

"EXCESS EMBRYOS" AND THE TWILIGHT ZONE

By: Janet Smith

President Bush has authorized his new Bioethics Commission to investigate the ethics of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF). At first glance, IVF may seem a life-affirming action since it enables couples with fertility problems to bring new life into the world.

Few can fail to sympathize with couples unable to have children, but IVF is a practice fraught with moral difficulties, the most serious of which is the creation of excess embryos. Simply the phrase "excess embryos" should make us suspect that we may have entered "the twilight-zone."

IVF can proceed by use of a husband's sperm and a wife's egg; or it can use donor sperm and donor egg. The parents may be married individuals, single persons, gay or lesbian couples; the child may be gestated by the biological mother, the adoptive mother or a surrogate. Many embryos are created, a few are chosen for implantation (which fails much more often than it succeeds) and the others are discarded or frozen.

Bizarre lawsuits have accompanied the practice of IVF; women have sued ex-husbands for child support; husbands have sued for property rights; surrogates have sued for custody, etc. Lawsuits with no clear solution often indicate that some serious violation of the natural law has occurred.

Our culture is so incapable of moral insight, that it finds completely antiquated and preposterous the suggestion that babies should only be conceived of an act of sexual intercourse by their married parents.

Let's try another perspective on for size, a perspective that argues that our present practices are barbaric, not humane.

"I knit you in your mother's womb; I knew you before you were born." So the Psalmist sang in the Creator's voice. Some philosophers and many religious traditions acknowledge God as the source of all life and even of the life of every individual soul. The philosophic argument is quite simple: only God can make something spiritual; the soul is spiritual, therefore God makes the soul. Human beings, male and female, provide the matter that is the body informed by the soul. Some of the same philosophers and religious traditions hold that marriage is the proper setting for the bringing about of new human life and that each human life should be conceived through a sexual act of spouses. The basic argument is that children deserve parents married to each other and madly in love with and committed to each other, and that it is important for spouses that the children they bear be of their own genetic make-up - such is a sign of fidelity. *Donum Vitae*, the Catholic Church's document on reproductive technologies, asserts that spouses have the "right" to be parents by each other.

We live in a culture that professes to believe in God but hardly to believe in an immaterial, immortal human soul. We seem to think that all our dreams, hopes, needs and wants must be satisfied in this lifetime. We are a culture aching in need of being free from suffering. We assuage our needs for intimacy and our desire for sexual pleasure by licentious sexual lives - to the extent that 1 out of 4 pregnancies is aborted largely because of an inconvenient pregnancy, and 1 out of 3 babies is born out of wedlock largely because their parents wanted the pleasures of sexual intercourse without a lifetime commitment.

Oddly it seems easier for us to appreciate that each winter snowflake is a beautiful and unique creation of God, than that these little human "snowflakes" are even more wondrous instances of His divine handiwork. It is perhaps consoling that we have much capacity for mourning the deaths of those who have lived among us; our national outpouring of grief for those killed in the destruction of the World Trade Towers and their families -- people often utterly unknown to us -- indicates that we still cherish life and know its inestimable value.

We have shown that we are prepared to make great sacrifices to protect life. Let us pray and hope that we will come to extend our willingness to sacrifice and to reverence all life, even the youngest and smallest and most vulnerable among us, so that we never need to face the question of what to do with "excess embryos".