

Homily given by UFL Chaplain Fr. Terry Ehrman, C.S.C.
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Our Lord Jesus teaches us today about discipleship. “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” In an age of instant gratification and satisfaction, the cross does not sound appealing. What does the Cross entail?: the suffering of love, self-sacrifice, turning away from a perspective focused on the self, losing/denying the self for Christ, giving oneself away as gift, entering into communion with others. A seldom discussed cross, for an increasing number of people today, is infertility.

We hear of infertility in the First Reading from Second Kings where the man and woman from Shunem are without children. The Shunemmite woman provides room and board for the prophet Elisha. The prophet wants to make a return gift for her hospitality. When he finds out she is without child, he prophesies that by this time next year she will bear a son. In the next verse that follows in the Bible—but is not included in our reading today—the woman remonstrates with him not to deceive her; she does not want to have her hopes raised only to be disappointed. However, she does conceive and bear a son.

We are probably familiar with those significant figures from Scripture who suffered from infertility but, through God’s grace, were able to conceive and have a son: Sarah had Isaac, Manoah’s wife had Samson, Hannah had Samuel, and in the New Testament, Elizabeth, who was thought barren in her old age, gave birth to John the Baptist.

In our present day, many couples, and women in particular, suffer from infertility. Research indicates that one out of six couples will experience infertility. Infertility is a cross and source of great suffering. Many women feel abandoned and isolated; they can feel inferior to other women who are pregnant and having children. They can feel judged by others: grandparents wonder where the grandchildren are; colleagues or parishioners may wonder why this couple is not having children. The repeated failure to achieve pregnancy can put a strain on the marriage. Husband and wife can feel like they are being used and using the other when trying to conceive. The joyous celebration of Mother’s Day for most becomes a painful reminder of infertility. Some will avoid the parish Mass where there are families with many children.

Infertility raises questions about God’s purpose and one’s identity. Called to marriage and the raising of children, women can suffer vocationally and with their sense of identity. They can struggle with happiness as their desire for a child remains unfulfilled.

What is the response to infertility? Can infertility be healed?

Leslie and John were trying for nine years to achieve pregnancy without success due to blocked fallopian tubes. They went to a doctor and using a new reproductive technology brought about the conception in a petri dish of a daughter who was implanted in Leslie's womb and born, Louise Brown, on July 25, 1978. She is was the first "test tube" baby to be born. Four years later, Leslie and John had another daughter, Natalie, through in vitro fertilization (IVF). Louise will be 39 years old at month's end. She is married and has a child through natural means. Louise and Natalie are both precious gifts of God made in God's image and likeness. Every human life has dignity whether its origin comes about through righteous or unrighteous means.

What is the relation of IVF to the dignity of a child, the dignity of mother and father, and to the integrity of marriage? The Church teaches (*Dignitas Personae*) that "[t]he origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and in the family, where it is generated through an act which expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman" (#6). Husband and wife join together in the conjugal bond, offering the gift of themselves to each other in an act of personal love that is capable of bringing about a new human life. This conjugal sharing is both intrinsically procreative and unitive of two persons who hope together to love a third, a child. The Church teaches that we should not separate these two essential dimensions of that love. "[H]uman procreation is a personal act of a husband and wife, which is not capable of substitution" (#16). The intrinsic bodily intimacy of husband and wife cannot be substituted by a petri dish, pipettes, or by donors/vendors of gametes, embryos, or wombs.

Beyond the reality of our human nature as God's creatures, artificial reproductive technology harbors a dark shadow side. IVF creates life by destroying life. For IVF on average, 5.88 embryos are procreated for every live birth. Louise Brown was conceived and born into the world, but she also had other siblings who were not brought to term. What is the relationship of Leslie and John to their other children who were conceived? Many "unused" embryos are "orphaned" by being put into cryopreservation. Today, 400,000 IVF embryos are in cryopreservation in the United States. Furthermore, with artificial reproductive technology, multiple conceptions occur or multiple embryos are implanted in a woman's womb. 32% of IVF pregnancies are multiple pregnancies. However, to reduce the number of embryos in the womb, selective abortion is regularly performed, sometimes the decision made on the sex of the baby. Artificial reproductive technology requires the sacrifice of many humans. In this sense, IVF is the reverse of the cross: others must die in order that a desired child might live.

Artificial reproductive technology does not treat the underlying cause of infertility; it does not heal the woman but bypasses infertility to bring about a child

amidst the destruction of human life as mentioned. What recourse, then, is there for the cross of infertility that women carry?

The Church is not against technology; it is for the moral use of technology. A procreative technology does exist that respects the dignity of a child, man and woman, and the integrity of marriage. It is called Natural Procreative Technology, or [NaProTechnology](#). NaPro evaluates and treats infertility by identifying and treating the underlying causes of infertility. A 29 year old woman had been trying for seven years to achieve pregnancy without success. She and her husband had tried ovulation induction and artificial insemination. She then visited a NaPro physician and fertility specialists who tracked her cycles and prescribed a vitamin B₆ protocol. Within her first cycle after this treatment, she observed a body fluid discharge never seen before (it was a sign of fertility). The couple achieved pregnancy in this first cycle.

The Church speaks prophetically to our culture about procreation and sexuality, and this woman who received this prophet, received a prophet's reward. Jesus calls us to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

With its natural technology, NaProTechnology achieves a success rate up to over three times that of IVF. Typically, the success rate of IVF is about 25-27%. Depending on the underlying condition of infertility, NaPro has a success rate of 38-82%. There are no selective abortions, no substitutions, no frozen embryos. Compared to artificial reproductive technology, with NaPro, diseases are identified and treated; more total pregnancies are achieved; it is built on human dignity and the natural fertility of a woman and not on death; it is more cost effective.

Some infertility cannot be healed by NaPro. 100% effectiveness is not obtainable. So, how does a woman bear the cross of infertility? These women, like all of us, are to enter into the mystery of the Cross and find and give life by conforming themselves to Christ who gave His life that we might live and flourish, free from sin. Jesus Christ was sent by the Father, not to make our life easy, but to show us the path of redemption: the Cross and Resurrection. He calls us to enter into His life that He poured out on the Cross. In every Eucharist, we celebrate His paschal life of death and resurrection. Jesus gives us Himself in the Eucharist. We receive the Body of Christ that we might better be the Body of Christ and conform ourselves to His self-sacrificial love.

Christ heals and elevates us with the gift of Himself. With the power of His Spirit, we are able to live His life and find happiness, beatitude. The beatitudes are the life of Christ. He lived this way. For a woman suffering from infertility, she—like all of us—is to enter into the beatitudes: blessed are those who mourn; they shall be comforted; blessed are the lowly; blessed are the merciful. Bodily healing may not be possible, but Christ heals our heart and spirit. For those carrying the cross of infertility, there are other ways to serve life: adoption is an option for

some but not all; one can serve and assist other families, the poor, children with disabilities, the community.

We as the Church are called to be compassionate toward those who carry this cross of infertility. And we also proclaim prophetically the goodness of healing achievable through natural procreative technology that serves life and love. Every human heart that suffers, for example through infertility, will find its beatitude and healing in Jesus Christ as we learn to take up our cross, follow him, and so become worthy of him.