On Being Catholic and Infertile

By Jennifer Fulwiler

This week is Infertility Awareness Week. According to the CDC, over 2 million married women in America are currently experiencing infertility. This is a deeply painful experience for any couple, but faithful Catholics face unique challenges in this department—yet in all the discussions about Natural Family Planning and how and when to avoid pregnancy, the struggles of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are not able to achieve pregnancy often get overlooked.

So this week I spent some time chatting with friends who are facing infertility, including a woman whom I’ll call “A.,” who chronicles her journey online at This Cross I Embrace. They shared some of the challenges unique to being Catholic and infertile:

**Temptation to Use Illicit Treatments:** In modern culture, the words “infertility” and “in-vitro fertilization” go hand-in-hand. Even though IVF doesn’t always succeed, and often costs tens of thousands of dollars when it does, the success rates are high enough that it’s widely touted as a solution that is likely to give couples the children they so desperately desire. This is a source of temptation for the women I talked to, even though they understand and agree with Church teaching against IVF on an intellectual level. “I would never do it, but it’s like a punch in the gut when other women go to the IVF clinic and are then planning baby showers seven months later,” one friend said. Added to this, there can also be tremendous pressure from family members who don’t understand Church teaching and see IVF as a path to having grandchildren or nieces and nephews.

**Loneliness:** Catholics who face infertility often find themselves in a social no-man’s land. In terms of day-to-day lifestyle, they have little in common with fellow Catholics who have kids, and often find that friends with children are so busy that it’s hard to make plans with them. Sometimes it’s possible to find community among fellow Christians who are infertile, but tensions inevitably arise over differing views about IVF and other reproductive technology. Other childless couples tend to be much younger. “The main people you can really relate to are other infertile Catholics who are faithful to Church teaching, and they are few and far between,” one friend told me.

**Assumptions:** In the Catholic world, couples who don’t have children (or, in the case of those experiencing secondary infertility, who have few children) are sometimes on the receiving end of assumptions that they must be contracepting or otherwise not open to life—which is especially hurtful since these folks are actually making painful sacrifices to be faithful to Church teaching. Then there are assumptions that they must not be that serious about children if they don’t adopt, when many couples either can’t afford it, aren’t eligible, or otherwise have good reasons for not pursuing that path. Also, A. of This Cross I Embrace says she hears this a lot: “There is the assumption that if you are not doing IVF, you must not truly want children as badly as so-and-so who did IVF six times until it worked. Because, after all, if you really want your baby, wouldn’t you stop at nothing to finally hold them in your arms?”
Jealousy and Spiritual Struggles: The Catholic Church has a beautiful culture of life where children are seen as blessings, but it can be hard to be surrounded by baby showers and birthday parties when you’ve been unable to have children. Also, A. tells me, “When your fellow Catholic infertile friends become pregnant, you can’t help but see it as a ‘reward’ from God (even the Bible calls children a gift and a reward).” Feeling left out, jealousy, despair, and feeling like God is answering other people’s prayers but not yours are common spiritual struggles for infertile Catholic couples.

Lack of Support: A lot of infertile Catholics say they would appreciate more support at the parish or diocesan levels. A. says: “While NaPro [Natural Procreative Technology] is one of the biggest blessings known to Catholics with infertility, it is still not widely known, and there is a large gap in support for this sector of the Catholic community ... Even on the rare occasion when I have found Catholic literature or brochures in response to the cross of infertility, it is generally a list of illicit treatments, that most of us already know to be morally wrong. We don’t need an education. We need love, support, and spiritual guidance. What are we to do? Where do we go from here? How can we best serve God and live a ‘fruitful’ life while bearing this Cross, not knowing when or if we will ever be relieved of it in this lifetime?”

A big thanks to the interviewees who contributed to this post. I hope it increases prayers and practical support for our brothers and sisters who are fighting this unique battle for life in a culture of death.

Read more: http://www.ncregister.com/blog/on-being-catholic-and-infertile/#ixzz1hrNst6po