



SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD

From an Orthodox Christian Perspective

ABSTRACT

The use of a surrogate mother in the conception and birth of a child complicates the relationship of the parents with their child, the child with himself, the surrogate with both the parents and the child, and all parties involved find themselves in a conundrum before God.

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A Changing World

Christians are finding themselves living in unprecedented times, dealing with issues that were not clearly addressed in the holy scriptures, canons of the ecumenical or local councils, or writings of the Fathers. Simultaneously, scientific advances are occurring at a rate that the Church is not able to study and reflect on, in order to give Her children an informed decision as to the morality or ethicality of the newly developed advancement of modern science. Often, by the time the Church addresses such an issue, Her members may already be engaging in an immoral practice, which the Church would reject as sinful.

Traditional and Changes in Human Reproduction

One of these controversial fields is the field of human reproduction (as well as the preventing thereof). The first commandment that the Lord gave mankind was, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth”.¹ Some have ignored this command by going as far as the murder of unborn children, while others have taken it so far as to also accept murder as a byproduct, and sometimes to even use another’s body to multiply their own seed. While the Orthodox marriage service blesses the couple to bear children, this is not the primary purpose to marriage, or even the marriage bed.² *The Russian Orthodox Department for External Church Relations had this to say concerning biomedical advances in reproductive assistance: “The growing technological interference in the conception of human life presents a threat to the spiritual integrity and physical health of a person. A threat comes also for interpersonal relations on which the community has been built from of old.”³

¹ Genesis 1:28b NKJV

² Hieromonk Gregorios. *The Mystery of Marriage: A Fellowship of Love*. Newrome Press, 2020.

³ *The Basis of the Social Concept*. The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations, mospatusa.com/files/THE-BASIS-OF-THE-SOCIAL-CONCEPT.pdf. 71

The changes in time and technology require us to “[acquire] the mind of the Church,”⁴ according to professor, Fr. John Breck, in order to understand what is acceptable, and what is not. The standard of morality, from a Christian perspective, is a question: What would God say? One could simply ask Him through prayer, but the right person is required to hear the answer. In this case, we attempt to understand what God would want through prayer and fasting, but also by looking for clues in the scriptures and tradition of the Church.

The traditional means of procreation is when one man and one woman, joined through the blessing of marriage, engage in sexual intercourse. According to WebMD, on any given month, the odds that a woman get pregnant (while trying to conceive) is only 15-25%.⁵ This is assuming that there are no underlying problems with the male or female reproductive organs, or a number of other factors including, but not limited to, stress, hormone levels, etc. This means that for some couples, the chances of conceiving can be significantly lower. The creation of life can only happen at the hands of the Creator through synergy with mankind. We have a good understanding of how our part of the process takes place, and so, we have been able to recreate some of these circumstances, even outside the body.

Surrogate Motherhood

One of the modern methods of coordinating life outside of natural law is called *Surrogate Motherhood*. There are two different types of surrogate motherhoods: Traditional surrogacy and gestational surrogacy.⁶ Traditional surrogacy involves the use of the surrogate mother’s egg and a sperm from a man, commonly the father of the future child. Dr. Englehardt states: “In the case

⁴ Breck, John, and Lyn Breck. *Stages on Life's Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005). 21-23

⁵ Nazario, Brunilda. “Thinking about Getting Pregnant? How to Prepare for Pregnancy.” WebMD, WebMD, 19 Feb. 2020, www.webmd.com/baby/guide/getting-started-on-getting-pregnant#1.

⁶ “Types of Surrogacy.” Surrogate.com | Information About Surrogacy, American Surrogacy, 2 June 2021, surrogate.com/about-surrogacy/types-of-surrogacy/types-of-surrogacy/.

where a surrogate mother is inseminated with the sperm of the husband, there is reproductive adultery. The husband has reproduced outside the union of husband and wife. He has used a woman other than his wife to bear him a child.”⁷ Gestational surrogacy is the use of the sperm and egg of the intended parents, fertilized outside of the womb, and implanted into a second woman, the surrogate’s womb. The Russian Orthodox Synod says, “‘Surrogate Motherhood,’ that is, the bearing of a fertilised ovule by a woman who after the delivery returns the child to the ‘customers’, is unnatural and morally inadmissible, even in those cases where it is realised on a non-commercial basis.”⁸

Life Is Not Fair

We know that sometimes our Lord had difficult sayings that could and sometimes did upset the listener, even as He was speaking, such as when He said that whoever loves their family members more than Him were not worthy of Him (cf. Matthew 10:37-39), or when He taught that in order to inherit eternal life, one would need to sell all of his possessions (cf. Luke 18:18-23). Jesus Christ is the Truth (cf. John 14:6), which means, regardless of the feelings of those listening, every word out of His mouth is truth. To quote a popular saying from unknown origins, “Life isn’t fair.” Of course, this would not be a very pastoral approach to blatantly declare at a couple who cannot have children.

Some men and women are not able to procreate for any number of reasons. Sometimes a couple is not able to bear offspring at first, but is blessed later, and in other cases, they are never able to conceive. Parenthood is not a right, but a gift. While this can be a very difficult thing to comprehend, we know that children are a blessing from God (cf. Psalm 128:3 LXX). This implies that not all couples will be granted children, at least not through traditional means. The

⁷ Engelhardt, Hugo Tristram. *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*. Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers, 2000. 255-6

⁸ *The Basis of the Social Concept*. The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations. 72

Russian Orthodox Synod states, “This ideological system assumes that the sexual and social self-fulfillment of a person has a priority over concern for the future of a child, the spiritual and physical health of society and its moral sustainability.”⁹ Further, they state: “the Church cannot regard as morally justified the ways to childbirth disagreeable with the design of the Creator of life. If a husband or a wife is sterile and the therapeutic and surgical methods of infertility treatment do not help the spouses, they should humbly accept childlessness as a special *calling* in life. In these cases, pastoral counsel should consider the adoption of a child by the spouses’ mutual consent.”¹⁰

Moral Dilemma

This leaves a couple with a choice; to accept the will of God and move forward in a God-pleasing way, or to defy the will of God and fulfil their own will through sinful methods. This is not unlike the Israelites, who after crossing the Red Sea, did not always get what they wanted immediately, but turned to other deities to get what they wanted. As a result, they continually angered God and were punished for their lack of faith and acceptance of God’s will in their lives. The first successful birth by a mother who had no genetic link to the child was in 1985.¹¹ While there are no specific canons dealing with gestational surrogacy, since the technology for this technique was not available until late in the twentieth century, the canons would have only dealt with traditional surrogacy as adultery.

Adultery

Adultery is a very serious sin, usually chastised through penance. It includes the bringing in of a third party within the marriage. One could argue that a third party within the reproduction

⁹ Ibid. 71

¹⁰ Ibid 72

¹¹ The History of Surrogacy: A Legal Timeline, 21 Apr. 2021, www.worldwidesurrogacy.org/blog/the-history-of-surrogacy-a-legal-timeline#.

is different than introducing a third party in sexual intercourse. Perhaps this is confusing because this technology was not available earlier and adultery has only been thought of in the context of sex, but sex and reproduction should never have been separated because the latter should only occur through the former. This is not holy. Fr. John Breck qualifies “Christian marriage with four adjectives: monogamous, heterosexual, blessed, and conjugal”¹² (although Dr. Englehardt believes that the conjugal aspect is not mandatory, as the blessing of the full marriage takes place in the Church and many saints have lived with “full sexual continence”).¹³ The separation of sex from reproduction breaks at least three of the four adjectives which define Christian marriage, according to Breck. Children are a result of the union and love of one man and one woman. To change that would be to alter God’s law, and that has consequences, both in this life and the next.

Furthermore, the use of the sperm of the father with an egg of someone who is not his wife may also take place. The egg donor is sometimes a close relative to the wife. This would usually occur because the eggs of the wife are not viable, either because of genetic defect, medical treatment (i.e. radiation or chemo therapy, etc.) or a partial or full hysterectomy. Introducing the genetic materials of a third party would also be considered adultery.

The holy scriptures contain examples of traditional surrogate motherhood through the slaves of women. The first, and most notable example is that of Abraham and Sarah through Hagar. Abraham and Sarah were not patient nor faithful to God’s promise, and took matters into their own hands when Sarah insisted that Abraham go into her maidservant. When Hagar had conceived, she despised Sarah. Later, when Sarah bore Isaac, she demanded that the boy and his

¹² Breck. *Stages on Life's Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*. 63

¹³ Engelhardt, Hugo Tristram. *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*. 251

mother be sent away, which hurt Abraham.¹⁴ From Abraham's disobedience to God rose a new people, who, until today, war with the people of Abraham's son, Isaac.

Another example of traditional surrogate motherhood found in the scriptures are the maid servants of Leah (Zilpah) and Rachel (Bilhah), Jacob's wives. Jealousy arose from among the brothers and they beat and sold Joseph into slavery. While it is true that the story ended well for all of the brothers, we call to mind Joseph's words to his brothers: "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good."¹⁵

Ends do not Justify the Means

The ends do not justify the means. Just because the end result may be a healthy child, does not mean that God blessed the methods of conception and birth. As previously stated, there are likely to be consequences, both in this life and the next. From a pastoral perspective, the priest now has to deal with the aftermath of the breaking of God's will. A couple who went through with having a child through surrogacy, even after being told that it is ethically and morally unacceptable, did so out of selfishness. It is not like a sin that was committed at the spur of the moment, but that was carefully thought out and executed. They would not be likely to handle a penance from the Church. They also now have a living child with a soul. That young soul needs to be cared for and nourished by the priest as any other child who was born through natural means.

What to do with the Child?

The child is not to be punished for the sins of the parents, although there is a good likelihood that he will suffer consequences of such actions. The child should be baptized by the priest and accepted into the flock as any other child. *The priest should cultivate a good bond

¹⁴ Genesis 16 and 21

¹⁵ Genesis 50:20a

with the child as he grows up and reaffirm him as a child of God who is complete and loved. The child should be reminded that he has done nothing wrong and that he is normal. Of course, these conversations must be had with discretion based on the relationship between the spiritual father and his spiritual child.

IVF and Frozen Human Beings

Not only is the carrying of a child through a surrogate strange and sinful, but perhaps more sinful is the process in which the egg is fertilized and stored, not to mention what happens with the remainder of zygotes – we are freezing human beings.

The process of Invitro Fertilization (IVF) removes the sperm and egg cells from the parents and the egg is fertilized in a lab. The desired number of fertilized egg or eggs are then placed into the surrogate, in hopes that they will implant and the pregnancy is successful. Dr. Engelhardt explains, “The more one brings the act of reproduction within the intimacy of the marriage bed, the less one falls short of the mark by preserving the union in one flesh of husband and wife.”¹⁶ The Russian Orthodox Synod clearly forbids the use of IVF: “Morally inadmissible from the Orthodox point of view are also all kinds of extracorporal fertilisation involving the production, conservation and purposeful destruction of ‘spare’ embryos. It is on the recognition of the human dignity even in an embryo that the moral assessment of abortion by the Church is based.”¹⁷

There are multiple issues here. *The medicines that are given to the mother, in order that she release multiple eggs, has some health risk, including the risk of stroke. The method of removal of the sperm is also subject to spiritual problems, as masturbation is considered sinful.

¹⁶ Engelhardt, Hugo Tristram. *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*. 252

¹⁷ *The Basis of the Social Concept*. The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations. 72

Dr. Englehardt says, “the husband’s semen must be procured from a sexual act of the couple.”¹⁸ Multiple eggs are fertilized because the process is so expensive that the couple would often prefer to not have to go through it or pay for it more than once. In fertilizing multiple eggs, we now have multiple souls in a freezer. It is the Orthodox understanding that conception is the beginning of the body of the new child, and a soul exists when the body exists, in what Breck calls, as “ensouled body.”¹⁹ While it is possible that parents may go through all of their frozen zygotes, it is more likely that the unused embryos will be destroyed. This is not biomedical waste, these are human lives that are being murdered without a second thought. There is a romantic idea of giving the unused fertilized eggs up for adoption to a poor couple who cannot afford the process, but the reality is that world-wide, there are hundreds of thousands of unused zygotes that will most likely be murdered.

Change of Mind

The arrangement between the surrogate mother and family could vary by situation. Some may have an arrangement where the surrogate is actively involved in the life of the child. Others may have an arrangement where the surrogate mother disappears from the family’s life after the birth of the child.

Bonding In Utero

No doubt, bonding occurs while the child is in his mother’s womb. This is bonding that does not occur between biological mother and child in a surrogate arrangement, but by the child and a stranger. The Holy Russian Synod states, “[Surrogacy] involves the violation of the

¹⁸ Englehardt, Hugo Tristram. *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*. 2

¹⁹ Breck. *Stages on Life's Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*. 82

profound emotional and spiritual intimacy that is established between mother and child already during the pregnancy.”²⁰

This set-up is cruel to the surrogate mother. Some surrogates may be giving up their bodies out of desperation, because of the amount of money they will make. The surrogate will most likely form a bond with the child in her womb. If she does not, one might question how the child will develop in utero, growing in a womb with no love. The Russian Synod explains, “‘Surrogate motherhood’ traumatises both the bearing woman, whose mother’s feelings are trampled upon, and the child who may subsequently experience an identity crisis.”

Preparation of the Mother

Part of the preparation for the mother is the training that occurs as she is carrying her child. She learns how to become selfless, giving up her very being for her child. She eats a certain way, sleeps a certain way, gets emotional, etc. all to prepare her for the actual responsibility of raising her child. Without this training, motherhood could be more complicated. Even the pain of labor is a gift that the mother can offer her child.

Breast Feeding

Furthermore, there is not a viable option for the child to be breastfed, which is best for the new infant. Breastfeeding, when possible, is usually the healthiest option for the child.²¹ The Creator’s design between the mother and her child should never be questioned or challenged. When the mother hears her child cry, her body begins to produce milk in abundance to satisfy her little one. The infant’s saliva and mother’s breasts operate as a two-way communication system, allowing the saliva to communicate what infirmities the child might be suffering, and

²⁰ The Basis of the Social Concept. The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations. 72

²¹ “Benefits of Breastfeeding: For Baby and Mom.” Cleveland Clinic, 1 Jan. 2018, my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/15274-the-benefits-of-breastfeeding-for-baby--for-mom.

tapping into the mother's immune system to add the proper antibodies to the child's milk.

Mothers also take on a characteristic of the Savior by being “always eaten yet never consumed.”²²

Complications to the Plan

Returning to the issue of the birth mother, regardless of signed contracts in hopes that the surrogate will never enter the child's life, the birth mother may one day desire to be in the life of the child she carried. This can cause considerable damage to the family dynamic.

Finances

The cost of surrogacy can range, based on the agency and type of surrogacy, from \$60,000 to over \$150,000.²³ This amount of money spent on a sinful process is obscene. This money could be used to adopt several children, not to mention feeding thousands of starving children throughout the world. The waste of resources are sinful and selfish in themselves.

Confused Child

The child of a surrogate brings major complications of his own. The parents would need to first decide if they will tell their child the circumstances surrounding his conception and birth. If they tell the child, the parents risk serious psychological trauma. If they do not tell him, they risk him finding out anyway and dealing with the betrayal of his parents.

Fr. John Breck tells two stories of mothers carrying their daughters and husbands' fertilized eggs to term. The grandmother became the mother. He then asks the question, “but what does one tell the children born under these circumstances?” He goes on to say, “Personal identity is largely established in the framework of family relationships. Will these children

²² JANNSON, LAURA S. *Fertile Ground: A Pilgrimage through Pregnancy*. ANCIENT FAITH PUBLISHING, 2020. 243

²³ <https://surrogate.com/intended-parents/the-surrogacy-process/how-much-does-surrogacy-cost/>

eventually experience an ‘identity crisis’ because of a lack of clear lineages or clear relationship with one or another family member?”²⁴

Because bonding between child and mother begins in the womb and without the benefits of breastfeeding, even if the child never finds out about his coming into the world, there may be psychological trauma present. Some surrogate agency’s fees include a line item for counseling and education. Even without a birthing class, natural parenthood comes somewhat naturally, whereas a surrogacy situation automatically becomes more complicated from the start and requires education and counseling.

Children in traditional families sometimes deploy tactics to get what they want, playing the mother against the father. Imagine now having two mothers and a father to play against. Children sometimes say cruel things, including telling their parents that they hate them. The child may request to go live with his “real mom,” or at the very least, to get to know her. This dynamic would confuse the already confusing childhood and adolescence.

Surrogacy and Homosexuality

Surrogacy also allows for homosexual couples and single people to have children. From the Christian perspective, to allow children to be brought up in a home without a mother and a father is catastrophic, because we understand the benefits of having both a mother and a father. Perhaps in another generation or two, we will see the real damage that was done by allowing same-sex couples to raise children. On this, the Holy Orthodox Synod of Russia says: “The insemination of single women with the use of donor germ cells or the realisation of the ‘reproductive rights’ of single men and persons with the so-called non-standard sexual orientation deprive the future child of the right to have mother and father. The use of

²⁴ Breck, John. *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998. 186

reproductive methods outside the context of the God-blessed family has become a form of theomachism carried out under the pretext of the protection of the individual's autonomy and wrongly-understood individual freedom."²⁵

Adoption and Surrogacy

While pondering a surrogate mother situation, there are similar challenges to parenting adopted children, however, there is a difference between the two. The situation that caused the adoption to occur is unfortunate, as it is natural for a child to be raised by his own two parents, but these circumstances were not forced for the sake of someone's desire to become a parent. Rather, the adoptive parents are attempting to fix a broken situation through love and selflessness. The case of the surrogate motherhood is causing unnecessary chaos.

This leads us to the conclusion that adoption is a much better option for the sake of the unwanted child and the spiritual life of the childless couple. Adoption, while by no means easy, aims to solve a problem rather than create one. Adoption is one of the most selfless options, while surrogacy is one of the most selfish.

God's Will

God, the omniscient, knows the desires and needs of all men. If it is God's will that a couple be barren, then perhaps it is for the same reason that the man in the Gospel was born blind; "so that the works of God should be revealed in him."²⁶ Prayer, in this case, is more powerful than medicine. Prayer is asking God to do what doctors cannot. There are wonder-working icons, which have been attributed to the conception and birth of children, such as the icon of St Anna at St Tikhon's Monastery in South Canaan, PA. Despite this, God, in His infinite wisdom, may even now not bless the conception and birth of a child.

²⁵ The Basis of the Social Concept. The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations. 73

²⁶ John 9:3

We may never know the reason that God allows a couple to be barren. Questioning His will could be futile. The more important question to work out between the couple and their spiritual father is, “What should we do now?”

*In the case of barren couples, although it may be painful, the spiritual lesson learned is to accept the will of God. In the case of the many miracles surrounding Christ’s life, “Where God wills, the order of nature yields.”²⁷ The opposite should not be true: where man wills, he overthrows the natural order, for such has severe consequences.

Science and God

Just because something can be done, does not mean that it should be done. Science gives us knowledge, but so did the fruit on the tree in paradise. Although fiction, the movie, “Jurassic Park” presented a situation where something could be achieved by science, but the results were catastrophic. One infamous line from the movie posed the question: “Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn’t stop to think if they should.”²⁸

Some make the argument that God gave us brains and understanding through science in order to make advances. A great example of why this is not always true can be found in weapons of mass destruction and biological weapons, for example. We have now studied the devastating effects of the atomic bomb, which was created by one of the world’s most famous geniuses. Dictators who use biological weapons are in breach of international laws and are considered war criminals. Those who invented such methods may have felt that by killing a few, more lives can be saved. The same can be said of the process of IVF, which is used in some types of surrogacy; that although some [embryos] were destroyed, life was the final result.

²⁷ Chrysostom, St John. “The Nativity Sermon of St John Chrysostom.” The Nativity Sermon of St. John Chrysostom | Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, Antiochian Archdiocese of North America, ww1.antiochian.org/node/21955.

²⁸ Spielberg, Steven, director. Jurassic Park. 1993.

Pastoral Counseling

In real pastoral situations, priests teach and few listen. People are free to make their own decisions and the clergy cannot force anyone to do anything. The topic of IVF and surrogacy may be taught by the priest, but when anxious couples think of themselves childless, they may have their sight set on their prize; a child of their own. On many occasions, I have been told about a situation (even surrogacy) after the surrogate was already carrying the child. As the old adage goes, “It is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.”

If a couple goes through with surrogacy, the pastor now has to decide what comes next. For starters, as was stated earlier, the child must still be baptized, and not punished for the sins of his parents. The couple who purposely broke ethical bounds and defied their Church and pastor are probably not able to bear a penance. Giving a penance such as time away from the chalice may push them away from the Church even further. However, this advice may also vary from bishop to bishop. In coordination with a pastor’s own bishop, an appropriate remedy may be devised, such as an extra day of fasting, or whatever may be best.

When Can Surrogate Motherhood be Considered?

In a situation where a couple has already taken it upon themselves to begin the process of IVF and only informed their priest afterward, there may be “extra” embryos that they no longer have need of. The problem should glare one right in the face. The couple does not want their child(ren) who are already in existence. As hideous a problem as that is, the bigger problem is that those embryos will either be destroyed (murdered), or else be experimented on. Another option is to give them up for adoption. At least, the child(ren) will have a chance at life. While all of the normal problems with adoption may still occur, at least the gestational mother would have given birth to her adoptive child herself. While this is in no way ideal and is even

nauseating to ponder, once one creates this dreadful situation, we must do what we can to remedy the predicament and offer the best solutions possible. The biological parents may wake up one day thinking about their child that they never met, but then again, they caused the situation by their own doing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, God has a plan for all of our lives. Sometimes, we are faced with challenges to overcome, and other times, we must accept God's will as it is presented to us. Surrogacy produces more problems than it attempts to solve. Helping the faithful to understand this cannot begin with a conversation after they may or may not have already made up their minds, but by a lifetime of spiritual teaching, counseling, and nourishment.

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