

Catholic Couples Relate Overcoming of Infertility

by:

Jennifer Brinker, Review Staff Writer, St. Louis Review

Infertility can be a heavy cross to bear.

So says Katie Rutkoski, mom of two adopted children, who has struggled with infertility during her 11-year marriage.

But at the same time, what seemed to be a burden "helped us in our relationship with God and each other," said Rutkoski.

The subjects of infertility and the artificial methods of achieving pregnancy have been highlighted within the debate on embryonic stem-cell research.

But while the issues are on different ends of the spectrum, both give way to highlight what the Catholic Church teaches about the dignity of human life at the embryonic stage and how creation of that life must occur naturally, within marriage (see related story, page 6).

Three Catholic women, all part of an infertility support group offered through the Archdiocesan Office of Natural Family Planning, recently met with the Review to describe their journeys through infertility and what they have learned from the experience.

Donna Whiteley, a licensed professional counselor who serves as a volunteer facilitator for the support group, noted that each woman has gone through her own individual journey, "and not without some test of faith, quite frankly."

The women, she stressed, didn't get pregnant right away, "but they still didn't go back to unnatural ways of achieving pregnancy."

"This is just like any other cross we're asked to bear," said Whiteley. "It's not our time, it's God's time. They hung in there, when there wasn't an immediate solution."

Rutkoski, a parishioner at St. Robert Bellarmine Parish in St. Charles, said she and her husband, John, from the beginning of their marriage had a good grasp of the Church's teachings and wanted to follow them.

The Rutkoskis, who knew within the first year of marriage that there was going to be an issue with infertility, adopted two children, Liliana Elizabeth, now 2, and James Rodrigo, who will turn 2 tomorrow, Sept. 30.

Rutkoski said the adoption of their two children was a great gift.

"We're very fortunate to take part in a great gift that God has given us."

In vitro fertilization, said Rutkoski, involves "creating life outside of the marital act." She also expressed concern that multiple embryos are created during the in vitro process and that a number of them never will be implanted and brought to term.

The Rutkoskis have used the Creighton Fertility Care Model, one of several methods of natural family planning approved by the Church, to better understand what kind of infertility issues they were dealing with.

"It helped to gain an understanding and getting resolution," she said, "and to accept what the problems are."

She admitted that there seems to be confusion, even among Catholics, on what the Church teaches about artificial methods of reproduction.

"People get wrapped up in 'We're trying to create life,'" she said.

"People will justify it in their mind. 'Well, the Church says we're supposed to have kids. Why is this wrong?'"

Kim Bish found herself in just that situation.

A member of Sacred Heart Parish in Valley Park, Bish and her husband, Rick, had been dealing with infertility issues for some six years of their almost 10-year marriage.

"I had no idea what the Church's teaching was," she said. "We were not as close to the Church as we are now."

For several years, the Bishes had been through infertility clinics, trying to find a way to have a child. But during that time, Kim Bish said the experience "felt wrong - and we didn't know why."

But Bish, who noted she was younger and at a different point in her life then, said she wasn't sure at the time that she wouldn't do anything for a child.

Eventually, the Bishes' medical insurance ran out, and the two could no longer afford the assistance of infertility clinics. The average expense of an in vitro fertilization cycle can cost \$12,400, according to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine. That was an expense the Bishes didn't want to incur.

The heartache of infertility was so strong, Bish said, that she decided to turn to the Church for answers.

"I thought, 'If this is God's plan, then by golly, we better start talking to him about it,'" she said.

Soon enough, Bish saw a blurb in her parish bulletin on the Creighton Model. The Bishes also got to know better their then-associate pastor, Father Rickey Valleroy, and started talking to him and praying over the issue.

About two years after starting the Creighton Model, Bish became pregnant with the couple's first child, Stephen George, who will be 2 in December. They also recently found out they are expecting a second child in March.

In addition to having children, Bish said the Creighton Model also helped her and her husband to understand the underlying cause of their infertility.

"The Creighton Model helped in terms of answers," she said. "Up until the Creighton Model, I had no diagnosis of my problems. Every other doctor had not been able to tell me why."

Melinda Steinbrueck said she latched on to the Creighton Model to learn more about her health.

"It just made sense completely what we did," said the parishioner at Immaculate Conception in Maplewood.

Steinbrueck said both she and her husband, Todd, had learned through the Creighton Model that there were some issues of infertility. Her husband's doctor, who was not connected with their education on the Creighton Model, even recommended artificial insemination to help the couple achieve a pregnancy.

But the two refused, instead sticking with the Creighton Model to help them find the underlying issues of their infertility. After two years on the Creighton Model, the couple learned they were expecting their first child, Renee Frances, who turned 14 weeks old today, Sept. 29.

"We had strong faith in God that whatever was going to happen happens," said Steinbrueck. "My husband and I, we had faith that we would find someone to share our lives with, so we had faith in getting Renee."

Steinbrueck said, "When you go through the process, you start off saying 'I'll do anything to achieve a pregnancy.' You should really educate yourself. There's a lot that you don't know until you get to that bridge."

Bish said that when a person begins to understand what the Church teaches, "it would be hard to make a decision to do IVF."

Whiteley said that most people who undergo artificial methods of conception don't know about the emotional baggage that can accompany it.

"Like abortions, they don't tell you the psychological impact" of in vitro fertilization, she said.

The infertility support group, she said, offers an opportunity for couples to share their experiences with one another.

"It truly is a support group," she said. "It's faith-based, and that's our driving force. These are strong women that make up strong couples. They see infertility as a blessing as opposed to a cross."