift of life. Sadly, this gift is *hidden* in the suffering that infertility brings.

Evaluation of the various assisted reproductive technologies must take place within this basic framework. As is made clear by the survey presented in the *Report on Islamic Ethics and Infertility Treatment*, which you will discuss in the panel, they are not all the same. There are great differences among them. What is in any case important is to avoid fertilization of more oocytes than are intended to be transferred to the womb, so as not to produce “surplus” embryos destined to remain frozen in a refrigerator or discarded and destroyed.

Heterologous assisted technologies, in particular, significantly change the practical and ethical quality of what the participants do. The donors of gametes are not spouses and do no more than provide “biological material,” depriving fatherhood and motherhood of their symbolic meaning. The “client” couple do not together generate the child that results. In the case when only one of them, and not the other, contributes to the genetic heritage of the child establishes a very problematic imbalance in the couple’s relationship. That imbalance is further aggravated in the case of surrogacy, given the increasing recognition of the deep meaning of pregnancy and how important the experience of pregnancy is.

In addition, turning to the best interests of the child, these technologies profoundly alter the relationship of the child with his or her biological origin, a very important reference point in the construction of a personal identity. To this is connected the problem of the anonymity of the gamete donor and the appropriateness of communicating to the child the circumstances of his or her coming into the world. Several approaches have been proposed, all of them unsatisfactory and negative for the child. In fact, the child is either deceived about the relationship to one of his or her the two “parents” or, if they decide to tell the truth, it becomes difficult, with such a confused multiplication of “paternal” and “maternal” figures, for the child to call its parent “father” or “mother”. In heterologous assisted technologies, and all the more so in surrogacy, the participant’s own body is reduced to a biological object and relationships are emptied of their practical and symbolic meaning, in the name of an assumed all-importance of the desire to have children, who thus are no more than the fruit of that desire.

This contribution of religious traditions can help not only to identify the ethical criteria

that support the use of technologies that respect the dignity of parents as well as children. In more general terms, however, religious experience makes it possible to consider the question within a horizon that transcends earthly concerns and avoids absolutizing a child as something to be had no matter what it takes. Every way in which the development of human life and fraternal solidarity is supported and fostered is an expression of the fruitfulness of the couple and the family, even if it is not possible to have one's own descendants. It is in this way that we live out our being sons and daughters of God.

Thank you