

Impregnation versus Implantation in the Embryo Adoption Debate

To the Editor: I wish to express my gratitude to Charles Robertson for his insightful essay titled “Navigating an Impasse in the Embryo Adoption Debate: A Response to Elizabeth Rex.”¹ Unfortunately, in the first sentence of his abstract, Robertson makes a very significant mistake and refers to my Winter 2015 article as “The Magisterial Liceity of Embryo Adoption.” In fact, the title of my article is “The Magisterial Liceity of Embryo Transfer.”² My entire article was dedicated to correcting his previous article’s confusion regarding these two terms!

In his conclusion, however, Robertson rightly asks why embryo transfer should be considered licit in the case of rescue or adoption as “an ad hoc exception to a rule that is everywhere else admitted, namely, that it is illicit to *effect pregnancy* through technical intervention in lieu of coitus.”³ Robertson’s phrase “effect pregnancy” is at the epicenter of both the problem with and the solution to the impasse in the embryo adoption debate. We must begin by defining “effect pregnancy.” It is now an irrefutable scientific fact that pregnancy is effected at fertilization, when a single human spermatozoa “impregnates” a single human oocyte and “generates” a new human being. Impregnation is synonymous with fertilization and conception, but it is not synonymous with implantation, because impregnation precedes and is distinct from implantation. Pregnancy begins with fertilization, which is the impregnation of an egg by a sperm. A new human being is conceived at fertilization, not implantation. Herein lies most of the confusion.

Implantation is effected when the human embryo implants itself in a woman’s uterus after impregnation—fertilization has taken place. Implantation initiates gestation. It is crucial to recognize and agree on the definitions of and the differences between impregnation and implantation as well as those between generation and gestation. Generative acts outside of marriage and the

marital act are illicit—for example, rape, incest, fornication, adultery, and IVF. But once a child has been conceived, the only moral option is life for that child, even if it has been illicitly conceived by its biological and genetic parents. Embryo transfer and adoption are not generative acts, and they must be held as licit acts in order to heal and save the life of an embryo.

If, scientifically speaking, pregnancy begins with impregnation, not implantation, then it logically follows that “to effect pregnancy” means “to effect fertilization,” not “to effect implantation,” since pregnancy is scientifically effected at fertilization. Moreover, embryo transfer does not even technically implant an embryo in the uterus. The process simply transfers the human embryo to the uterus, where the human embryo implants itself in the uterine wall. Embryo transfer does not effect pregnancy. It is a medical procedure, a technical intervention, that is used to transfer human embryos. According to *Donum vitae* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “one must hold as licit” any medical procedure that heals or saves the lives of human embryos.⁴

I urge Robertson, who is a Thomistic scholar and an alumnus of the Center for Thomistic Studies at the University of St. Thomas, to reconsider these critically important definitions. If Robertson agrees with and accepts these simple scientific and ontological distinctions, then we are 100 percent in agreement that it is always illicit to effect pregnancy—defined as impregnation, fertilization, and conception—through technical intervention in lieu of coitus. Embryo transfer and embryo adoption are not exceptions to this rule; they are corporal works of mercy that aid the least of our brethren, who are in desperate need of healing and a loving family to adopt them.

In a footnote to his article, Robertson candidly states, “Were I to be convinced of the liceity of embryo transfer, then, I would consider both adoption and rescue morally licit means to save the lives of these persons.”⁵ This is at the heart of the impasse regarding embryo adoption. Until therapeutic embryo

transfer, which is a medical procedure that is used to heal and save the lives of human embryos, is recognized and accepted as magisterially licit, as clearly stated in *Donum vitae* and the Catechism, those who continue to deliberately confuse embryo transfer and embryo adoption with illicit assisted reproductive technologies will continue to advocate throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

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1. Charles Robertson, "Navigating an Impasse in the Embryo Adoption Debate: A Response to Elizabeth Rex," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 16.3 (Autumn 2016): 409–417.

2. Elizabeth Bothamley Rex, "The Magisterial Liceity of Embryo Transfer: A Response to Charles Robertson," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 15.4 (Winter 2015): 701–722.

3. Robertson, "Navigating an Impasse," 417, emphasis added.

4. *Catechism*, n. 2275; see also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum vitae* (February 22, 1987), I.3.

5. Robertson, "Navigating an Impasse," 146 note 13.