Donald De Marco, *Biotechnology and the Assault on Parenthood* (Ignatius Press, 1991), 269 pages
Reviewed by Kristine Cranley

In November 2011, voters in the state of Mississippi were asked to decide when a human being becomes a person. Initiative 26 read as follows: “Should the term 'person' be defined to include every human being from the moment of fertilization, cloning, or the equivalent thereof?” The devolution of personhood into a category assigned by popular opinion reveals a deep philosophical crisis in our understanding of what it means to be a human being. Our personal dignity is no longer recognized as intrinsic to our human nature but rather something extrinsically bestowed by others.

For John Paul II, this “eclipse of man” and his transcendent personal value is rooted in a more fundamental “eclipse of God.” For “when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 21). Our greatness and inviolability flow from our origin in divine love and our summons to divinization through eternal communion with the Triune God, by becoming love in and through Christ. Human generation *via* the incarnate self-gift of love between husband and wife is meant to educate us that our very identity as persons is “gift” and “love.” However, when procreation is severed from the marital embrace the truth of this inalienable personal identity is obscured.

In *Biotechnology and the Assault on Parenthood*, Donald De Marco addresses this concern by offering a comprehensive discussion of the problem of Artificial Reproductive Technology (ART) and its devastating philosophical, moral, legal, psychological, and social impact on how we understand ourselves. Right from the outset, De Marco grounds his critique of ART in the biblical anthropology of John Paul II. Beginning with a defense of the “normalcy” of marriage through a eudemonistic natural law perspective, he fills out his argument by referencing the late Holy Father’s “Theology of the Body” catecheses, and their teaching that Christ reveals the full truth of marriage and gives the grace to live it. Marriage, as a vocation to become a communion of persons through total self-giving, is “the ordinary way in which ordinary people deepen their knowledge of life’s meaning and mystery, most fully express what is immortal in them, and share in the life of the divine” (p. 17). The couple, called to communion with God, embraces marriage as a pathway toward that union, allowing the whole of their married life and love to be transfigured into the image of Love himself, Jesus Christ, through his grace. Man and woman’s procreative capacities enable them to express personal and familial love to their children, and thus experience their reality as “self-giving persons” made in the image of the Trinitarian God.

For De Marco this understanding of the truth of the human person is what gives marriage and procreation their deeply personal nature. He then goes on to spend the rest of his work exploring the consequences of contradicting this internal truth of marriage and procreation through ART.

**The Depersonalization of the Child**
In turning away from their divine origin, Adam and Eve lose sight of their identity as gift, as testified to in their experience of “original shame” at the objectifying gaze of the other. De Marco claims that ART is a continuation of this same objectification and involves the incapacity to recognize the other as gift. Through ART the child effectively becomes a commodity to be...
bought and sold. The sundering of his generation from the physical act of unity between spouses causes a ripple effect of alienation for all involved. Surrogacy declares the natural bond between mother and child revocable. Sperm donation denies the child the right to be in relationship with her father. While the abolition of slavery outlawed the practice of considering one person the object of another’s “rights,” yet in ART children become the object of a newly-defined right to conception, pregnancy, and childbearing (a right which has now been extended from infertile couples to non-fertile same-sex couples). De Marco asserts that these injustices against the child grow out of a loss of the recognition of God himself as the author of every human life, and as such the guarantor of their inviolable dignity.

The Assault on Motherhood and Fatherhood
He goes on to demonstrate that the practice of ART violates the nature of authentic parenthood. Procreation degenerates into mere reproduction, the making of products rather than a privileged participation in the creation of new human beings by God. Instead of parents being “for” children, these technologies cause offspring to be increasingly viewed as “for” parents. Contrary to the dictates of justice, a vulnerable and needy child is summoned to fulfill the subjective desires of his relatively “wealthy” parents. De Marco believes that the myopic emphasis on biological reproduction in the discussion involving ART tends to exclude the moral and spiritual dimension integral to our human vocation. Thus ironically, despite placing the emphasis on the desires of the parents, its widespread acceptance corrodes our understanding of the personal significance of both motherhood and fatherhood. The father’s role is reduced to that of a “loveless, mindless, bodiless sperm donor.” He is expendable. Likewise “the objective reality of motherhood as a hallowed vocation is reduced to a choice.” Through ART a woman no longer conforms to motherhood but “invents” it. She can choose to be a mother without undergoing pregnancy, or having any genetic relation to the child. Through embracing these technologies she allows her radical, embodied self-gift in motherhood to be depersonalized and objectified.

The Disembodiment of Motherhood
By citing numerous legal case histories, De Marco demonstrates the Cartesian disembodied or dualistic anthropology at the foundation of the ART laws. Surrogacy sunder pregnancy from motherhood, for the woman from whom the child is born is no longer legally considered the mother (even in the cases of “full” surrogacy, where the child is genetically her own). Surrogates are spoken of in subhuman terms as “human incubators” or “rented wombs.” In cases where a mother desired to revoke the contract and keep the child, her rights are superseded in court by those of the contracting couple, who are described as having “mentally conceived” the child. In favoring this fiction, the courts show a blatant disregard for the truth of the biological and psychological bond between mother and child, which De Marco attributes to the “triumph of marketing over common sense.” As he says, “Surrogacy glorifies the will and makes an invalid of reason” (p. 203). No longer subject to reason, law becomes founded on will alone, and as such is increasingly distanced from any connection with the objective reality.

Societal Repercussions
On a wider scale, the book looks at some of the cultural implications of the practice of ART De Marco speaks about social justice concerns involved with the practice of treating a desire rather than a disease (as in the case of in vitro fertilization). The glut of money and medical expertise poured into these technologies diverts these resources from the poor and those with true diseases.
Little attention is given to infertility prevention. Advertisements promising miracle pregnancies exploits the vulnerability of couples desperately desiring a child. The feminist ideology which champions ART is incapable of reconciling its two fundamental tenets of freedom and equality. A woman’s “reproductive freedom” overrides the “equal rights” of anyone who stands in its way, in the process objectifying women through surrogacy contracts, ignoring the rights of the unborn, denying fathers the right to protect or raise their child, and paradoxically enabling women to use their “right to choose” for the purpose of gender discrimination (sex selective abortion). Following this ideology to its logical conclusion, De Marco claims, makes motherhood itself the enemy, because it “compromises individuality by sharing itself with others” (p. 250).

**Verbal Engineering**

As the moral theologian Msgr William B. Smith has noted, “All social engineering is preceded by verbal engineering.” Maternity, paternity, family, human generation, and personhood itself; the way we define these words will have profound implications for the whole of human society. In this book De Marco offers a luminous defense of these sacred realities from the growing assault waged on them by proponents of ART. For example, the concept of surrogate parenthood itself is founded on the contradiction that a woman can simultaneously both be and not be a mother. Traditionally the mother is the one who gives birth to the child, and it is more properly the adoptive or contracting woman who is the “surrogate” mother. The woman bearing the child is more precisely a *surrogate wife* to the father of the baby.

Surrogacy is also the legal flip side of abortion: in both cases one party is depersonalized. While in abortion the child has no legal protection in the face of the mother’s “right to choose,” so too in surrogacy contracts the mother has no right to keep the child who as we have seen is considered as a mere “tenant in a rented womb,” mentally conceived by another. “Surrogate motherhood,” De Marco writes, “demands a great deal of alienation: the pregnant woman from her child as well as from her own motherhood, the husband from his wife, and the surrogate from her own husband and children, and even her children from their surrogate sibling. Such alienation on so many fronts weakens personal identities as well as the family unity” (p. 179).

**Conclusion**

De Marco’s book is invaluable in bringing clarity to some of the anthropological ramifications of the use of ART. However, because the book was written over two decades ago, the case histories cited may be legally outdated. Another shortcoming is that the text focuses extensively on surrogacy cases without spending as much time on IVF or issues involving cloning, embryo freezing, and reduction. If written today the author might also have referenced the tremendous success of clinics such as the Pope Paul VI Institute ([http://www.popepaulvi.com/](http://www.popepaulvi.com/)) which have made great strides in treating and curing many of the fertility problems which ART seeks to circumvent. Nevertheless, the philosophical foundation De Marco provides in this work is beautifully articulated and remains perennially valid.

Rooted in an anthropology enlightened by revelation, his arguments expose the inconsistencies, deceptions, and dangers of the untruth about human person which these technologies are predicated upon, while simultaneously testifying to the true glory of the human being called to
communion with God. It is a glory demanding the reverence of the barefoot Moses; the mysterious glory so poetically expressed in C.S. Lewis’ sermon “The Weight of Glory”:

“‘You have never met a mere mortal…. It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet if at all only in a nightmare. All day long we are in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another.’”