

Sixteenth Sunday *per annum*
Year C, 2025

Gen 18:1-10a Col 1:24-28
Ps 15 Lk 10:38-42

Childlessness and dining with Jesus

Today, reflecting first on the first reading and then on the gospel, I will give what are essentially two very different homilies, as you'll soon see, the first reflection quite serious, the second a little more heart-warming.

Reflection one. In the reading from Genesis, Abraham and Sarah, who are childless and described as “old, advanced in years,” are told by the three mysterious guests whom they welcome, honor, and feed, that within the year Sarah will give birth to a son. The emotional, social, and spiritual burden of childlessness will end when their son Isaac – a gift from God – is born.

In ancient cultures in particular, childlessness carried with it a heavy social stigma. And even today, it weighs upon many couples who, for so many reasons, have a hard time conceiving. Great advances have been made in medical science to help with conception, many of them morally and ethically sound – surgical interventions, medical and hormone therapies, for instance. But there are other “reproductive technologies” that, while allowed under civil law, are morally and ethically wrong – surrogacy and in vitro fertilization (IVF), to name but two. The Catholic Church, faithful to her mission to teach the truth about right belief and right

behavior, has rather advanced and articulated teachings on the moral and ethical correctness of reproductive therapies.

A brief homily, though, is certainly not the place to delve into a full-blown explanation of this topic, but I feel that I must say something about IVF, since many Catholics – ardently and fervently pro-life – seem unaware of just how problematic IVF is and have even resorted to it without knowing the moral and ethical implications.

We must first acknowledge that the moment of conception is the moment in which human life begins. At that moment, when the male sperm joins the female egg, a new human life is created. Scientifically speaking, a unique and unrepeatable genetic code is fashioned, human life begins, and that unique and unrepeatable human life will, unless interrupted, develop and grow to become what it already is, a human person, who, in the space of nine or ten months, will be born into the world. Religiously speaking, we say that the moment of conception is the moment in which the human soul is created, a soul known by God, loved by God, brought into being by God's design, a soul meant to know, love, and serve God in this life and be forever with him in the next.

One – and here I emphasize that this is only one – of the many great problems with IVF is that during the process, any number eggs are fertilized, creating, let's say, a dozen or so human embryos, meaning a dozen or so human persons. Some embryos, found to be defective, will be discarded – killed – even before implantation.

Others will be implanted in the mother's uterus, often two or three at a time. Sometimes if too many implantations "take," one or more may be removed through an elective abortion. The rest of the embryos – which are human lives, human persons – are then frozen, perhaps for later use, perhaps indefinitely. What we then have are human souls on hold, frozen in an embryonic state, cryogenically held in medical stasis.

It seems to me – and to all right-thinking people – that human life should not be held in freezers, treated like a thing that can be used or not, kept or discarded, according to the whim or wishes of others. To treat human life like frozen vegetables, like leftover gumbo, is an affront to the dignity of human life. The last three popes – John Paul II, Benedict, Francis – did not fail in their duty to denounce this *commodification* of human life as morally evil. While acknowledging the pain and grief of childlessness, these popes, dutifully speaking the truth in love, reminded all who have the ears to hear – and Catholics first of all – that babies, children, are not commodities that anyone claim a right to, that can be bought or sold, kept or discarded. They are a gift, as is all human life. The desired end – to have a child of one's own to love – does not justify the means used to "obtain" that child when those means are shown to be morally and ethically wrong.

It is the case that many Catholics have resorted to IVF and are raising beautiful and deeply-loved children. They are our children and grandchildren, our brothers and sisters and cousins, our nieces

and nephews. While we cannot and must not regret the lives of these precious children, we can and must regret that they were brought into being by morally illicit means. We can and must regret that many people of good will, wholly committed to the pro-life cause, are unaware of how contrary to an authentic and consistent ethic of life technologies such as IVF are.

Big topic, to be sure. And before anyone gets too defensive and wants to disagree with the teachings of the Church on this matter, let's consider two things. First, this is an intensely emotional matter, and naturally so. Let's acknowledge that. Second, if you've never heard about the moral and ethical problems with IVF, then that probably means you haven't had a real chance to give this serious thought. Before you start to disagree, to argue, take the time to learn more, reflect more, before trying to articulate your thoughts and feelings. In the meantime, we must love with all our hearts our little ones conceived through IVF, and their parents, too. Here, there is no condemnation of people, but only a correction concerning the misuse of certain morally illicit and impermissible technologies that do not respect human life in the moment of conception.

Shifting gears altogether, a second reflection on the gospel, where sisters Martha and Mary receive Jesus into their home. Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus later raises from the dead, become friends of Jesus. They are a family who have become disciples of his, though they do not follow him around like some of his other disciples. Their home seems to be a sort of refuge for Jesus,

a place where he can get away from the burdens of his mission. He is always a welcome guest in their home, whether they invite him or whether he invites himself.

Whoever does the inviting, Jesus is there simply to be with the people he loves, enjoying their company, being together with them, speaking about his Father and the kingdom. Jesus is not a demanding guest. He's not there to be waited on hand and foot, not there for fancy food and drink. He is there because he simply wants to be with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

Just a few verses earlier in the same chapter as this gospel episode from Luke, Jesus told his disciples: "Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you... Whatever town you enter and they welcome you, eat what is set before you" (Lk 10:7-8). Jesus means for his missionary disciples to accept whatever hospitality is offered them as they go to each town, curing the sick, expelling demons, proclaiming the kingdom. From Jesus these disciples have received knowledge and power without cost, and without cost they are to freely give what they have freely received (Mt 10:8). And at the home of Martha and Mary, Jesus gives his disciples the example to follow.

Apparently Martha was not there to hear those earlier words of the man she calls "Lord," which perhaps explains why she is "anxious and worried about many things," and complains to Jesus about the burdens of serving while her sister Mary just sits there at Jesus's

feet, listening to him speak. Jesus's reproach is gentle and compassionate. He reminds Martha why he is there: not to be served, but to serve (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45). Being served by Jesus, teacher and friend, is the better part. Receiving from Jesus, teaching and friendship, is the better part. Mary seems to know this intuitively, while Martha must learn the lesson otherwise.

For most priests – and for me in particular – being able to spend time with parishioners away from official Church functions, services, and activities gives us a joy similar to the one Jesus must have experienced in the home of his friends. A meal together, a visit, prayer together, time to get to know one another, to make connections, time to ask questions or talk about difficult topics – like IVF perhaps – in a safe and private place, in calm and with understanding.

Since my ordination eighteen years ago, this has been one of my favorite ways of serving the people whose priest I was sent to be. Like Jesus, I don't need or even want a fancy restaurant or a fancy home. I don't need or want fine foods or to be fussed over. I'm not there for any of that. I'm there for you, because of you. I want to know you, so that I can come to love you, so that I can be of better service to you.

I have had the opportunity over the six years I've been here at St Patrick's to visit with a number of you in a more intimate and friendly setting in this way. Sometimes you invite me. Sometimes I

kind of invite myself, as I do occasionally, sometimes taking people by surprise. But don't ever be afraid to welcome your priest to your home, whether it's a single-wide trailer or a sprawling country estate. If you'll have me, I'll gladly accept. Where you live, I will gladly go. What you serve, I will gladly eat. Whatever questions you ask or things you want to talk about, these I will gladly entertain. This is the vocation, the calling, of priestly ministry after all. It is our life and our joy.

The love, welcome, and hospitality that people give their priests is one of the most humbling and rewarding things about being a priest. A priest's concern is not the kind of welcome given him, but that people might see in him something of the Lord Jesus, whose servant he is meant to be, and what delights and encourages a priest is that by receiving him, people are really receiving Jesus. And this, according to the words of Jesus: "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me" (Jn 13:20).

Yesterday evening, for example, I drove all the way to Ville Platte, there to visit, pray, and eat with former parishioners. Nearly twenty years ago, when I was first ordained, this group of couples invited me into their homes and into their hearts. In that time, I've buried their parents, married their kids, baptized their grandkids, been there in times of sorrow, stress, and struggle, death and divorce, or when they wanted to just get together and visit, or when they needed spiritual advice and comfort, to teach, to explain, to laugh,

to cry, to tell stories, to just be together. I love these people dearly, as Jesus must have loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and as I love you, too, and dearly, my St Patricians, and greatly desire to know you better and more and to spend time with you.

So, looking forward to our next visit or our first, I leave with you the words of today's gospel: don't be anxious or worried about anything. Whenever together we sit beside the Lord at his feet and listen to him speak, we experience together – priest and people – the better part, and it will not be taken from us.