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THE HOSPITALITY OF ABRAHAM: ORTHODOX ETHICS AND REPRODUCTION

After a Spring 2011 lecture on reproductive screening techniques, a lively discussion arose in the semester-long seminar on bioethics offered by Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts. Led by Dr. Timothy Patitsas, Assistant Professor of Ethics, the class was later described by its students as life-changing and revelatory. We think you'll agree.

PROF. PATITSAS: So far we have spoken of infertility and the medical technology that addresses it in somewhat abstract terms, but we must also remember that the Church has always been aware of the difficulties surrounding conception. Beginning with Abraham and Sarah, infertility is a part of the salvation story rather than something extraneous to the Church's life. Some might think, "The church doesn't care or understand our situation, but here come the doctors to save us." Rather, in the Church, the fact of childlessness has been an arena for God to show His power and His grace. As a Church, we celebrate three conceptions: the conception of the Lord on March 25; the conception of the Virgin Mary on December 9 to the barren Joachim and Anna; and the conception of John the Baptist on September 25 to the aged and childless Elizabeth and Zachariah.

The brokenness with which a childless couple turns to God, as did Abraham and Sarah, Joachim and Anna, and Elizabeth and Zachariah is part of the history of Christ's coming into the world. In our modern world, we need to ask what kind of reliance upon medicine would be a part of this turning to God.

Opposite: Dr. Timothy Patitsas.

For example, in vitro fertilization (IVF) quite obviously raises moral problems such as removing conception from the hiddenness and intimacy of the marital bed, and disposing of “unneeded” fertilized eggs—of human beings. But how about a couple who simply takes fertility drugs and by producing more eggs has twins, triplets, or quadruplets? Is this turning to God? Where is the line to be drawn? From our class readings it would seem that the conscience of the Church is heading towards an attitude of extreme caution about IVF, at least, not only because conception has been taken out of the natural context of marriage, but because of the presence of a third party within the act of conception. With IVF, you are walking into a thicket that is not easy to negotiate, so the Church as a whole seems gently to be saying, “It would be better if...”

Orthodox have traditionally dealt with fertility problems through prayer and pilgrimage. There are pilgrimage sites throughout the Orthodox world that people go to for infertility - on Mt. Athos, in Romania, Greece, Syria, and everywhere. And part of the miracle of Christian life includes the surprise babies that result from these prayers and pilgrimages.

The icon I’ve usually given to friends wishing to have a child is *The Meeting of Joachim and Anna*, but recently I’ve come to the conclusion that an even better icon of conception is *The Hospitality of Abraham*. At the Oak of Mamre, three angels appear in the guise of strangers—the Holy Trinity—and when this aged couple shows hospitality to the Trinity, a child results. This is a profound message about the mystery of marriage and conception—as well as the very human element of incredulity, for when the strangers speak of the coming child, Sarah laughs knowing that she is beyond the age of childbearing.

Along with Christ’s portrayal as Incarnate God and Man, *The Hospitality of Abraham* is our highest icon of God. In it we have something paradigmatic and profound. Here is a couple with no earthly hope of bearing a child, but in showing their hospitality to God and their fellow man (for the identity of the three strangers seemed at first human), the impossible happens. Hospitality is vital for the Christian ethical life, and involves far more than fulfilling a law or a duty. Hospitality to the Holy Spirit means accepting absolute possibility. You don’t know what is going to be required of you. Hospitality goes beyond the letter of the law, because the Spirit is saying, “You may have to do something really great. Your destiny may be much greater than you, in fact,

realize. You are struggling and suffering, but you don't see that providence is involved in your frustration and that it is bringing you to a point of openness to God." We know that many times in saints' lives a couple cannot conceive, but later in life the much-desired child unexpectedly arrives. Often this child is consecrated to Christ from birth and becomes a priest or a monastic, even a miracle-worker. It is a blessing, and frequently this child is also a harbinger of something quite spiritual in the family, adding another dimension to the life of faith.

So human hospitality to our fellow man and to Trinitarian Life is the real context of our discussion of conception, and it would be unfortunate to reduce the matter to test tubes, as either a practice or as a mindset. Because Christianity has such rich faith in this area, we have to call upon this tradition in humility, and *The Hospitality of Abraham* icon shows us the way. It is the conception of Isaac by Abraham and Sarah that is the beginning of our salvation history. This is where we receive our first vivid prophecy of the crucifixion and the incarnation of the Son of God, for Isaac, the child that comes out of this event, is destined to be sacrificed. All that happens here is just part of the warp and woof of life in our Church.

Unfortunately, many times our people are not schooled in these Biblical narratives or in contemporary stories of faith and deliverance. If we don't understand the spiritual dimension of the humiliation of infertility, then we are not really open yet to the way that Christ is trying to visit us and bring us to fruition. A few years ago two friends went through the tremendous effort of IVF and found the whole process not only expensive, but extremely humiliating in that it involved an apparently cold-hearted third party (a seemingly uncaring doctor) in their marital relations. Following the unsuccessful attempt at IVF, they resorted to blessed objects, in their case cords or ribbons that are put on the zone, the sash of the Mother of God at Vatopedi Monastery on Mt. Athos, and then worn. But always it was with the feeling, "I want this"; the sacred objects had been reduced to technological totems. Finally, they gave up completely, and then the child was conceived naturally. So these issues are not as biologically simple as we make them out to be. There are so many things at work here physically and spiritually that we are missing. When St. Paul says that marriage is a great mystery, he means also the marriage of Christ and the Church. This means that there is something beyond earthly marriage, and we need to ground ourselves in this context

when we deal with these things pastorally. People who want to step outside a context where human marriage is an icon of Christ's relationship with the Church operate in a completely different world.

I'm not saying that reproductive technology is always wrong—I leave it to the bishops to make those kinds of statements—but it is important to know that God really does care about our childbearing. Where else in Scripture do we have a visitation of the Trinity? Perhaps in Genesis, when the Spirit hovers on the face of the waters, and yet this is a metaphor for conception too. But there is no other Trinitarian epiphany as vivid as *The Hospitality* until you get to the New Testament—and this penultimate theophany results in the conception of a child by a barren couple.

In a few days we shall arrive at the observance of Holy Week. Now, Holy Week is our story, it is *the* story. New Testament scholars sometimes say that the synoptic Gospels are in fact Passion narratives with some miracles attached to the front; it was really the Passion and the Resurrection that grabbed people. A teacher and healer? That was one thing. Crowds? That was great too. But it is the manner of His death and His Resurrection that impressed Christ's contemporaries. And all of this kicks off with the raising of Lazarus, an event that shows both a concern for the body—Christ restores his friend to life—and a distance from over-concern, for even if we die, this is not the end.

Taken together, the entirety of the hymns of Holy Week leave us with only two choices: we may either choose to become crucified with Christ, or we may choose to crucify Him. And just maybe that relates to these problems. Yes, it can be a kind of crucifixion to have a Down's Syndrome child in your family, because it is a heavy burden, a tremendous effort. But often, instead of my being crucified with Christ—that is, my child is an image of Christ and he's being crucified through this ailment and I'm there to be crucified with him—instead of this, we crucify Christ completely by killing Him in this child before he is even born.

This is the kind of stark choice that the hymns of Holy Week lay out, but it's a nice choice. It has its own logic and it draws you naturally into saying to God, "What do we know? Is my life so perfect, or will it last so long, that it's worth killing you, O Christ, to preserve? You know best." As a TV character once said about overcoming her fears of marriage, "It's 3:00 AM and I somehow find myself at a cock fight—what am I clinging to?" You might as well

give your life to Christ. We're not going to live forever anyway, so you might as well join yourself to the loveliest person that ever lived and see where that path takes you.

There is a materialism in these eugenic movements when they attempt to create a worldly paradise without reference to God or even to metaphysics. At the same time, we can have compassion for the people who use these technologies to screen for abnormalities, because their motivation may simply be that people shouldn't suffer. It is very difficult to see someone you love suffer; much harder than suffering yourself. The suffering person always knows what to do, they just suffer; when the suffering lessens then they forget it for a minute or two. But you, as the person who loves them, feel guilty if you even stop thinking of them for a moment. That's hard, and people feel driven to these decisions. The same is true of governments who have a certain love for their people and don't want to see them suffer, so they try to put these population screening programs or various technologies in place.

ARKADY: In this discussion, are we deciding what we should choose to do or are we deciding what the world should do?

PROF. PATITSAS: I think that we have to decide what we as Christians should do, and we have to so live out our life in Christ that that becomes the new normal. This is what happened historically. For instance, what civilized person today would defend sex-selective abortion? But before Christ, the Greek and Roman worlds defended sex-selective infanticide. We both have to choose and to point the way, but this means first a living-out of our own ethos, our life in Christ, because that is what generates a new world.

DEMETRIOS: Your values can change over this issue in a moment of time. If a woman chooses to abort an unwanted child, in her mind and in the minds of those who carry it out, the fetus is unwanted tissue and seemingly of no value. However, as soon as it is aborted it becomes a commodity that we can use to heal with, and is incorporated into research, medicine, and vaccines. All of a sudden it has potential and great value. Science makes this very strange distinction: it doesn't have value as a human being, but it does have value if it contributes to scientific knowledge.

PROF. PATITSAS: It's a kind of gnosticism, the elevation of gnosis to a paramount value in society. We say that we are doing these things to help people,

but if you are killing people along the way, who exactly is it that you want to help? People are locked into blindness on this point.

DEMETRIOS: I was trying to come up with some redemptive meaning to slaughter. It's radical when you think of the number of abortions that occur.

PROF. PATITSAS: Forty million a year world-wide, according to the World Health Organization. The casualties of all of the wars in history—religious wars, unreligious wars, atheistic wars, any kind of war you choose—are surpassed every three years by the victims of the world's abortions.

DEMETRIOS: One day Father George Dragas, our patristics professor, said, "When do we become? You are a person, an entity when God thinks of you... *I knew you before I formed you in the womb.*" [Jer. 1:4-5] He wasn't being an Origenist; he was saying that you exist because God wants you. That's heavy. As pastors, there is so much of a foundation to lay before we even start talking about things like *in vitro* fertilization. If we give people this framework of anthropology and what God thinks of the human person, sooner or later, they're going to say, "Whoa! IVF is stupid, why did I even consider it?" or "Abortion is ridiculous." Once you delve into what we mean to God, it solves a lot of problems.

PROF. PATITSAS: Yes! The pro-life bioethics articles always say, "Oh, this shouldn't happen because the infant or zygote is of infinite worth to God." But this comes too late. The hospitality toward the child, our ultimate obligation, or our obligation in its truest form, must begin before the child is even conceived. In this sense, the pro-life position is insufficient. God's *wanting us* is what *makes us* to be. He values us not "before" we exist, but *into* existence itself.

A related issue is that of hospitality to our very own selves. I am here because God wanted me—this grounding is of infinite significance. People have lost a sense of their own worth. An elder in Greece said, "Fifty or a hundred years ago, people were proud, you had to humble them. Now it's the opposite, everyone is already broken. They feel so lost." Once you overcome that and can make people feel loved despite their sin, despite everything that's going on, they will begin to value their very existence. So this is your preparation for bioethical issues in the parish. Get that point across, day in and day out.

Ultimately, we can only stress this infinite worth of the person with hospitality and compassion. We don't have our backs to the wall; there are enough resources. We don't have to start picking off the weak and killing them to survive. There's not only enough, there's plenty.

By the way, this ontology is also in St. Maximos. Philosopher Eric Perl calls the energies of God, "thought-wills." It is God's thought and His will together that make up His energies. So, the energies of God are already a desiring of you, a desiring of what He brings into existence. And we in turn come to be by desiring Him back. Every created thing is in motion towards God who loves it. Even on a molecular level, our motion is toward Christ. There is always a symbiosis between His wanting us into existence, and our loving Him so that we "repent" of our non-existence.

DEMETRIOS: And when you do choose to abort or to kill in any form, you aren't just killing the individual person, you are killing that "thought-will" of God. You are stepping on something that God wanted, and it is a very frightening thought that God allows us human beings to have the power to stamp out His will, something that He desires. As a pastor, you have to warn people about this on some level. You have to say, "Look, you have no idea of what you are doing. There's blood on your hands whether you believe it or not, and you'll have to give account for that one day. I would be negligent if I didn't tell you this." This advice has to come out of the understanding that God wants those people to exist.

PROF. PATITSAS: That is a much more personal telling of it, and in presenting it in this way you will save people.

This completely inverts the world's understanding, which says, "Oh this embryo is nothing because it can't survive on its own, it doesn't have this or that capacity," but what Demetri is saying makes it so vivid. We start on the cusp of nothingness in terms of size, of capabilities, in the ability to function on our own, but in fact, what you are looking at even in those petri dishes is the moment that God calls a unique individual out of non-being. It's right on the edge. It's before your eyes that God's wanting us makes us to be *out of nothing*. We have to know what this ethos of the Church is. If we are really living it, that ethos is going to free people. At the least it will influence the social standard, and in some cases it will decisively transfigure it.

ARKADY: Like St. Seraphim saying, “Save yourself and thousands around you will be saved.”

PROF. PATITSAS: I am just stunned by Demetri’s linking of the conceptus in the petri dish with the fact that it is because God desires you that you exist. We see non-being becoming being! It is also in the spirit of St. Maximos the Confessor to say that we exist because we desire God.

ANNA: Because we are growing into His likeness?

PROF. PATITSAS: St. Maximos says that God was within Himself and in an overflow of fullness and goodness came to be outside Himself, that He ecstatically poured Himself outside Himself. There is nothing outside of God, so when He comes to be outside of Himself, by definition He enters non-being. As He enters it, non-being finds God’s glory so beautiful that it rises to meet Him; it repents of its non-existence. Our desire for Him makes us “forget” what we were—part of non-existence—and moves us towards His ultimate existence.

ANNA: The idea of God’s pouring into non-being reminds me of the Lord’s harrowing of hell. And the idea of our necessary “consent,” even before we exist, at least underlines the importance of the Mother of God’s “Yes.”

PROF. PATITSAS: In creation itself there is already a foretaste of this synergy, and the science of emergence is fleshing that out for us. Out of a primordial chaos, the elements are drawn up to a standard of information, a logos. They begin to attain this, and this new existence becomes in turn a matrix for still further emergence. These stages of emergence are in a sense the Six Days of Creation.

But let’s get back to our pastoral concern. If people can feel their own infinite worth, then they’re not going to mind sharing that life with someone else, including someone very vulnerable. Outside of the framework of what Demetri said, many of the pro-life articles we’ve been reading sound legalistic and rational. “It’s the law because academically we know that from this moment you are thus and so....” Even these writings miss this sense in which our hospitality is more than a response to somebody’s being. Rather, our hospitality is the condition of their existence to begin with. So of course the conceptus in a petri dish doesn’t look like much; no mother has yet offered it hospitality.

NECTARIOS: Some Christians would argue that if in IVF you were to harvest and use only one egg, which was then fertilized, it might not technically be “bad,” but I prefer this idea that our personal condition, whether it is fertile or sterile, is an arena where God can work miracles. In resorting to these extreme reproductive technologies you are putting a lock on the gate and saying, “We’re taking control of this, and we’ll straighten it out with science.” But with such lack of faith, how can God work? Without condemning anyone today, I would note that the Lord left Nazareth—He couldn’t work miracles because of their lack of faith. And elsewhere in the Gospel, the Lord said that the blind man was afflicted so that the glory of God could be revealed. If there is something wrong with a man or a woman that they can’t produce a child naturally, perhaps the glory of God will be revealed in another way, such as in the life they give to a child who has been abandoned, or is being raised in an institution, or the spiritual gifts given a child who is less than physically or mentally perfect.

PROF. PATITSAS: And we’re so statistical in our understanding of God’s blessings, right? Abraham and Sarah could have been depressed that they had only one child. Maybe they wanted twelve, but that one child was the ancestor of all of the New Israel. So our insistence on a blessing may limit God, Who is trying to do something more. He’s not trying to give you less, He’s trying to give you more.

ANNA: I heard a true story last night about a poor Russian village priest and his wife. In the early 90’s, they saw the needs of children in a local orphanage, so over the next eight years they emptied out the orphanage and raised every one of them. All of the children are adults now.

NECTARIOS: That’s a miracle. You know, I work with kids in institutions and some of them are living in hell, they have zero sense of worth. I hear daily, “I’m abandoned. I’m someone’s job. They have to take care of me.”

PROF. PATITSAS: They say that the hardest kind of child abuse to recover from is neglect.

NECTARIOS: Our society assumes a lot of collective responsibility on some issues, but none on personhood. I’ve heard people say that society should be judged on how we treat the most vulnerable, which are the children. And

even more defenseless than a child is the fetus. It can't speak, it can't do anything, it is just pure presence. How we treat them is indicative of who we are.

ANNA: Physiologists say that many fertilized ova are naturally expelled without a woman realizing that this has occurred. In this case, it seems to be God's providence at work, not our will, and the Greek bioethicist Metropolitan Nikolaos of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki, points out that this fact does not allow us to willfully destroy fertilized ova that may ultimately live. He says, "...the fact that we will all die someday—and this is a certainty—does not mean that we are not human beings."¹ This makes me wonder if God has an entire company of people that we have no idea of in the otherworld, perhaps in an innocent, slightly angelic state, living in Him in a way unknown to us; people who were simply never born into earth?

NECTARIOS: Why don't most Orthodox talk about this kind of thing? This is so intertwined with our theology.

PROF. PATITSAS: The way bioethics is often done is the worst. There's no mystery, no wonder. You feel everyone succumbing to the pressure to give some definition, some law, stepping on mystery for the sake of rational consistency.

Look at what happened today. When I first began this lecture I presented the modes of pre-natal screening, which was fine as a clarification within a course in bioethics. But when Demetri started speaking about God desiring us into existence, we all felt a spiritual inversion. What's missing in the approach that often predominates is that it aspires to strength by emphasizing rational consistency and logical coherence. This thinking always tries to be strong and can't really confess the Crucified One in a spiritual way. Like St. Peter himself, we seem to fear that Christ is maybe a little too weak, and secretly think that we need to "buck Him up a bit."

You might even say, "Let's do things the weak way," because you've discovered that it's better for the marriage, it's better for the child, it's better for the health of society. Although this sounds like good theology, the reason for weakness in this western way is so that later you can be strong. This kind of approach is not a fruit of life in the Spirit but rather shows that we think we need to excuse the Spirit's vulnerability. "After all, it's better for your health, it will lower your cholesterol, it will give you healthy babies." It's just as materialistic as anything else. It's a rival materialism, and the human soul will

not be liberated by that. This is why even many of these Orthodox bioethical writings leave us so flat.

ANNA: So what is the human soul liberated by?

PROF. PATITSAS: An experience of, or faith in the possibility of an experience of, the coincidence of Cross and Resurrection. But the contemporary notion of moral theology is like economics—it's built on the assumption of scarcity.

ANNA: Scarcity of what?

PROF. PATITSAS: Of God's grace, of God's protection for the Church, of human goodness. Scarcity is often built on fear. Even when it's not, it has a taint of fear. Orthodoxy is poverty, just an absolute poverty that historically sometimes leads to wealth and sometimes leads to destruction by the Persians or Mongols, the Crusaders or Communists or Muslims. In terms of this poverty a woman I know who works with these issues told me that she's coming to the conclusion that even natural family planning can be a sin.

ANNA: In the Greek sense of "missing the mark"?

PROF. PATITSAS: Yes, because, she says, God may be trying to have more children through us. It's beyond our ken. Just because you dot all the i's and cross all the t's with natural family planning doesn't mean that you are in the clear. It's much more open than that. This spirit of hospitality is much higher and can't be reduced to a formula. We have made the natural mistake of thinking that "moral theology" is simply reducible to concerns with justice. But a mercy beyond justice cannot be captured systematically, unless our dogmas, too, are icons. Often people are too concerned with justice and this is related to this fear of lack, to the suspicion of scarcity.

ANNA: That's what St. Basil said during the Cappadocian famine: "Give your last loaf to the beggar at the door, and trust in the goodness of God."

PROF. PATITSAS: That was Abraham's world of hospitality. In social ethics, justice can't be the highest concern. When Plato uses justice he is talking about the harmony of the whole. When people today talk about social justice, they are operating from some very narrow, fearful conceptions. "There's a limited amount of spoil and we've got to divvy up the loot fairly!" Who can be

inspired by that nonsense? No one. This approach to justice is the same as to birth-control; they are fractals of the same issue. Love is beyond these categories and it is very intimate: you may have many children, or maybe God only wants you to have a few children, or one, or none. Or, if your spouse is totally against more children, and there is no loving way that you can change his or her mind about it, perhaps this is God's providence for you. In the meantime, your spouse's sin may be a real sin—but God's love for you is expressed through this situation. This is where this emphasis on justice falls flat.

For example, a decision can be made in a family. For some people in the family the decision is heaven, for others it is neutral and for others it is hell. So those in heaven must then reach out to change the decision—to leave heaven—to save those for whom the course of action is a kind of hell. In an old world family you feel that, you let each person be what they are before Christ and you put yourself aside to help those who are, for the moment, weak. I think a lot of Greek priests in this country get a bad rap about being lukewarm on birth control. They really are trying to be true to that love tradition. Sometimes they probably go too far, but they have that memory from Greece.

An excessive concern with justice poisons everything. It is a justice predicated on an assumption of scarcity, an assumption that we are all at each other's throats. Who can buy into that? It's true that some people are ripping others off and that's outrageous, but in almost any ethical issue when you finally get to the point of "fairness," even if the outcome is exactly right, it just wasn't worth the cost. You've lost too much along the way; you've lost your freedom and your soul.

God forbid that we should turn to God! Whether it is the logic of the marketplace or the logic of justice, both are concerned with the things of this world. The whole point of Christ's coming is to rupture the self-containedness of this earth and open it to its Source. That source is inexhaustible, undefinable, mysterious. So, now our conception of justice has to be turned inside out, and so too does our conception of mercy. A this-worldly account of mercy devolves into spoiling everybody and demanding that everybody spoil us. Forget justice, forget mercy. Turn those things inside out. To put something in an Orthodox *phronema* is to blow all that up and to say, "Justice and mercy are there everywhere, but beyond both is love." And God is love.

This won't happen, though, until you make your system utterly Christocentric and include the crucified Christ, not just Christ as a wonderful person. Although these other ways of thinking say a lot of Orthodox things and come to Orthodox conclusions, they have somehow lost this dimension. They feel like closed ideologies, a merely rational hybridization of worldly justice and mercy, because you must also have the inexhaustible mystery of love. ✦