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Bishops criticize some reproductive technologies

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

BALTIMORE -- Although the Catholic Church shares the pain of married couples facing infertility problems, some reproductive technologies "are not morally legitimate ways to solve those problems," the U.S. bishops say in a new document.

The 15-page document, "Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology," received overwhelming approval Nov. 17 at the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. The vote to approve it was 220-4, with three abstentions.

Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities, said the new document would "fill a true pastoral need" among U.S. Catholics for a better understanding of "the difference between the Catholic understanding and the secular understanding of human life."

"Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology" is designed as a companion to the bishops' 2006 statement, "Married Love and the Gift of Life," which urged Catholic couples to reject the use of artificial contraception and to learn how natural family planning can benefit the marital relationship.

Like the earlier document, "Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology" is in question-and-answer format, with a short introduction.

"In an age of advances in reproductive medicine, many solutions are offered to couples going through infertility problems, says the document.

"Some solutions offer real hope for restoring a couple's natural, healthy ability to have children," it adds. "Others pose serious moral problems by failing to respect the dignity of the couple's marital relationship, of their sexuality, or of the child."

Specifically, the bishops reject the use of eggs or sperm from "donors" -- whom the document says are often paid and should instead be called "vendors" -- as well as surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, or IVF, and human cloning.

"Children are not parents' possessions to manufacture, manipulate or design; rather, they are fellow persons with full human dignity, and parents are called to accept, care for and raise them to be new members of God's family and his kingdom," the document says. "Children deserve to be 'begotten, not made.'"

The bishops express strong support for adoption, calling it "a wonderful way to build a family," but do not endorse the concept of "embryo adoption," in which a frozen embryo that would otherwise be discarded is implanted into a woman willing to give birth to and raise the child.

"Serious moral concerns have been raised about embryo adoption, particularly as it requires the wife in the adopting couple to receive into her womb an embryonic child who was not conceived through her bodily union with her husband," the document says.

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"The terrible plight of abandoned frozen embryos underscores the need for our society to end practices such as IVF that regularly produce so many 'spare' or unwanted human beings," it adds.

But the bishops say couples with fertility problems do not necessarily need to abandon their hope of conceiving a child.

"The challenge is to diagnose and address problems so these (male and female) bodies can function as they should -- and there is no moral problem in doing this, any more than there is in other medical treatments to restore health," the document says.

"Hormonal treatment and other medications, conventional or laser surgery to repair damaged or blocked fallopian tubes, means for alleviating male infertility factors, and other restorative treatments are available," as is natural family planning to maximize a woman's chance of conceiving, it adds.

"These and other methods do not substitute for the married couple's act of loving union; rather, they assist this act in reaching its potential to conceive a new human life," the bishops say.

The document includes several statements from those who have experienced infertility.

"Natural methods took the focus of conception away from the wonders of technology and back to the love between me and my husband, and I didn't have any of the awful side effects from medication or treatments," said Amy Cagliola Smith of Norristown, Pa.

In introducing the document to the bishops Nov. 16, Cardinal Rigali said many Americans, including many Catholics, consider "any method of 'making babies' ... to be 'pro-life.'"

"The widespread moral acceptance of IVF and the large numbers of frozen embryos have contributed to the general public attitude that human embryos are less than human and are better used for scientific experimentation rather than 'wasted,'" he said.

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