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Companions on the Journey: What Parish Communities can do to Help Couples Struggling with Infertility

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ”
(Galatians 6:2).

“The Church seeks to draw near to every human being who is suffering, whether
in body or in spirit, in order to bring not only comfort, but also light and hope”
(Donum Vitae 4).

1. Introduction

“Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and His Church?” This is one of the questions a couple will be asked at the altar on their wedding day. This joyful couple, full of dreams and expectations for the future, would have most probably discussed their hopes and aspirations for their future children. These children would be the fruit and celebration of their love. They might have imagined what these children would

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look like. They might have been eager to pursue parenthood soon after marriage, envisioning themselves in the role of mother or father delighting in the little new life in their arms who would be part them and part their spouse. The last thing on such a couple's mind on their wedding day would be the thought that they might endure a painful struggle with infertility in their pursuit of parenthood.

When you have never anticipated that you and your spouse would have difficulty conceiving the discovery of infertility can be devastating. It can lead to a sea of questions including: *"where is God in this? Why us? What have we done to deserve this?"* In the United Kingdom, as is certainly the case in other parts of the world, the lack of understanding of the experience of infertility within a married couple's parish can often leave them feeling isolated and abandoned by the very community that should be offering solace and support. With such profound difficulties being experienced by married couples journeying on the road of infertility, it is important for dioceses, clergy and parish communities to consider various practical strategies that can be adopted and promoted to support and accompany them through this taxing experience. This chapter will address the important role that pastors and the parish community can play in helping couples through the heartache of infertility¹.

2. Defining Infertility

Infertility is defined as the inability to conceive a child after one year of regular sexual intercourse or the inability to carry a child to live birth (HFEA 2010 6–7). There are two forms of infertility; primary and secondary. Primary infertility refers to couples who have not had a previous pregnancy and secondary infertility refers to the inability to conceive or carry a child to live birth following a previous pregnancy. It might come as a surprise to some to discover the prevalence of infertility. In the United Kingdom, for example, infertility is said to affect one in seven couples and it is the second most common reason for a woman to visit her General Practitioner after pregnancy (HFEA 2010: 6–7).

¹ As a researcher into the area of infertility and its experience, I have been humbled by the women and couples who have taken time to speak to me and have provided me with insights into their personal stories. I am deeply grateful to them for their willingness to share something of their journey through infertility with me. Their insights have been very invaluable in my research as a whole and in the writing of this chapter.

3. A Loving Presence: What the Parish Community can do

For a Catholic couple, infertility can strike at the heart of their marriage in a unique way. They belong to a Church that is renowned for its celebration of children and their place in the family. There might be strong expectations from Catholic relations and friends that this couple will have children within a few years of their marriage. When this does not happen the couple might have to come to terms with the prospect of not being able to produce that much desired grandchild for their parents and niece or nephew for their siblings. Additionally, the couple often has to wade through a painful cocktail of feelings that accompany the many pregnancy and birth announcements, birthdays, baptisms, family reunions, Masses and child-centred events.

The Catholic Church worldwide has beautiful traditions which celebrate and rejoice in family life. Mothering Sunday and Father's Day are typical examples of days when the Church and families play tribute to the unique vocations of motherhood and fatherhood. During a Mothering Sunday Mass, mothers might be offered flowers and gifts by their children and they might receive a special blessing. Some parishes maintain meaningful rituals involving the blessing of expectant parents and the honouring of motherhood and fatherhood. During advent and Christmas there might be a more concentrated focus on parenthood and family life in the priest's homilies.

It is precisely in the midst of all these festivities that a couple might privately mourn the absence of a child hoped for. The parish community would thus need to be aware that whilst attendance and involvement in church can be a source of great strength for the couple, it can unintendedly become a place of pain. For infertile couples, even participation at Mass can be a stark reminder of their own childlessness and can evoke intense feelings of isolation from the wider 'fertile' parish community. Spiritual companionship and support is needed for couples who might find that they are in the midst of a spiritual crisis, or are trying to make sense of why this experience is happening to *them*.

Some Catholic couples suffering from infertility might find themselves under the scrutiny of concerned or curious Catholic friends and parishioners who incorrectly assume that they are not having children because they are not open to life. Such situations and episodes can contribute to the heaviness of the cross borne by these couples. An important question is therefore; *how can the parish community be of real help to them?*

Parish priests would do well to encourage solidarity in their parishes with the sufferings of those facing both primary and secondary infertility. It is important that Catholic couples do not feel that the parish community is indifferent to the

unique challenges and difficulties they might be experiencing. A study carried out by Whiteford and Gonzalez highlights the acute sense of alienation and distress that accompanies the experience of infertility. In this study, a woman named Cathy was interviewed about her personal experience of infertility and her response highlights this sense of isolation: “I feel like I’m isolated in a prison; I have no one who understands how horrible this is. People don’t know what to say... I think I’m alternatively dealt with as either someone who has died or that (I) have a handicap. And I think people approach it like that because they don’t understand death; they don’t understand handicaps; they don’t understand infertility”².

For women like Cathy, infertility places them in the category of ‘other’ – they feel misunderstood, different and worse still; they feel as if they are perceived as ‘handicapped’, unable to do what *normal* women do. In the same way, husbands might feel emasculated and ‘less of a man’ due to their inability to have children. Both husband and wife might feel that they are somewhat different and might lose a sense of connection and belonging with their ‘normal’ Catholic acquaintances, friends and fellow parishioners who seemingly have no problem enlarging their families. Although the study by Whiteford and Gonzalez does not focus on the Catholic experience of infertility, such sentiments of isolation, loneliness and marginalisation are echoed by Catholic couples who describe their experience of infertility.

Parish communities need to respond in supportive, charitable and compassionate ways to these couples. Simple, but deeply meaningful ways in which parish communities could demonstrate their care, concern and love could be through remembering the infertile in the *Prayers of the Faithful*³. Helpful literature on infertility and its experience could be left at the back of church⁴. Special prayers and Annual Masses can be said for couples struggling to conceive and their families.

² L. M. Whiteford and L. Gonzalez, *Social Science and Medicine*, “Stigma: The Hidden Burden of Infertility” (1994), 40. No. 1, p. 27.

³ Some useful parish and diocesan resources can be found on the website: <http://www.catholicinfertilityjourney.com/resources/parishdiocesan-resources>. An example of a prayer given on this website is:

“For the Church, that she may continue guiding and accompanying the broken-hearted who suffer the pains of infertility, difficult pregnancy, miscarriage, still-birth, or the early death of a child, we pray to the Lord...”

⁴ Books on infertility that could be useful to a couple include: *Facing Infertility: a Catholic Approach*, *The Infertility Companion for Catholics: Spiritual and Practical Support for Couples and Dealing with Infertility: A Guide for Catholics*.

Other events or seminars can be arranged to raise awareness of infertility and to introduce couples to treatments approved by the Church. Christ-centred support groups for couples and their families could be established within the diocese and couple mentoring might also be arranged. It could be greatly helpful for the couple to know that there are others who are going through similar trials. Parishes could raise the issue of infertility at marriage preparation classes and meetings. Engaged couples could be encouraged to explore what choices they would consider if faced with primary or secondary infertility in the future and what this would mean for their marriage.

Couples who have lost children through miscarriage could be invited to attend a memorial service or special prayers where they would be allowed to remember their children and grieve their loss. Such efforts help in showing couples that their very real sense of loss and pain is recognised and acknowledged.

Often friends, family and fellow parishioners might find it difficult to know what to say to those suffering from infertility. It is a work of mercy to respond in a compassionate and sympathetic manner when one is confided upon. Simple statements and affirmations of love such as; “I am praying for you”, “I love you and God loves you”, “I am sorry about your pain”, “I am here for you” or just lending a sympathetic ear can often go a long way. Fellow parishioners should be careful not to offer misguided and insensitive comments such as; “just relax, you will get pregnant in no time”, “why don’t you just adopt? I have heard of women who fall pregnant right after the couple adopts” or worse still “maybe God never intended you to be parents”. Such comments can be deeply painful for a couple and will do more harm than good.

Considering the prevalence of infertility in society, it is regretful that the cross of infertility is not ordinarily discussed in public forums. The silence surrounding infertility could be attributed in part to the personal nature of the infertility experience itself. Due to the raw sensitivity of the experience of infertility, a couple may be highly selective with whom they choose to disclose their struggle with. Understandably, some couples might feel that by speaking to others about their fertility issues, they are drawing them in to a very intimate space in their lives and with this disclosure comes an accompanied sense of vulnerability. The parish community must be respectful of the privacy that such a couple might want to maintain and should avoid discussing this couple’s situation with others before first checking with the couple.

By revealing their situation to friends and relations, the couple might feel susceptible to their friends and relations’ future actions as a consequence of this disclosure, an example being the reluctance of inviting this couple to family events

or maintaining secrecy around gatherings involving babies or children such as baby showers, baptisms or birthday parties due to the fear of exacerbating the hurt of the couple. Whilst such events might perhaps be an occasion of pain for that couple, it is important to realise that intentional exclusion from such events can further intensify the couple's sentiments of social isolation. Honest dialogue should therefore be promoted and understanding and respect should be given when the couple chooses not to attend such events.

The silence surrounding infertility can also be due to the fact that it is not as visible a loss as the death of a child or a spouse⁵. In such circumstances, the parish community is likely to offer much needed support and their care and attention can be a great source of comfort for the couple. In the case of infertility, however, the parish community might be oblivious to the loss and the sense of grief that the couple is experiencing as they mourn the absence of their longed-for child. They might simply not understand the sheer scale of grief that infertility can generate for the couple. The parish community can therefore provide much needed comfort to the couple by supporting them in their grief. The first step towards supporting a couple would be to recognise their hurt.

4. The Life-Giving Mission of Marriage

It is important for parishes to affirm the value and beauty of a couple's marriage even when they do not have children. The life-giving nature of their union, even when children do not result, should be emphasised and gratitude should be shown for their unique contribution to parish life. Their fruitfulness as a couple should be highlighted and the couple should be helped to recognise that whilst they might not be able to co-create a physical new life with God, they can participate with God in many life-giving projects, such as devoting their gifts and their time to the service of the community and of others. The parish should help the couple recognise that their marital love and union is an image of the love of the Trinity.

⁵ Jennifer Saake, author of *Hannah's Hope: Seeking God's Heart in the Midst of Infertility, Miscarriage, and Adoption Loss* expresses something of this sense of loss when she states: "If my husband, Rick, and I weren't aggressively trying to conceive or longingly seeking to adopt, we were anxiously praying to sustain troubled pregnancies and grieving our many losses along the way. What a long, weary journey it has been". J. Saake, *Hannah's Hope: Seeking God's Heart in the Midst of Infertility, Miscarriage, and Adoption Loss*, Hanford, CA, 2005, NavPress, p. 14.

They should be encouraged to draw closer together, to pray together, to appreciate the gift that they are to each other and to grow in the knowledge and awareness of the beauty and mystery of their vocation. This can be done by introducing the couple to God's plan for marriage in John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*⁶. In short, they should be supported in the nourishment and strengthening of their marriage.

5. What Parish Priests can do

The help and support that parish priests could give to couples struggling to have children cannot be underestimated. The care that priests could offer infertile couples is multi-layered; some might need to be accompanied with pastoral support through the ethical and spiritual challenges they might be facing as they continue to wait for a child. Others might need support and encouragement through the process of adoption, whilst others might need comfort, compassion and guidance as they come to terms with the prospect of their married life without children. Some couples might greatly benefit from help and spiritual guidance when navigating through complex thoughts, feelings, emotions and even a sense of failure, jealousy, anger or blame.

Infertility can place great strain on the relationship of a married couple. They might find that infertility affects their intimacy and their sexual love. The experience of infertility might also make them question their identity and force them to try and reconcile what it means to be a husband and not a father – a wife and not a mother. For this reason, priests and other ministers would need to be sensitive to the many difficulties that infertility could pose on a marriage. The role of those pastorally supporting couples during such stressful and difficult periods is of no little importance.

The drama of infertility can be especially burdensome for the couple trying to be faithful to the Church's teachings on love and life. Whilst such a couple might appreciate the Church's guidance on the complex plethora of moral questions raised by some methods of infertility treatment, the couple might have the added difficulty of outright pressure to try techniques such as *In Vitro Fertilisation* (IVF) by medical professionals who are dismissive of or insensitive to their faith⁷. Pressure

⁶ Christopher West's *Theology of the Body for Beginners* might be a good introduction of couples to John Paul II's inspired work.

⁷ Many couples would have to work through the morality of creating new life in this way, questions surrounding the number of embryos to implant, decisions surrounding what to do with surplus

to have recourse to IVF and other Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) can sometimes come from family and friends. The couple might also witness the success that others have had with illicit methods of reproductive technology. This can cause real anguish for the couple who could be led to believe that they have little or no other options available outside of IVF. In such situations, the use of IVF can be highly tempting. It can be a challenge for couples to reconcile their beliefs and convictions with the powerful desire to have a child of their own⁸.

Other Catholic couples might simply be unaware that the Church has any teaching on the subject of infertility and its treatment. Consequently, they endure the road of infertility on their own, in the face of all the astonishing advancements and inevitable moral issues posed by reproductive medicine. Julie I. Zimmerman, a journalist and author of *A Spiritual Companion to Infertility*, makes a noteworthy point. She states that infertile persons often “make decisions in a moral minefield – with perhaps the value-neutral counsel of a physician – or, in rare cases, after meeting with a mental-health professional, but rarely with guidance from someone from their own faith community”⁹. Furthermore, she potently comments that: “As Catholics we can do better than this. The church has learnt how to reach out to others in difficult circumstances and guide them gently toward life-giving decisions. It is time to do the same for those suffering from this heavy burden (of infertility)”¹⁰.

It would seem that a first step for pastors and for the wider Church would be to help Catholics understand what moral issues are at play within current methods of infertility treatment, and secondly, the Church’s response to these. They should be supported in their discernment of treatment options available to them in the light of Church teaching. The main sources for the Church’s teaching on infertility and its treatment, including the use of reproductive and related technologies are the two Instructions issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith; *Donum Vitae*

embryos and whether to undergo more cycles after a failed IVF attempt. Such decisions often have to be made under the additional pressure that ART has to be embarked upon as quickly as possible due to age constraints.

⁸ The magisterial document, *Donum Vitae*, which I will discuss shortly, highlights that the Church is aware of this desire, it states: “The Church recognises the legitimacy of the desire for a child and understands the suffering of couples struggling with problems of fertility”. It then continues to explain that such a desire should not “override the dignity of every human life to the point of absolute supremacy” (*Donum Vitae* 16).

⁹ Cf. Zimmerman, *A Spiritual Companion to Infertility* 2009, p. 13.

¹⁰ Zimmerman, *A Spiritual Companion to Infertility* 2009, p. 13.

(On the Respect for Human Life in its Origin and On the Dignity of Procreation) and *Dignitas Personae* (On the Dignity of the Person)¹¹. All the moral conclusions delineated in both Instructions are founded on the inherent dignity of the person and one the profound dignity of marriage.

In such an area as this, priests and those in pastoral ministry would need to be equipped with the knowledge and the tools needed so as to competently support and guide infertile couples. Greater understanding is needed on the experience of infertility and its treatment and on the Church's teachings in this area as reflected key documents such as *Humanae Vitae*, *Donum Vitae* and *Dignitas Personae*. Those in pastoral roles would therefore need to be supported, encouraged and strengthened in their ministry to couples struggling to have children. This might mean that greater effort is placed into organising diocesan events, training and support for priests and those in pastoral roles.

As pastors of their flock, priests have the great role of caring for the spiritual and moral welfare of their congregation. This should involve imparting the Church's teachings on life and love in a compassionate and loving manner. The document *Dignitas Personae* highlight's that medical techniques used for the treatment of infertility should satisfy and respect three fundamental goods: firstly, it should respect the right to life and to physical integrity of every human being from conception to natural death; secondly, it should respect the unity of marriage and the right of the respective spouses to become spouses only with each other¹². Thirdly, treatment should respect the human values of sexuality requiring that "procreation of a human person be brought about as the fruit of the conjugal act specific to the love between spouses"¹³.

Even if parish priests appreciate the teachings found in these documents and are enthusiastic about them, it can be easy for them to feel helpless in the face of a couple's pain and desperation for a child.

An important practical way of helping Catholic couples struggling with infertility is to promote greater awareness of NaProTechnology (Natural Procreative Technology). NaProTechnology, which has been described as the "Church's best kept secret" is the result of over 30 years of research into women's health, which

¹¹ *Donum Vitae* was issued in 1987 and *Dignitas Personae* in 2008. Both documents were written by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. These documents can be found in full on <http://www.vatican.va>.

¹² *Donum Vitae*, II, A, I.

¹³ *Ibid*, Introduction 3.

initially conducted at St Louis University and the Creighton University Schools of Medicine in Nebraska, USA and later at the *National Centre for Women's Health* also in Omaha, USA. It has been developed by a team of researchers led by a senior medical consultant in obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive medicine – Dr. Thomas W. Hilgers. NaProTechnology offers a medical solution to infertility in a way that honours marital integrity, the sanctity of life and the dignity of the person¹⁴. Its success rates have proven to be comparable to and even higher than IVF¹⁵, and it does not involve the ethical and moral complexities associated with Assisted Reproductive Technologies. Considering its success rates and effectiveness in helping couples overcome infertility, NaProTechnology is still largely unknown – even with the Church. Evidently, more needs to be done to make this better known.

6. Conclusion

Parish Priests need to be aware that whilst couples might appreciate the Church's resounding affirmation of the dignity of each human person and of marriage, they might not find that these teachings assist them in any practical way in the resolution of their infertility. When a child is desperate for a child, teachings or *theory* in itself is not enough – couples want practical help and support in their journey towards parenthood. Information about successful and ethically sound treatments such as NaProTechnology should be made easily accessible to parishioners. Many a heartache, a sense of disillusionment and the dichotomy of

¹⁴ Cf. T. W. Hilgers, *The NaProTechnology Revolution: Unleashing the Power in a Woman's Cycle*, New York 2010, Pope Paul VI Institute, p. 36. NaProTechnology fulfils the requirement that fertility treatment should aim to prevent the "causes of sterility" and aim to "remedy them so that sterile couples will be able to procreate in full respect of their own personal dignity and that of the child to be born" (*Donum Vitae* II B 8).

¹⁵ Both parish priests and couples can find books such as *In Their Own Words: Women Healed* and *The NaProTechnology Revolution: Unleashing the Power in a Woman's Cycle* to be helpful in understanding NaProTechnology and the experience of those using it.

NaProTechnology can also be used for the evaluation and treatment of a host of other women's health issues such as endometriosis, recurrent miscarriages, postpartum depression, menstrual cramps, recurrent ovarian cysts and other conditions.

Two significant papers on NaProTechnology were published by Boyle and Stanford in 2011 and Tham, Schliep and Stanford in 2012.

wanting to follow the Church's teachings but on the other hand feeling there is no other choice could be altogether avoided through ensuring that couples are aware that there is another way.

The parable of the Good Samaritan can help us to reflect on our relationship with those who are undergoing the challenges associated with infertility in our parish communities. Are we too engrossed in our own affairs that we are unable to recognise the anguish of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? Like the Levite and the priest in the story, are we simply indifferent to their suffering? Are we too busy to stop and attend to their needs? Do we leave them alone in their pain? Or like the Samaritan traveler are we "moved with compassion"? Are we willing to help bandage their wounds spiritually, emotionally and practically through our compassionate presence and action? In loving and serving our dear brothers and sisters in this way, we help to alleviate the weight of the cross on their shoulders.

This chapter has attempted to highlight the challenges that might be faced by infertile Catholic couples and it has endeavoured to offer some small suggestions as to ways in which couples can be supported on this difficult journey. It has sought to provide a brief snapshot of the pain of infertility and the ways in which this pain might be alleviated through support offered by the parish community and those in pastoral ministry. Through greater discussion and exploration of this important area, the Church can seek to find further ways in which the above proposals could be developed and implemented at a diocesan or national level. Let us pray that all infertile couples within our parish communities receive comfort in their pain, strength and help in the journey and peace in their hearts.

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