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Toward a Theology of Infertility and the Role of *Donum Vitae*

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A theology of infertility is needed to help couples and the broader ecclesial community understand the theological implications of infertility. Infertility raises questions about human freedom, finitude, embodiment, childlessness, and parenthood. In this article, dominant cultural assumptions surrounding each of these areas when considering reproductive technologies are sketched. Official Roman Catholic teaching on reproductive technologies (Donum Vitae), while rejecting most forms of such technologies, does provide a viable response to the presupposition that reproductive technologies resolve infertility. Given the dominant cultural assumptions and insights from Roman Catholic teaching, this article advocates for several ecclesial changes when considering infertility. Finally, theological resources for developing a theology of infertility are offered. Specifically, insights from Karl Rahner's theology of concupiscence are examined with an eye toward how they provide a framework for rethinking the cultural assumptions about freedom and finitude when considering reproductive technologies.

Keywords: theology of infertility, Donum Vitae, reproductive technology, Karl Rahner, generativity, concupiscence, marriage

Introduction

IT would seem that assisted reproductive technologies aimed at helping people achieve pregnancy provide an answer to infertility.¹ The cultural message is that one does not need to be childless if one has the economic means, the emotional stamina, and the work flexibility

¹ Throughout the article, “assisted reproductive technologies” and “reproductive technologies” will be used interchangeably.

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to pursue pregnancy and childbirth with the help of medical science. However, assisted reproductive technologies are not without controversy; the issues surrounding them are varied and complex.² Rather than focusing on the ethics surrounding specific technologies, I will instead explore what resources the Christian tradition offers toward developing a theology of infertility. Articulating a theology of infertility is important, since Catholic teaching bans the use of most reproductive technologies,³ and reproductive technologies are successful approximately 5–42 percent of the time.⁴ As a result, many infertile couples still need to grapple with childlessness and how it is understood in relation to their faith.

While Scripture does not directly speak to the ethics of reproductive technologies, the narratives we read, pray during the Liturgy of the Hours, study, reflect on, and hear proclaimed during worship shape our responses to infertility. Scripture indicates, and tradition reaffirms, that children are a gift from God. However, the laments of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah highlight

2 The issues include the procurement of sperm, the status of the embryo, the goods of marriage, universal norms/absolute norms, the nature of the person in relation to faith, our understanding of parenthood, the role of the will of God in creation, the distinction between morality and public policy, the understanding of natural law, and economic questions, among others. The series *Readings in Moral Theology*, ed. Charles Curran and Richard McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1979–) examines many of these themes. See also Maura Ryan, *The Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction: The Cost of Longing* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001); John F. Kilner, Paige C. Cunningham, and W. David Hager, eds., *The Reproduction Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

3 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation (Donum Vitae)*, March 19, 1987 (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1987); also available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html (the English translations vary slightly; I have used the Pauline Books version); Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Bioethical Questions (Dignitas Personae)*, December 18, 2008, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html. While released in December 2008, *Dignitas Personae* was approved on June 20, 2008 by Pope Benedict XVI and signed by William Cardinal Leveda, prefect for the CDF, on September 2, 2008.

4 The success rate varies for any number of reasons, including age, where younger women have more success becoming pregnant with reproductive technologies than older women. On the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web site, see “Infertility FAQ’s,” <http://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/Infertility/index.htm>. The statistics cited in the FAQ’s come from data in two reports from the CDC, 2010 ART Fertility Clinic Success Rates Report (<http://www.cdc.gov/art/ART2010/index.htm>) and 2010 ART National Summary Report (http://www.cdc.gov/art/ART2010/NationalSummary_index.htm).

83 the perception that God could withhold that gift. For example, Rachel
 84 despairs of having children and rejoices when she eventually bears a son
 85 (Gen 30:1–2, 22–24). In the ancient world, a childless man solved his
 86 problem by having children with a second wife, or with a surrogate. A child-
 87 less woman, on the other hand, suffered reproach, shame, and disgrace.
 88 Infertility was perceived as a sign that the woman had somehow displeased
 89 God. Conception and a child affirmed that God was pleased, and assured
 90 the woman’s place in the ancient household. Thus the word emerging from
 91 Scripture can be experienced as both a blessing and a curse.

92 On a theoretical level, we might suppose we no longer believe that a
 93 woman is incomplete unless married with children. But do we still act from
 94 the beliefs that a woman is incomplete unless she can biologically bear a
 95 child, and that infertility is a sign of God’s displeasure.⁵ Consequently,
 96 then, do we implicitly believe there is something wrong with a woman
 97 (and, by implication, a couple) who does not have biological children, who
 98 does not seek a medical remedy for infertility (either her own or her hus-
 99 band’s), and who might not adopt children?

100 The normative cultural and ecclesial narrative presumes that a woman
 101 and man fall in love, marry, and have biological children. For Catholics,
 102 receiving the sacrament of marriage requires that the couple be open to chil-
 103 dren, with the underlying assumption that this openness means biological
 104 children. This presumption is exposed when the presider at the marriage cer-
 105 emony asks a couple beyond childbearing years if they are open to children,
 106 often eliciting laughter from the congregation. Yet it seems normal when a
 107 younger couple is asked the same question, and infertility as a possibility
 108 goes unacknowledged. Couples do not hear the question, “Are you willing
 109 to accept the possibility of infertility or the inability to bear biological chil-
 110 dren?” What happens, then, as the marriage progresses and biological chil-
 111 dren do not arrive? How is one to understand the inability to become or
 112 remain pregnant? Where does the infertile couple fit in the theological
 113 picture of love, marriage, and children?⁶ What challenges does infertility
 114 pose to our self-understanding, individually, as a couple, and as a
 115

116 5 I would argue that these same presuppositions underlie, in part, the critique of celibacy
 117 as a valid and worthwhile vocation, as well as human discomfort with singleness beyond
 118 a certain age. However, the similarities and differences between celibacy, single life, and
 119 married childlessness cannot be explored in this paper.

120 6 In this article, I rely on a definition of marriage as between one man and one woman. I
 121 remain cognizant of the debates in contemporary society regarding expanding the defi-
 122 nition of marriage to include same-sex couples. Additionally, since this article focuses on
 123 infertility, I will frequently use the term “infertile couple,” even though those who suffer
 from infertility are defined by more than their infertility.

community? Is our imagination and tradition supple enough to understand a man or woman as fully human, without being a biological parent, particularly within a marriage? What does the Catholic tradition offer to help the infertile couple understand their place in the Body of Christ?⁷ More specifically, given the limited success of reproductive technologies and the number of infertile couples who do not use them for various reasons, what theological and ecclesial resources exist to begin developing a theology of infertility that can answer these questions?

To begin a consideration of a theology of infertility, I will proceed in the following fashion. In section 1, I will sketch an outline of the dominant cultural assumptions operating in the use and ethical assessment of reproductive technologies. Section 2 offers a brief overview of the Roman Catholic Church's recent moral tradition regarding reproductive technologies and the potential conflict the tradition poses for the infertile, particularly women. In this section I will also explore how the teaching opens space for rethinking infertility. In section 3, I will argue for the potential that Karl Rahner's theology of concupiscence holds for a theology of infertility. Additionally, I will suggest potential pastoral changes the Church can make and other potential theological venues that warrant further study in order to develop a theology of infertility.

1. Dominant Cultural Assumptions Surrounding Assisted Reproductive Technologies

The portrait that follows is a generalization. Yet, sketching the broad contours is necessary and important because reproductive technologies are often presented as good or morally neutral. Laying out operating assumptions regarding their use makes it easier to identify areas that need to be addressed when developing a theology of infertility.

In the United States, at least two presuppositions underlie our twenty-first-century approach to reproduction and infertility. One, the myth of the American Dream—the belief that we will succeed and accomplish anything we wish as long as we work hard enough—encourages us to think we can conquer infertility. Nadine Pence Frantz and Mary Stimming describe the phenomenon in this way: “We have come to expect that we should be able to achieve the particular future of our desiring.” This includes children.⁸

7 For additional questions that need further study, see Kevin T. Kelly, *Life and Love: Towards a Christian Dialogue on Bioethical Questions* (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1987), 147–52.

8 Nadine Pence Frantz and Mary T. Stimming, eds., *Hope Deferred* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 6.

165 Two, our culture primarily celebrates reproductive technologies while mostly
 166 ignoring their detrimental effects. This “celebration” occurs in prime-time
 167 news stories about multiple births, feature stories on talk shows like *Oprah*,
 168 reality shows such as (the now-canceled) *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, and articles or
 169 reports describing new advances in medical science.⁹ The reports or feel-
 170 good stories rarely if ever offer critical analysis of the technology.¹⁰ The cele-
 171 bration rightly acknowledges growth in scientific knowledge, the results of
 172 human creativity, and the birth of children. Yet this celebration glosses the
 173 pain and suffering that often precedes the successful use of assisted reproduc-
 174 tive technology or that results from its failure. Furthermore, the celebration of
 175 reproductive technologies neglects the fact that technology is not value-
 176 neutral. John Staudenmaier, an historian of technology and culture, argues
 177 that technological inventions embed and cultivate values. As a result, any
 178 technology needs examination that explores the values that are being pro-
 179 moted, protected, or overlooked.¹¹ The theologian Richard McCormick, in a
 180 different vein, contends that “bioethical thought—and indeed health care
 181 planning in general—can be profoundly influenced by certain cultural
 182 assumptions, trends, unexamined attitudes, biases—what I shall call ‘value
 183 variables.’”¹² If we take Staudenmaier and McCormick seriously, then we
 184 need to ask what cultural assumptions or values need scrutiny in light of
 185 assisted reproductive technologies. Assisted reproductive technologies
 186 surface cultural assumptions, unexamined attitudes, and questions regarding
 187
 188

9 Maura A. Ryan, “Particular Sorrows, Common Challenges: Specialized Infertility Treatment and the Common Good,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1994): 187–206; see 192 n. 11.

10 An exception to this celebration was the critical coverage of the birth of octuplets to Nadya Suleman in 2009. Given the positive coverage of other multiple births, one wonders if part of the criticism was due to her single status, raising the question of whether the coverage would have been more positive if she had been married. The influence of Oprah Winfrey’s talk show in framing and thinking about various cultural, political, and ethical issues, such as the ethics of assisted reproductive technologies are beyond what can be considered in this article. For an examination of Oprah’s media influence, see Trystan T. Cotten and Kimberly Springer, *Stories of Oprah: The Oprahfication of American Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010); Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

11 John M. Staudenmaier, SJ, “Electric Lights Cast Long Shadows: Seeking the Greater Good in a World of Competing Clarities,” April 14, 2005, *Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics*, ed. Adam Graves, <http://repository.upenn.edu/boardman/7>; Staudenmaier, “To Fall in Love with the World: Individualism and Self-Transcendence in American Life,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 26.3 (May 1994), 1–28.

12 Richard A. McCormick, *Corrective Vision: Explorations in Moral Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 165–66.

how we comprehend human freedom, finitude, and embodiment as well as how we understand childlessness and parenthood. Some brief consideration will be given to each “value variable” just named.

Freedom

In a modern context, freedom frequently functions as the ability to have options, to choose among objects, and to exercise one’s rights. Furthermore, humans often understand freedom as the ability to control their destiny and the outcome of their endeavors.¹³ This type of freedom, freedom of choice, operates in approaches to reproductive technologies in a variety of ways.¹⁴ The philosopher Karey Harwood discusses the “consumer” language, mentality, and framework operating in this style of reproductive-choice-as-freedom.¹⁵ Freedom understood as choice appears, for example, when people shop for the clinic with the best success rates, when they screen embryos to increase the chance of implantation, in advertisements requesting egg donors with specific criteria, or in the screening of sperm donors for desirable characteristics.

There are at least two ironies in thinking about freedom of choice as providing options and reproductive technologies. The first is that one’s socioeconomic status can hinder one’s ability to avail oneself of certain types of reproductive technologies. Maura Ryan details this reality in *The Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction: The Cost of Longing*.¹⁶ The second irony involves both the perception that a couple should or will use reproductive technologies, and the desire for the technology to “fix” infertility. Both

13 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), 139–58. In this work, Arendt analyzes human alienation from each other and the world. One aspect of her analysis focuses on human attempts to control and dominate “nature.” Her critique of *homo faber*, our relationship to work and labor, and utilitarianism can also be applied to notions of human freedom. Thus we can arrive at a negative definition of freedom. Freedom does not permit unlimited choices, nor does it permit treating others through the lens of their usefulness or as an object or means to an end.

14 See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (1996; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 7.

15 Karey Harwood, *The Infertility Treadmill: Feminist Ethics, Personal Choice, and the Use of Reproductive Technologies* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

16 Ryan, *The Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction*. Access to reproductive technologies is alleviated for some when they use a surrogate in India. This type of “medical tourism” is growing, highlighting the belief that we should have freedom of choice and access to all options for pursuing our dreams and fulfilling our desires. See Nilanjana S. Roy, “Protecting the Rights of Surrogate Mothers in India,” *New York Times*, October, 4, 2011.

247 actually function to make it hard to say “no” to the technology. For example,
 248 Harwood observes that while the nonprofit advocacy organization RESOLVE:
 249 The National Infertility Association sees the “decision to remain ‘child-free’”
 250 as a response to infertility, “few if any of the people who came to the monthly
 251 RESOLVE meetings had not tried or were not considering some form of infer-
 252 tility treatment.”¹⁷ Thus, saying “no” to reproductive technologies is often
 253 saying “no more,” rather than simply “no” at the outset. Connected to the
 254 ability to say “no” as one type of free choice is how humans respond to
 255 human finitude.¹⁸

256 *Finitude*

257 Underlying the anguish, sorrow, and despair that one hears in the
 258 questions of those wrestling with infertility (such as “If I want a baby, why
 259 can’t I have one?” or “Why won’t my body cooperate?”) is the reality of our
 260 inability to transcend the limits of human finitude. Infertility profoundly
 261 brings home the reality that we are finite, contingent creatures, who do not
 262 control all aspects of our lives. Infertility harshly illuminates the lies that
 263 “we can have it all” or “if we only work hard, we can accomplish anything.”
 264 Infertility forces people to grapple with these lies when they do not get
 265 immediately pregnant, when they are told they are infertile, when various
 266 reproductive technologies do not work, or if they chose to follow their
 267 church’s ban on certain reproductive technologies. This is a painful reality
 268 for both men and women in different ways. Miroslav Volf describes this
 269 reality as a “poison and a curse” and laments, “One hundred months’
 270 worth of hopes, all dashed against the stubborn realities of bodies that just
 271 wouldn’t produce offspring.”¹⁹ Ryan writes about the lie in this way: “As
 272 the quite normal expectation of growing up, marrying, and raising a family
 273 of one’s own begins to appear out of reach, so the assumption that the
 274 course of one’s life is predictable and subject to the powers of reason and
 275
 276
 277

278 17 Harwood, *The Infertility Treadmill*, 39. RESOLVE is a national nonprofit organization
 279 founded in 1974. It offers support groups and takes various advocacy roles governing
 280 reproductive technologies. For more information see the RESOLVE web site at [http://](http://www.resolve.org)
 281 www.resolve.org.

282 18 McCormick, *Corrective Vision*, 166. McCormick argues that “value variables” are inter-
 283 twined with and nourish each other. Therefore, “value variables” often need to be exam-
 284 ined together.

285 19 Miroslav Volf, introduction to Frantz and Stimming, *Hope Deferred*, vii. The book *Hope*
 286 *Deferred* is a collection of essays by theologians who have suffered some form of repro-
 287 ductive loss, including infertility. Insights into the tussles with finitude are found
 throughout the essays.

will becomes a lie.”²⁰ These particular experiences of finitude arise from the body not doing what is normally expected. As a result, the body receives attention in a different manner.

Embodiment

Our bodies matter. Women experience bodily changes every month from puberty to menopause. At some point, for most women, this monthly bodily fluctuation becomes an event requiring little attention or reflection. However, for the woman trying to get pregnant, the monthly hormonal changes and resulting flow of blood are reminders that her body is “misaligned” with her heart and its desires. This can feel like death and subsequently causes suffering.²¹

In addition to the dissonance between body and heart, women bear the greater physical burden of infertility. They are tested more frequently than their spouses. Some women’s reproductive systems are found to be fine, and the infertility occurs because of an issue with the male’s biology. Male infertility, though, often means that the woman still needs treatment. Women thus withstand the worst of medical interventions when attempting pregnancy. In light of cases such as these, Judith Lorber has raised the question of the value of women’s altruism in shouldering the burden of infertility, even when their husband is infertile.²²

The question of whether women should subject otherwise healthy bodies to medically invasive procedures raises the additional question of how to classify infertility. Medically speaking, humans subject their bodies to many painful procedures in the hope of future health, defined as a restoration of proper bodily functioning. Understood in this context, classifying infertility as a disease draws attention to the need to determine underlying causes for infertility, increasing the potential for restoring reproductive functioning.²³

20 Ryan, “Particular Sorrows,” 196. For more patient perspectives, along with some analysis of the emotional and psychological effects of infertility and the use of reproductive technologies, see “Patient Perspectives,” in *Assisted Reproductive Technologies: Analysis and Recommendations for Public Policy* (New York: The New York State Task Force on Life and the Law, 1998), 117–34.

21 For a description of the dimensions of this suffering, see Ryan, “Particular Sorrows,” 195–200; Nadine Pence Frantz, “Why,” in Frantz and Stimming, *Hope Deferred*, 15–30, at 15–16; Mary T. Stimming, “Sorrow,” in *Hope Deferred*, 33–45, at 34.

22 Judith Lorber, “Choice, Gift, or Patriarchal Bargain? Women’s Consent to *In Vitro* Fertilization in Male Infertility,” in *Feminist Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, ed. Helen Bequaert Holmes and Laura M. Purdy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 169–80.

23 The Pope Paul VI Institute in Omaha, Nebraska, is addressing these issues.

329 On the one hand, this is a positive outcome. On the other hand, the “techno-
 330 logical cure” is not always equivalent to “healing” more broadly defined.²⁴
 331 “Healing” more broadly construed applies to different dimensions of
 332 human existence, such as the bodily, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.
 333 Ryan highlights this when she asks “whether individuals now being offered
 334 treatment for infertility . . . are in general being *healed* by the experience.”²⁵
 335 Attending to the question of health and how to classify infertility is important
 336 because the quest to become pregnant and to “heal” the body by means of
 337 technology can lead to spiritual disease and ill health. For example, Mary
 338 T. Stimming writes that, for her, the pursuit of pregnancy eventually func-
 339 tioned as a form of idolatry. Using Paul Tillich’s notion of “ultimate
 340 concern,” she reflects on how pregnancy, not God, became the “center of
 341 her life.”²⁶

342 Given the amount of time women spend infertile during puberty, prime-
 343 nopause, menopause, and even most days during their supposedly fertile
 344 years, perhaps we should also perceive of infertility, no matter when it
 345 occurs, as an ordinary dimension of being human. Noticing infertility as
 346 part of the rhythm of our bodies might open a space for saying “no” to
 347 certain medical treatments and help counter the lure of what Harwood has
 348 called “the infertility treadmill.” This “no” then creates a space to consider
 349 saying “yes” to something else. However doing so means considering how
 350 the body’s infertility causes one to confront cultural assumptions about
 351 childlessness.

352 *Childlessness*

354 Celebrating reproductive technologies leaves unchallenged the unspoke-
 355 n, unexamined societal assumption that we are somehow incomplete as
 356 human beings without children.²⁷ Evidence of this presumption exists, for
 357 example, in the question “Do you have children?” If one answers “no,”
 358 often the next question is, “When are you planning to have children?”
 359 Many people do not realize that someone might be infertile. Mercy Amba
 360

361 24 See Kenneth D. Alpern, ed., *The Ethics of Reproductive Technology* (Oxford: Oxford
 362 University Press, 1992).

363 25 Ryan, “Particular Sorrows,” 198–99.

364 26 Stimming, “Sorrow,” 33–45.

365 27 See Linda A. Mercadante, “Faith,” in Frantz and Stimming, *Hope Deferred*, 87–99; Nadine
 366 Pence Frantz and Mary T. Stimming, introduction to *Hope Deferred*, 3–8. Frantz and
 367 Stimming draw on several authors in their discussion, including Laurie Lisle, *Without
 368 Child: Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), and
 369 Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of
 Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Oduyoye, a Methodist theologian from Ghana and founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, writes that people have said to her, “Don’t say ‘no’, say ‘not yet.’”²⁸

Oftentimes, silence greets a response of “No, I do not have children.” This silence extends beyond societal convention to silence by the Christian church on the role of the married childless members of the Body of Christ. Oduyoye directly challenges the Christian church’s silence.

The “child factor” in Africa (and perhaps elsewhere) is complex, and its public faces are daunting; but nothing is more oppressive than the ordinary meanings imposed on the absence of children in a marriage. The silence that shrouds the issue compounds its potential for the disempowering of women. Shall we continue to be silent, or shall we shape a theology that is life-giving in a situation that is otherwise a context of death? The one who sits on the throne says, “See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). Shall we not seek new life for the childless?²⁹

This is a difficult challenge given that the Judeo-Christian tradition emphasizes the importance of children within marriage.³⁰ The ability to talk about childlessness resulting from infertility also means examining the implicit “norms” that govern the practice of parenthood.

Parenthood

Using or considering the use of reproductive technologies can indicate a profound desire to have a biological child as the fruit and grace of a shared love, commitment, and life together. Wanting to share a genetic connection with one’s child cannot be overlooked or minimized. However, the desire to “have a child of my own” can also belie a sense of ownership, undercutting the very sense that children are a gift from God, a gift held in trust.³¹ Scripture underlines this sense of gift. For example, Hannah’s response to God hearing

28 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space,” in *Liberating Eschatology*, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 105–20, at 108.

29 *Ibid.*, 119.

30 Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 121–216.

31 Reproductive technologies often keep the focus on the couple and the desires of the potential parents. In other words, the technology, when successfully used, provides children for childless couples. This is different from adoption, which, while fulfilling the desire for a child, also finds parents for a parent-less child. See Klaus Demmer, “Ethical Aspects of Reproductive Medicine,” in *Andrology: Male Reproductive Health and Dysfunction*, ed. Eberhard Nieschlag, Hermann M. Behre, and Susan Nieschlag (New York: Springer, 2010), 601–12.

her plea for a child shows she recognizes her custodianship; she dedicates the child to God (1 Sam 1:20–28). Moreover, thinking about infertility within a limited focus on biological parenthood risks denigrating the familial relationships between children and the nonbiological adults in their lives, such as adoptive parents, foster parents, or other child-raising scenarios.³²

From a theological perspective, focusing on biological parenthood potentially ignores the Christian claim that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, responsible for each other, and that relationships based on discipleship are not subordinate to biologically familial relationships. This theological tenet opens up possibilities for understanding adoption not just as a second choice when reproductive technologies fail, but instead as a Christian response to care for God’s children. This is not to suggest that adoption is a simple answer, since adoption itself has ethical implications.³³ Rather, I want to suggest we have to hold in tension the importance of biological connections with the Christian belief that life-giving love transcends biological connection.

Thus, the American landscape around reproductive technologies contains some implicit assumptions that require consideration when developing a theology of infertility. These assumptions include the ideas that freedom equals the ability to choose among available options, that technology can compensate for human finitude, that we need to subject our bodies to all types of medical interventions, that women and men need children to be complete, and that adoptive parenthood is inferior to biological parenthood.

Before exploring resources for developing a theology of infertility, I want to examine the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on reproductive technologies. This examination will further illuminate why a theology of infertility is necessary.

2. Infertility and Recent Roman Catholic Teaching on Reproductive Technologies: *Donum Vitae*

The Catholic Church’s primary statement regarding the use of reproductive technologies is the *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its*

32 Scott B. Rae and John H. Core, “Reproductive Technologies and the Theology of the Family,” *Ethics and Medicine* 10.1 (Spring 1994): 11–21.

33 See, e.g., Stephen G. Post, “Adoption Theologically Considered,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25.1 (March 1, 1997): 149–68; for responses to Post’s essay, see Elizabeth McKeown, “Adopting Sources: A Response to Stephen Post,” *ibid.*, 169–75; and William Werpehowski, “The Vocation of Parenthood: A Response to Stephen Post,” *ibid.*, 177–82.

452 *Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation (Donum Vitae)*, promulgated by the
 453 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on February 22, 1987.³⁴ In
 454 December 2008, the CDF released the *Instruction on Certain Bioethical*
 455 *Questions (Dignitas Personae)*, which affirmed *Donum Vitae* and addressed
 456 questions that had arisen since *Donum Vitae*'s publication. *Donum Vitae*
 457 will be the focus here, since it provides the foundational arguments against
 458 most forms of reproductive technologies.

459 *Donum Vitae* begins by describing the proper use of technology in relation
 460 to the beginnings of human life. It states that the proper use of technology is to
 461 aid procreation and to serve humanity, in contrast to a misuse of technology,
 462 which dominates and controls procreation, impinging on the values and
 463 rights of the human person. Sadly, the instruction does not more fully
 464 develop its assessment of technology's positive and negative features. If the
 465 CDF instruction had included a more robust theological discussion about
 466 technology, it would have provided an additional moral framework for con-
 467 sidering various reproductive technologies.

468 Instead, the CDF focuses its examination on the status of the embryo and
 469 protecting the value of procreation within marriage in order to evaluate the
 470 licitness of various reproductive technologies. Many have examined the
 471 CDF's arguments against various types of reproductive technologies found
 472 in section 2 of *Donum Vitae*.³⁵ What is missing, however, is an analysis of
 473 *Donum Vitae*'s presumption that procreation means having biological chil-
 474 dren, an assumption that does not hold in light of barrenness, which poses
 475 a challenge for understanding the procreative aspect of marriage found in
 476 *Donum Vitae*. Yet the instruction also affirms the intrinsic value, dignity,
 477

478
 479 34 For several responses to and analyses of *Donum Vitae*, see Antonio G. Spagnola, Maria
 480 L. Di Pietro, and Elio Sgreccia, "Reproductive Technologies in the Light of Vatican
 481 Instruction," *Ethics and Medicine* 5.1 (1989): 9–11; Thomas A. Shannon and Lisa Sowle
 482 Cahill, *Religion and Artificial Reproduction: An Inquiry into the Vatican "Instruction on*
 483 *Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Human Reproduction"*
 484 (New York: Crossroad, 1988); Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, "Dignity of Procreation:
 485 Science and the Creation of Life," *Origins* 17.2 (May 28, 1987): 21, 23–26.

486 35 See, e.g., Thomas W. Hilgers and Sr. Marilyn Wallace, eds., *The Gift of Life: The*
 487 *Proceedings of a National Conference on the Vatican Instruction on Reproductive Ethics*
 488 *and Technology* (Omaha: Pope Paul VI Institute Press, 1990) (contributors include
 489 Joseph Boyle, Rev. R. Cessario, Lorna Cvetkovich, Germain Grisez, Rev. R. Lawler,
 490 William May, Rev. J. Sheets, Janet Smith, and William Wagner); Edmund D. Pellegrino,
 491 John Collins Harvey, and John P. Langan, eds., *Gift of Life: Catholic Scholars Respond*
 492 *to the Vatican Instruction* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) (con-
 493 tributors include J. Harvey, M. Damewood, J. Huber, J. Langan, B. Schüller, J. Haas, Msgr.
 494 Sgreccia, and Lisa Sowle Cahill); Brian V. Johnstone, "The Instruction *Donum Vitae* and
 495 Its Reception," *Studia Moralia* 26 (1988): 209–29.

493 and worth of the infertile couple and their marriage. How do I arrive at these
494 conclusions?

495 In section 2 of *Donum Vitae*, the CDF delineates its position on assisted
496 reproductive technologies, ultimately concluding that both homologous
497 (using the wife's eggs and the husband's sperm) and heterologous (using
498 some combination of donor eggs or sperm) techniques are morally illicit.
499 The techniques prohibited include artificial insemination and in vitro fertili-
500 zation. Prior to the publication of *Donum Vitae*, Kevin Kelly examined the
501 question "How far is the Roman Catholic position on contraception a deter-
502 mining factor in its assessing the morality of IVF?" He analyzed various state-
503 ments by the Catholic bishops in Britain, addresses by Pope Pius XII, and
504 theological analysis by Richard McCormick, SJ. He noted that since the posi-
505 tion in Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humane Vitae* regarding contraception
506 is a conclusion drawn from the more fundamental premise that the unitive
507 and procreative aspects of sexual activity must be held together, this funda-
508 mental premise would be important when looking at in vitro fertilization
509 (IVF). *Humanae Vitae's* concern is to maintain the union of the unitive and
510 procreative in the conjugal act, while IVF separates the unitive and procrea-
511 tive "outside the sexual act."³⁶

512 The CDF in *Donum Vitae* did end up arguing that the unitive and procrea-
513 tive goods of marriage and their connection with sexuality needed to be
514 upheld. The CDF states, "Indeed, by its intimate structure, the conjugal act,
515 while most closely uniting husband and wife, makes them capable of the gener-
516 ation of new lives, according to laws inscribed in the very being of man and
517 of woman." In other words, conjugal activity by design is both unitive and
518 procreative. After noting that this structure has implications for responsible
519 parenthood, the CDF cites *Humanae Vitae*: "By safeguarding both these
520 essential aspects, the unitive and the procreative, the conjugal act preserves
521 in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its ordination toward man's
522 exalted vocation to parenthood."³⁷ The CDF concludes that there is a connec-
523 tion here regarding the use of contraception and what occurs in homologous
524 artificial fertilization, so that neither is permissible because of the underlying
525 premise that the conjugal act is both unitive and procreative. Contraception
526 and artificial insemination, albeit in different ways, sever the link between
527 the unitive and procreative aspects of the conjugal act, and undermine the
528 connection between the unitive and procreative goods of marriage. What
529 holds true for artificial insemination also holds true for in vitro fertilization.

531 36 Kelly, *Life and Love*, chap. 2, esp. pp. 106-10, at 106-7. In the postscript, Kelly indicated
532 that he knew that the CDF would be issuing a document.

533 37 *Donum Vitae*, II, B, 4, citing *Humanae Vitae*, art. 12.

Therefore, the CDF argues that by seeking procreation outside of the conjugal act by using artificial insemination or IVF, a couple incorrectly permits a separation of the goods of marriage and undermines the link between the goods of marriage and the conjugal act.

While the CDF argues that many reproductive technologies are illicit, they sanction technologies that correct underlying medical conditions and as a result permit procreation to happen through the conjugal act.³⁸ For example, hormonal treatments to correct for low or high levels that contribute to infertility, surgery for endometriosis, clearing blocked fallopian tubes, and treating varicocele are acceptable.³⁹ However, for many couples, the solution might not be so simple, particularly if permitted treatments do not change their infertile status. If couples choose to follow the Roman Catholic Church's instruction and not avail themselves of the prohibited reproductive technologies, how are they to understand the inseparability of the unitive and procreative aspects of their married life and their conjugal activity, especially when procreation is understood as bringing forth biological children?

For many who suffer from infertility, the Roman Catholic Church's instruction prohibits a method for fulfilling the mandate or blessing emanating from Genesis 1:28 to "be fruitful and multiply." Alongside the presuppositions that one will be able to have children, the Roman Catholic emphasis on the contributions of married couples as parents,⁴⁰ and the belief that children are a "gift" and "blessing" from God, put the couple in a bind. Ryan describes this bind as a "paradoxical and ultimately untenable position." This position results from the emphasis on the fullness of marriage culminating in parenthood and not having the "right to expect that they will be able to participate in this 'expected' role." The CDF in *Donum Vitae* then says that certain methods the couple might use for moving out of this bind and fulfilling their "expected" role as Christian parents are off-limits.⁴¹

Complicating this reality for women is the Roman Catholic Church's discussions about women as wives, mothers, and virgins, and their societal roles. With roots in Scripture, the tradition's dominant stream maintains that a woman's primary role is motherhood, fulfilled by becoming a wife and bearing children, or in the case of religious women, spiritual motherhood.

38 *Donum Vitae*, II, B, 6-7; *Dignitas Personae*, arts. 12 and 13.

39 The first three are discussed in *Dignitas Personae*. While varicocele is not listed, given the criteria for permitting the first three, treating varicocele would be permitted. See *Dignitas Personae*, art. 13.

40 Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 48-60.

41 Ryan, *The Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction*, 155-56.

This sensibility is slowly changing because of work by Ann O'Hara Graff, Donna Teevan, Elizabeth Johnson and others, even as the virgin/mother myth remains deeply embedded in our theological imaginations and some ecclesial writings.⁴² A woman's vocation as mother comes to the fore when Pope John Paul II exhorts women to model Mary, in whom "*The Church sees ... the highest expression of the 'feminine genius' ...* . Through obedience to the word of God she accepted her lofty yet not easy vocation as wife and mother in the family of Nazareth."⁴³ Evidence of the virgin/mother construction materializes in the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, where John Paul II says of Mary that "*virginity and motherhood co-exist in her: they do not mutually exclude each other or place limits on each other. Indeed, the person of [Mary] helps everyone—especially women—to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other.*"⁴⁴ However, the infertile married woman is neither a perpetual virgin like Mary nor usually a biological mother. Therefore, the CDF instruction places some women in a quandary, because it creates a tension between the Roman Catholic teaching on the nature and vocation of women as primarily virgins or mothers and its reproductive teaching, which closes a biological motherhood option for infertile women.⁴⁵

42 For work analyzing Roman Catholic theological anthropology regarding women, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, 1993), esp. chap. 4. For constructive attempts toward a feminist retrieval of anthropology see Ann O'Hara Graff, ed., *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989); Donna Teevan, "Challenges to the Role of Theological Anthropology in Feminist Theologies," *Theological Studies* 64.3 (September 2003): 582–97; Susan Abraham and Elena G. Procario-Foley, eds., *Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology: Shoulder to Shoulder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), esp. pt. 1.

43 Pope John Paul II, "Letter of John Paul II to Women," June 29, 1995, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women_en.html, art. 10 (emphasis in the original).

44 Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women (Mulieris Dignitatem)*, August 15, 1988, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii apl_15081988_mulieris-dignitatem_en.html, art. 17. For similar reasoning, see Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (Familiaris Consortio)*, November 22, 1981, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html, esp. arts. 17–22 (emphasis in the original).

45 While I would like to say this conundrum does not exist, I have had too many conversations with Catholics who tell me that this is how they see their reality.

616 One reason this predicament exists can be found in the statement from
 617 *Donum Vitae* cited earlier. To drive home the point, I cite it in a fuller form:

618 The Church's teaching on marriage and human procreation affirms the
 619 "inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man
 620 on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the
 621 unitive meaning and the procreative meaning. Indeed, by its intimate
 622 structure, the conjugal act, while more closely uniting husband and wife,
 623 makes them capable of the generation of new lives, according to laws
 624 inscribed in the very being of man and of woman. . . ." "By safeguarding
 625 both these essential aspects, the unitive and procreative, the conjugal act
 626 preserves in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its ordination
 627 toward man's exalted vocation to parenthood."⁴⁶

628 This statement says to the married couple, particularly to the woman, that the
 629 Church teaches that children are a blessing of marriage and they are the gen-
 630 erative end of the conjugal act. This declaration also implies that men are by
 631 vocation called to be fathers. Furthermore, John Paul II's teaching that fathers
 632 take a more active parenting role is necessary and valid.⁴⁷ However, I have not
 633 found any teaching that restricts men's vocation to fatherhood. Indeed, men
 634 are assumed to have other vocations besides fatherhood. Therefore, given the
 635 Roman Catholic Church's teaching regarding the nature of women and the
 636 role of men in the family, I would argue that the CDF in *Donum Vitae* also
 637 does not assume that males are tied to their vocation of fatherhood, but
 638 does claim that women's primary vocation is motherhood.

639 Yet if a woman or her husband is infertile, Roman Catholic teaching
 640 denies a woman a means of reaching her (or their) generative function and
 641 vocation in marriage. Hence, using the same underlying premise for exclud-
 642 ing contraception and for banning certain types of reproductive technologies
 643 is somewhat problematic, since in *Humanae Vitae* "procreative" is under-
 644 stood as biological procreation. The desire to preserve and protect the inse-
 645 parability of the unitive and procreative goods of marriage, manifested in
 646 the conjugal act is valuable, but the inseparability collapses in light of inferti-
 647 lity. A married couple's infertility demonstrates the fallacy of always insisting
 648 on conjoining the unitive and procreative goods of marriage and dimensions
 649 of conjugal activity when one understands procreation only as biological pro-
 650 creation. This raises the question of how we understand procreativity as a
 651 good of marriage if biological procreation is not possible.

652 The CDF in *Donum Vitae* offers a potential way forward when it implicitly
 653 argues that nature does not dictate a woman's vocation to be mothers. It does
 654

655 ⁴⁶ *Donum Vitae*, II, B, 4.

656 ⁴⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, arts. 15, 28, and 41.

657 so when it writes, “*The fidelity of the spouses in the unity of marriage involves*
 658 *reciprocal respect of their right to become a father and a mother only through*
 659 *each other.*”⁴⁸ While this statement could reference the embodied aspect of
 660 cocreating a child, an alternative reading is possible, one that highlights the
 661 reality that men and women become parents in relationship to each other.
 662 Female nature does not make a woman a mother any more than male
 663 nature makes a man a father. The CDF makes a nod in the direction of
 664 acknowledging that parenthood is more about decision, commitment, and
 665 relationality than simply a biological connection. It is the sacrifice for and
 666 care of a vulnerable dependent human child together that forge the identity
 667 of a mother or father.

668 Furthermore, *Donum Vitae* states that “marriage does not confer upon the
 669 spouse the right to have a child.”⁴⁹ While contributing to the bind of married
 670 couples noted earlier, this statement could be interpreted as saying that bio-
 671 logical procreation is not necessary for a valid and fruitful marriage. Thus the
 672 CDF, on its own terms, challenges the belief that a person, particularly a
 673 woman, is incomplete without a biological child. If this is so, then to maintain
 674 the inseparability of the unitive and procreative goods of marriage, procrea-
 675 tion needs to be more broadly construed as generativity.⁵⁰ Generativity can
 676 encompass biological procreation yet also provides a framework for perceiv-
 677 ing “fruitfulness” more broadly. In fact, section 3 of *Donum Vitae* hints at how
 678 the infertile couple might understand procreation in a more expansive way.
 679 Here, the couple is encouraged to examine other gifts they might have to
 680 offer, with which they might serve the community of believers. There is a
 681 responsibility to God and the community to develop those gifts and use
 682 them. Infertility, while dashing hopes, also invites the couple to examine in
 683 a new way what their role is, or should be, in the larger community.
 684
 685

686 48 *Donum Vitae*, II, A, 1 (emphasis in the original). This section cross-references *Gaudium*
 687 *et Spes*, art. 50.

688 49 *Donum Vitae*, II, B, 8.

689 50 In fact, John Paul II does offer an alternative understanding of procreation: procreation of
 690 a just society, dedicated to God. In his “Letter to Women” he makes reference to Genesis
 691 1:28 (“Fill the earth and subdue it”), interpreting it as referring to both procreation and
 692 the transformation of the earth. He states, “In this task, which is essentially that of culture,
 693 *man and woman alike* share equal responsibility from the start. . . . To this ‘unity of two’
 694 [husband and wife] God has entrusted not only the work of procreation and family life,
 695 but the creation of history itself” (art. 8 [emphasis in the original]). In other words,
 696 women and men have an equal role both in the public sphere and in their roles as
 697 parents. This understanding of vocation does not restrict women to the vocations of
 mothers and virgins. Rather, like men, women have vocations and contributions to
 make toward the common good in addition to parenthood.

698 Likewise, the CDF states that the full ecclesial community must consider how
 699 they will welcome and incorporate the infertile or childless into their midst.
 700 Unfortunately, this responsibility on the part of the couple and the commu-
 701 nity is not explained well.⁵¹

702 Despite the fact that I find *Donum Vitae's* reasoning in support of the pro-
 703 hibition on reproductive technologies lacking, I do acknowledge that the CDF
 704 recognizes that reproductive technologies are not morally neutral. The CDF
 705 also provides support for another option that those who are infertile may
 706 have, namely, the option to say “no” to reproductive technologies and the
 707 “infertility treadmill.” However, given the CDF proscription on the use of
 708 most reproductive technologies, the Church needs to grapple with the theo-
 709 logical implications of this teaching for the lived experience of the faithful, its
 710 theological anthropology, and the understanding of marriage as inseparably
 711 unitive and procreative. One way to do this would be to develop a theology
 712 of infertility that helps women and men not feel like failures, that counters
 713 the sense that they have somehow found disfavor with God or that they are
 714 incomplete members of the Body of Christ. Any formulation of a theology
 715 of infertility would require honoring the suffering caused by infertility and
 716 would need to uphold the dignity, worth, gifts, and contributions of infertile
 717 women and men, and the infertile couple. Furthermore, a theology of inferti-
 718 lity would break the silence of the Church on this matter and permit a more
 719 thoughtful, compassionate embracing of all members of the Body of Christ.
 720 I propose we move forward and begin to formulate a theology of infertility.
 721 The next section offers steps for starting that work.
 722
 723

724 **3. Toward Crafting a Theology of Infertility**

725 Given that people experience infertility, it is important that practical
 726 steps to address this reality be taken as a theology of infertility is developed.
 727 My suggestions fall into three general categories: societal, ecclesial, and theo-
 728 logical. The first two are more praxis-oriented.
 729
 730

731 *Societal*

732 These suggested changes involve our daily encounters with people. We
 733 should be deliberate with the type of questions we ask. Let others take the
 734 lead in speaking about their children or lack thereof. We need to resist the
 735 urge to resort to platitudes when encountering the suffering of those who
 736 are infertile. We should be willing to have non-child- centered conversations.
 737
 738

51 *Donum Vitae*, II, B, 8.

739 And we should be courageous in thinking and discussing both the good that
 740 can come from reproductive technologies and the negative consequences of
 741 the technology, while always being mindful to honor the stories and experi-
 742 ences of those who have suffered the pain of infertility.
 743

744 *Ecclesial*

745 The ecclesial proposals might appear more pastoral than theological.
 746 However, changed ecclesial practices, in addition to meeting needs among
 747 the faithful, could foster an awareness for a theology of infertility. By imple-
 748 menting changes, ecclesial communities rise to Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s chal-
 749 lenge to address the pain and suffering of infertility, breaking the Christian
 750 church’s silence. This is important because, as Ryan highlights, infertility is
 751 not only a “medical or social crisis” but also a “spiritual crisis, a deep confron-
 752 tation of meaning and belief.” Acknowledging the spiritual dimension of
 753 infertility allows one to engage resources within the tradition to help people
 754 grapple with loss and self-transformation, to hold onto hope, to heal, to
 755 forgo the pursuit of a technological solution, and to arrive at a new sense of
 756 self.⁵² The Church must accompany its people in their spiritual distress.

757 Consequently, attending to homilies, bulletin inserts, and church events
 758 around particular holy days while recognizing that such feasts can be a test
 759 of faith or a source of great sorrow for infertile couples can help to break
 760 the silence. For example, Christmas, which focuses on the birth of a baby,
 761 Emmanuel, poses particular challenges for those longing for a child.
 762 Celebrations and blessings of mothers and fathers in church on Mother’s
 763 Day or Father’s Day can be alienating, since they often overlook those who
 764 are infertile. These celebrations can be more inclusive if they seek ways to
 765 recognize “the pain of longing for parenthood” and incorporate this recog-
 766 nition “liturgically alongside the joy and struggles of its [parenthood] realiz-
 767 ation.”⁵³ On the other hand, Pentecost provides a great resource to preach
 768 on the power of the Holy Spirit and the gifts provided to the Church on
 769 that day. How can this feast help us think beyond the usual gifts from God
 770 that include but are not limited to children? How can we name, recognize,
 771 and honor these other gifts of the members of the Body of Christ on a
 772 more deliberate, consistent basis?

773 Changing and adapting the marriage rite to include the possibility that
 774 children might not arrive needs consideration. When the couple is asked to
 775 commit to each other “in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health,
 776 for richer or poorer,” “with or without biological children” could be added.
 777

778 ⁵² Ryan, *The Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction*, 151.

779 ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 154.

We acknowledge that health might decline, material circumstances will change—why not acknowledge that biological children may or may not arrive? One resource within the marriage rite already makes this acknowledgment. The prayers highlight the rich dimensions of marriage and express the community’s hopes that the marriage will facilitate service to the world, foster growth in holiness, increase trust between spouses, shape a shared life together, function as sign of the union between Christ and his Church, serve as a witness to the world of divine love, function as an image of the covenant between God and God’s people, and be blessed with children.⁵⁴ These are wide-ranging hopes for the marriage, whereby children are one hope among many. We need to admit, and discover how to communicate, that prayers that make reference to children actually request that God may grant or bless the couple with children. Liturgically, the prayers and blessings admit the reality that biological children might not arrive.⁵⁵ Frank discussions regarding this reality could also help break the silence surrounding infertility and begin facilitating discussions about the gifts of the childless within the community, as well as broader understandings of procreativity as a good of marriage.

However, changed practices are not enough. The cultural assumptions surrounding reproductive technologies discussed in section 1 still need more developed theological responses.

Theological

Theological resources exist within the tradition to counter the cultural notions of freedom and finitude operative in the celebration of reproductive technologies, specifically Karl Rahner’s notion of theological concupiscence.⁵⁶ For Rahner, theological concupiscence is the category with which to discuss the relationship and essential tension between human finitude (nature) and human freedom (person).⁵⁷ This tension between nature (finitude) and person (freedom) exists as an existential of human existence.

54 *The Sacramentary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1985), 840–50.

55 The infertile are most aware of the blessing and gift language surrounding children. This awareness springs from the fact that they are not included in the group so blessed and gifted, and creates its own theological and spiritual distress for them as they wonder why God is withholding gifts and blessings from them.

56 Karl Rahner, “The Theological Concept of *Concupiscentia*,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary, and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 347–82.

57 *Ibid.*, 362 ff.

821 Nature, according to Rahner, is “that which is pre-established for free
 822 personal control and which serves as the norm of [a] decision.”⁵⁸ Nature
 823 serves as the norm of any decision, because it is what the Creator created,
 824 our essence—the clay of the potter, so to speak. Person, on the other hand,
 825 is “what this being in freedom makes of itself and as how it wants to under-
 826 stand itself.”⁵⁹ It is how the human wants to shape and form her being and life
 827 through the choices made and actions undertaken. However, freedom does
 828 not arise from nothing; it requires that which is embodied, prior to
 829 expression, in our nature. Nature forms the a priori basis for any decision
 830 or action in freedom. In other words, nature sets the preconditions for any
 831 action. However, these preconditions are transcended through freedom and
 832 subsequent actions.⁶⁰

833 All actions engage varying depths of our being, and thus embody our
 834 values and beliefs. Rahner states, “Seen from a Christian point of view, the
 835 idea of responsible freedom changes greatly and becomes immensely
 836 deeper when it is seen that man can determine and decide himself as a
 837 whole by his freedom . . . and that he therefore posits acts which must not
 838 merely be qualified morally and then pass away again.”⁶¹ In other words,
 839 acts are not just momentary blips in our lives. Acts have effects that influence
 840 not only present but also future actions, our way of being in the world, and
 841 our relationships. If Rahner is correct that we determine our identity and
 842 shape the direction of our lives by our actions, then the possibility exists
 843 that struggles with infertility and reactions to reproductive technologies indi-
 844 cate that infertile couples are engaging their freedom more deeply than
 845 freedom-of-choice language implies.

846 Given the reality that reproductive technologies do not always
 847 succeed, theological concupiscence provides a theological foundation for
 848

849 58 Karl Rahner, “The Passion and Asceticism,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, *The*
 850 *Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon
 851 Press, 1967), 69.

852 59 Ibid.

853 60 Rahner maintains that the “finite person itself is at the same time always also a nature.”
 854 He further states that there is “no point in the concrete existence of man . . . which is not
 855 affected by the fate of the nature in the person.” This is because “the possibilities of per-
 856 sonal existence always rest essentially on the possibilities of the nature.” In other words,
 857 nature forms the contours of the conditions within which freedom acts (Rahner, “The
 Passion and Asceticism,” 71).

858 61 Karl Rahner, “Guilt—Responsibility—Punishment within the View of Catholic Theology,”
 859 in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. and
 860 Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 201–2. While Rahner ultimately talks
 861 about salvation and damnation in this particular passage, there is insight here for consid-
 ering responses to infertility.

862 understanding the uncertainty in any response to infertility. Theological con-
 863 cupiscence accentuates the lack of certainty and the elusiveness of many
 864 moral decisions and actions. There remains something irresolute in the
 865 relationship between our finitude and our freedom, something that questions
 866 the decision made or the action taken, or elements to be considered that we
 867 simply do not yet recognize; there is a remainder of sorts. This means that
 868 every decision or action undertaken entails risk. The risk is that we will be
 869 more wrong or more wonderfully right than we ever imagined.

870 Moreover, any response to infertility will require grappling with some
 871 form of suffering, since nature (finitude) can never be fully overcome by
 872 freedom. Rahner describes how the tension between our finitude and our
 873 freedom manifests itself in the experiences of human Passion.⁶² Passion as
 874 humans experience it is not the Passion of Christ, but the aspect of human
 875 existence “characterized by what we normally call pain, suffering, anxiety,
 876 fear, death,” and so forth.⁶³ This is experienced as any “diminution of a
 877 natural condition of existence or activity”—stated differently, as an experience
 878 of finitude.

879 When discussing human Passion, Rahner makes a crucial distinction
 880 between the natural and personal aspects of this human experience. The
 881 natural is related to what we experience biologically or that which other crea-
 882 tures would also experience. The personal refers to what occurs “within the
 883 natural sphere” as experienced by a human being. In other words, the per-
 884 sonal indicates a degree of freedom in thinking, acting, and deciding about
 885 one’s “reality,” “own being,” and “life.” The personal transcends simple
 886 empirical analysis of the natural experience. The natural and personal experi-
 887 ential aspects of Passion help explain why infertility is not simply a matter of
 888 biology. The biological effects of infertility manifest themselves in personal
 889 ways, raising questions about identity, purpose, and a person’s life narrative.
 890 Rahner recognizes that suffering is part of every decision engaging the depth
 891 of human freedom. Suffering occurs because every decision involves renun-
 892 ciation; deciding in favor of some possibilities means closing off other possi-
 893 bilities. Freedom seen as truth-to-self will necessitate “suffering” or the
 894 closing of certain possibilities. For example, for those who are infertile, this
 895 actuality reveals itself when they let go of hopes for biological children.
 896

897 62 Rahner, “The Passion and Asceticism,” 58–85. In this article Rahner does not use
 898 “passion” to mean human emotions or intense emotion, as “passion” sometimes indi-
 899 cates in English usage. Rather, he uses it as a description of a state of existence, a
 900 matrix within which one lives, rather than a particular emotion or feeling. As such, I
 901 will follow the translator in capitalizing “Passion” to distinguish this existential state
 902 from a particular quality or type of emotion.

903 63 Rahner, “The Passion and Asceticism,” 69.

903 Thus, infertility is one particular expression of the existential reality that, for
 904 all human beings, freedom never completely transcends finitude. However,
 905 while Rahner's concept of theological concupiscence can help us think
 906 about the tension between freedom and finitude in the context of infertility,
 907 on its own it is insufficient for a theology of infertility.

908 A robust theology of infertility also means theologically contesting the cul-
 909 tural and religious notions regarding childlessness noted earlier. A starting
 910 point could be perceiving Genesis' call to be fruitful and to multiply as a
 911 call not just for individuals but also for the human race. If humanity is to
 912 be fruitful and multiplying, can we consider how procreation might not be
 913 a necessity for all human couples? This would require a conversation about
 914 the identity and place of childless couples in the community and the Body
 915 of Christ. What is their role? Would a better understanding of the celibate's
 916 role in the community help us think about the role of the childless within
 917 the community?⁶⁴ Giving a satisfactory answer to the questions regarding
 918 childless couples' contributions to the Body of Christ means we must
 919 attend to several underlying foundational issues.

920 First, can we more explicitly articulate a belief that childless marriages are
 921 valid vocations?⁶⁵ This is a difficult question to answer. Given the operative
 922 norm that the fruit of marriage is children, our ability to answer in the affir-
 923 mative depends on our ability to give theological support for an expanded
 924 notion of procreation. The theological move from the goods of marriage
 925 being unitive and procreative to being unitive and generative, where "genera-
 926 tive" includes biological procreativity, is central to a theology of infertility.
 927 This would help create space for infertile couples to think about their mar-
 928 riages as not empty and barren, but rather as fruitful. Among others,
 929 Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Christine Gudorf have already done some
 930 work in the area of generativity, but more needs to be done.⁶⁶ Mercy Amba
 931 Oduyoye indicates the value of seeing procreativity differently, where the
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933 64 Dale Launderville's work exploring where the celibate fits into the structure and function-
 934 ing of the ancient household has promise for understanding and articulating more expli-
 935 citly how we understand the childless in contemporary culture. See his *Celibacy in the*
 936 *Ancient World* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

937 65 This is a slight rewording of a question posed by Kelly in *Life and Love*, 152.

938 66 See, e.g., Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Produce or Perish: A Feminist Critique of
 939 Generativity," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 43.1-4 (1989): 201-22; Miller-
 940 McLemore, "Generativity, Self-Sacrifice, and the Ethics of Family Life," in *Equal-
 941 Regard Family and Its Friendly Critics*, ed. John Witte Jr., M. Christian Green, and Amy
 942 Wheeler (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 17-41; Christine Gudorf, "Papal Ideals,
 943 Marital Realities: One View from the Ground," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism:
 Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung and Joseph
 Andrew Coray (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 269-88; Gudorf,

944 infertile could claim that their lives were lived as a doxology to God, and their
 945 creative command became “increase in humanity. Multiply the likeness to
 946 God for which you have the potential. Multiply the fullness of humanity
 947 that is found in Christ. Fill the earth with the glory of God. Increase in crea-
 948 tivity. Bring into being that which God can look upon and pronounce
 949 ‘good,’ even ‘very good.’”⁶⁷

950 The second foundational issue that needs further work in developing a
 951 theology of infertility concerns Mary. Analysis of how a theological anthropol-
 952 ogy that prioritizes Mary’s virginity and motherhood as a central image that
 953 shapes views about women’s vocation must continue. Mary is important,
 954 but what understanding of women and vision of women’s vocations would
 955 arise if other scriptural images of women were also integrated into our theo-
 956 logical heritage? Is it possible to shatter the duality of the virgin/mother con-
 957 struct for women so that roles other than vowed life or motherhood are
 958 appreciated and supported as a valid response to God’s call? Studying the
 959 role of other women in Scripture, such as Miriam, Deborah, and Phoebe
 960 would help develop a more robust theological anthropology and understand-
 961 ing of vocation for women. Doing so would provide alternative visions for
 962 identity formation when biological motherhood is not an option.

963 964 **4. Conclusion**

965 The operating premise of this article is that a theology of infertility
 966 needs to be developed as a response to questions raised by infertility.
 967 Section 1 indicated some challenges facing human self-understanding in
 968 light of infertility and our cultural response to reproductive technologies.
 969 These challenges include how our comprehension of freedom, finitude,
 970 and embodiment, responses to childlessness, and views of parenthood are
 971 shaped by cultural presuppositions. A theology of infertility would need to
 972 offer alternative constructions for understanding freedom, finitude, embodi-
 973 ment, childlessness, and parenthood. Section 2 examined the Roman Catholic
 974 Church’s teaching on reproductive technologies and raised additional chal-
 975 lenges in two areas: theological anthropology and the understanding of the
 976 inseparability of the unitive and procreative goods of marriage. The analysis
 977 of *Donum Vitae* also yielded insights toward maintaining the inseparability
 978 of the unitive and procreative goods of marriage in light of childlessness
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982 “Resymbolizing Life: Religion on Population and Environment,” *Horizons* 28.2 (2001):
 983 183–210, at 207–9.
 984 ⁶⁷ Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” 118.

985 and discerning gifts to be offered to the community. Additionally, *Donum*
 986 *Vitae* with its prohibition of many types of reproductive technologies provides
 987 an alternative to the “infertility treadmill.” However, saying “no” to the tech-
 988 nology needs to be placed within the context of a more robust theological
 989 vision of women’s vocations, a richer understanding of procreativity, and sen-
 990 sitivity to and pastoral responses attentive to the implications of the teaching
 991 in the lives of the faithful.

992 As a result, suggestions were made in section 3 for implementing societal
 993 and ecclesial practices that would foster awareness of infertility and sensitivity
 994 to the infertile in our communities. Karl Rahner’s notion of theological con-
 995 cupiscence was used to show an alternative way of considering freedom
 996 and finitude. Finally, additional places within the tradition and Scripture
 997 that might yield fruit for crafting a theology of infertility were suggested.
 998 Doing the further work needed to craft a theology of infertility would continue
 999 the process of raising awareness and breaking the silence surrounding infer-
 1000 tility in communities and would provide an alternative to the cultural vision
 1001 celebrating reproductive technologies while ignoring their costs.⁶⁸

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