

Pastoral Letter

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and

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CELEBRATING HUMAN LIFE

Cherishing Life

1. It is indeed positive to note that in our country, there has been an ongoing debate with respect to the way in which a number of couples can address the difficulty of infertility. This gives witness just to what extent we cherish human life. This is even more appreciated when one realizes that in today's age, in Europe, and in Malta too, a large part of society is stingy with respect to new life, in the sense that the birth rate is low.¹ It is admirable that our society expresses such enthusiasm, particularly in the case of those couples who are called upon to make great sacrifices.
2. As Bishops of Malta and Gozo, bearing in mind the cultural context of today's society, we are addressing this Pastoral Letter primarily to the Catholic community of our country; but also to our Maltese and Gozitan brothers and sisters of goodwill who genuinely hold Catholic teachings at heart.² It is our duty as spiritual shepherds of this community to guide those Catholics (in the first place, married couples who are experiencing difficulty with procreation, as well as other persons who work in the field of science, politics and the law), in order that they may form their consciences rightly on a subject such as human life, a subject which is so sacred and fundamental.
3. It is normal for a newly wedded couple to desire children. It is often the case that when faced with the problem of infertility, a couple feels that it has failed.

¹In EU countries, the birth rate is 1.59, a little higher than ten years ago, however in Malta is decreased from 1.77 in 1999 to 1.38 in 2010. See Eurostat,

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsdde220&plugin=0>.

² Joseph Mercieca and Nikol Cauchi, "Declaration on Artificial Insemination", 26th July 1995; *ibid.*, "Declaration on Ethical Problems Related To Assisted Reproduction", 4th February 2005; *ibid.*, "Declaration on the Protection of Human Life from Conception", 1st July 2005; Joseph Mercieca, "The Dignity and Integrity of Human Life", 21st September 2005; Paul Cremona and Mario Grech, "Pastoral Letter for Advent 2010, The place of the Crib in our families", 27th November 2011; Mario Grech, "The sorrow of couples who are unable to bear children", 30th March 2012.

This sense of failure is aggravated if this condition arises as a consequence of certain choices which the couple would have made in the past.

4. As Bishops, we empathize with these couples and we wish to remind them that the fact that they are childless does not mean that their mission as a married couple has been unsuccessful. We all know of couples who, in spite of being childless, have proved to be worthy in other areas of their lives. Yet this does not resolve their great desire to communicate their love by becoming parents. For this reason, we appeal to men of science to carry on with their research, leading them to seek solutions which are ethically and morally good, in order that these married couples may fulfill their genuine and valid desire to become parents. In our appeal, we are reiterating that which His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI stated a few months ago while he was addressing scientists gathered to discuss the diagnosis and treatment of infertility. While praising the intellectual honesty of the scientists who seek truth, he also felt the need to make the following observation: “Scientism and the logic of profit seem effectively to dominate the field of infertility and human procreation today, even to the point of limiting many other areas of research”.³

YES to Life

5. The Church is the Institution which favours life more than any other institution in the world. It insists that the value of human life must remain untarnished and the Church defends it from the very moment of conception, always striving to bring to light the unique dignity of the human being. This is in accordance with the will of God, who alone is the Lord of life. The Church recognizes that human life is not a ‘product’ which may be fashioned, built, used and brushed aside.⁴ The Church teaches that no one can “use” a person, at whatever stage of his development, right from the first moment of his existence until the moment of his natural death, whatever his condition. If this fundamental respect is over-looked, science becomes man’s enemy. The Church is fully aware of her duty to defend those who are vulnerable and to give a voice to the voiceless. The Church strongly reiterates its ‘yes’ to life, particularly when life is at it’s weakest point, such as when a person’s development is in its early stages.
6. It is in this light that the Church, bearing in mind the principles of natural reason, and confirmed by Revelation, has always insisted upon the fact that science is to be at the authentic service of humanity. Scientific development must progress within such limits which ensure that fundamental respect towards the person is never lacking, otherwise it becomes an enemy of the human being.

³ Benedict XVI, Address to the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, 25th February 2012, par. 2. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120225_acdlife_en.html.

⁴ Ibid. par. 5.

7. The Church has always taught that authentic service to humanity and the protection and promotion of his dignity cannot be guaranteed unless one abides by the principles of truth about mankind. This is explained very clearly by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*. In fact, the Church has always taken loving initiatives (*Caritas*) in favour of mankind in the light of the truth about the human person. Charity and truth go hand in hand; it is truth which ensures authentic charity.
8. The Church has the right and duty to proclaim its moral judgment upon research and upon technical methods used for human reproduction. By so doing, she is in no way interfering in the scientific field; rather she is fulfilling her mission of bringing to the attention of one and all, the ethical and social responsibilities which arise from any action taken in respect of human beings.

The Truth protects Life

9. What is the ethical truth regarding *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) which the Catholic Church, out of love for mankind, and together with all its members, has the duty to proclaim as part of its mission?
10. According to the teachings of the Church, any medical methods which are used to cure infertility should be based upon a profound respect for the following three fundamental values:
 - a. **The value of life and the physical integrity of every person.** This must be protected from the very moment of conception until the moment of natural death of the human person, more so when the person is in a vulnerable state. Any form of discrimination with respect to different stages of life cannot be justified and must be upheld like any other form of discrimination.⁵ “From conception, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother, it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already”.⁶ Some months ago, this most important value was acknowledged at a civil level, that is, human life must be safeguarded from the moment of conception (embryos).⁷
 - b. **The value of conjugal unity.** This unity is manifest in the respect which the married couple foster for one another; in recognizing that in their marriage, they have the right to become parents. The married man and woman, through their reciprocal gift of love, bring one another to perfection when they cooperate with the Creator in the conception and bearing of children. For this reason, any couple which accepts a third

⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Procured Abortion, 18th November 1974, par. 12.

⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*, Instruction on respect for human life in its origin and on the dignity of procreation: replies to certain questions of the day, 22nd February 1987, par. I.1 which quotes from the Declaration on Procured Abortion of the same Congregation, 18th November 1974, par. 12.

⁷ European Court of Justice, *Oliver Brüstle vs Greenpeace*, 18th October 2011 decided that human embryos deserved to be respected with human dignity.

party to participate in the process of artificial fertilization is in effecting constituting a rupture of their conjugal unity, their conjugal fidelity; it also obstructs the right of the married couple to become parents exclusively through their mutual co-operative action.

- c. **The value of human sexuality in marriage.** The conception of a human person should be the outcome of the mutual self-giving love of the married couple. This gift is realized through their sexual intimacy, an action through which the man and the woman become “one body”. Therefore, bearing in mind this value, the conception of new life cannot be treated solely as a biological act. Neither can it be a technical process which produces embryos as if they were objects. The gift of human life should be eagerly accepted in marriage, which is the ideal and most natural situation for conception to take place, through personal acts which are exclusive and specific to married men and women. This is in conformity with the teachings of the Church which state that “there is an inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act”.⁸

11. Therefore, every technical method which replaces the personal conjugal act fails to respect the dignity of the human person and of the unity of marriage and so this is not acceptable. On the other hand, such technical methods are acceptable when they aid the personal conjugal act to achieve its aim, that is to conceive human life.⁹

The natural law safeguards life

12. The IVF method calls for the creation of several embryos in order for the desired child to be born. Even though a number of these embryos are not killed deliberately, but die a ‘natural’ death shortly after they are conceived, the fact remains that several embryos are being sacrificed and instrumentalized so that a child may be born. Both this procedure, as well as the method in which human embryos are being selected in order that a child may be born, confirms that the process, in itself, infringes upon human dignity. Everything points to the fact that *in vitro* fertilization methods, which at first glance seem to be at the service of life, are in fact, actually a threat to human life.
13. At times the scientific process involves the freezing of superfluous embryos (conceived through IVF) which are not selected to be implanted in the mother’s womb (*cryo-preservation*). The Church makes it clear that it does not consider the freezing of embryos to be an acceptable solution. The document, *Donum Vitae*, which was previously referred to states clearly that: “*The freezing of embryos, even when carried out in order to preserve the life*

⁸ Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Humanae Vitae*, 25th July 1968 par. 12. This teaching is repeated in Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*, Instruction on respect for human life in its origin and on the dignity of procreation: replies to certain questions of the day, 22nd February 1987, p IIB4a

⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Personae*, Instruction on certain bioethical situations, 8th Settembru 2008, par. 12

of an embryo - cryopreservation - *constitutes an offence against the respect due to human beings* by exposing them to grave risks of death or harm to their physical integrity and depriving them, at least temporarily, of maternal shelter and gestation, thus placing them in a situation in which further offences and manipulation are possible”.¹⁰

14. Parents can never concede to the freezing of their children. By so doing they would be shirking their responsibility as parents. On the other hand, if their ‘offspring’ is frozen without their consent, they would be unfairly deprived of their responsibility as parents. Through the freezing of these embryos, mankind is creating new orphanages. Besides this, the future of these frozen embryos is very bleak. The embryo, even while it is frozen, is still in possession of certain unalienable rights. A democratic society is duty-bound to oversee that the laws which protect these embryos are observed.
15. In some areas, it is being suggested that in order to mitigate the dangers of frozen embryos, such embryos which are not implanted in the mother’s womb are put up for adoption. This is not a solution either because serious complications of a medical, psychological and legal nature may arise; this also poses greater ethical problems.
16. The *IVF* process involves methods which at times considers the person, who is still at the embryonic stage, to be merely “a mass of cells” which may be used, selected and dispensed with. Many times, a significant number of human embryos are sacrificed for the sake of the birth of the desired child. Such *in vitro* fertilization practices constitute the meditated and direct destruction of innocent human life. The Church Magisterium has always considered this destruction of embryos to be abortive. Blessed John Paul II teaches that: “Procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth”.¹¹

Therefore the above-mentioned practices cannot be morally justified in any way and under no circumstances. It is never morally permissible for a bad action (in this case, the destruction of a number of embryos) to atone for a good cause (in this case, the conception and birth of a desired child). It is a well-known moral principle that the end does not justify the means.

17. Human life should be safe-guarded and its integrity promoted from the very moment of conception. This obligation stems from the dignity of the human person which is at the foundation of all human rights. Therefore, this is an obligation which stems from the principles of natural law. Every person, because he is a person, has an inherent dignity which must be acknowledged and respected by others. For this reason, civil law would be just or unjust not based upon whether it agrees or disagrees with the religious ethical code, but if it is not in conformity with the human ethical code. This human ethical code, also referred to as the natural law, does not depend upon positive

¹⁰ Par. I.6.

¹¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, 25th March 1995, par. 58

parliamentary legislation; even more so, it cannot be tarnished or brushed aside by a majority vote in parliament.

18. It is a fact that in our country, the practice of IVF is widespread. It has just been reported that during the last 22 years, 750 women became pregnant through this method. It is also a well-known fact that where civil laws do not regulate the practice of IVF, there is great disorder. In continuation to what we stated earlier, we feel that civil law in respect of assisted procreation should aim to safe-guard the three values we have already mentioned, ie. the value of life and physical integrity of every person, the value of the unitive aspect of marriage and the value of human sexuality in marriage.

A law which does not safe-guard these values is morally wrong. There are different levels of ethical gravity emanating out of a law that does not respect these values. For this reason, men of goodwill who are responsible to draw up legislation are duty-bound in conscience to try and achieve the best possible benefits, or as far as possible, to mitigate dangers.

Solidarity with couples who wish to accept the gift of life

19. The Church, in deep solidarity with couples who are facing problems of infertility, desires that science will continue to develop and offer such technical methods which, without replacing the conjugal act, assist the couple's fertility processes. It is the hope of the Church that couples who are combatting infertility will not taken advantage of either psychologically nor financially, especially since their situation already poses enough stress as it is.
20. The Church is heavily committed in several ways to assist couples who are facing such a situation and to offer proper guidance on the real nature of their condition. First of all, the Church steadfastly encourages couples not to concede to the temptation of taking "easy" solutions simply because these seem technically possible. Not only are these solutions morally wrong, but they are susceptible to danger in that they are to the detriment of the physical and mental health of the couple, most especially the woman. The Church is also committed to take initiatives that are morally good, in order to assure the utmost respect towards strengthening the couple and towards human life. Finally, it would be extremely helpful if one were to embark upon a serious scientific study with respect to the cause and prevention of infertility.
21. For this reason, the Church makes an appeal to all people and reminds them of their obligation to form their conscience properly. An authentic Christian conscience is formed in the light of the principles of natural law mentioned above and in conformity with the teachings of the Church. Catholics with a morally and correctly formed conscience are called upon to give witness to the Truth of Love, and this love is confirmed by the same truth.
22. In this respect we wish to address those couples who have overcome infertility problems by adopting or accepting to foster children. Their generosity is most exemplary and praiseworthy. These couples offer hope

not only to those children whom they have welcomed into their lives and who are being reared with love and care, but also to those couples, who similarly, are hoping to be parents.

23. The Church holds close to her heart all those children who are born as a result of IVF methods and confirms that they are still children of God, even if the methods through which they were conceived go against Church teachings and against human dignity. The Church urges the parents of these children to trust in God's mercy and to seek the road to self-reconciliation, in line with their call and mission as parents.

We pray for God's blessing upon all married couples and families of our country and also upon all those who cherish and labour in favour of human life.

Today, 26th July, 2012 Memorial of St Joachim and St Anne.

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