



# Humanum

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BOOK REVIEW

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## Experiences of Donor Conception

PAIGE S. SANCHEZ

**Caroline Lorbach**, *Experiences of Donor Conception: Parents, Offspring and Donors through the Years* (Kingsley, 2003, 192 pages).

"A Response to the Malaise of Not Being God by Creating Children for Biologically Infertile Persons of the World to Eliminate the Burden of an Unfilled Desire, and for Making Gametes Beneficial to the Public." [With apologies to Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being a Burden on Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public," 1729.]

*I think it is agreed by all parties that to have a child is an inalienable right of every human person. To pass on one's genetic make-up to progeny is something every man desires and deserves. The prodigious number of women lacking an ovum, of men with a low sperm count, or of people who have suffered disease or have hereditary abnormalities that could be given to their children is a presently deplorable state, a very great grievance indeed; and therefore, whoever can find a safe and probable way of using science to answer this tribulation would serve the public immeasurably. Certainly to help infertile persons in their great need would be nothing short of an immense act of generosity and charity of the truest kind.*

*But my intention is very far from being confined to provide only for those who desire to be mothers and fathers: it is of a much greater extent, and shall take in the whole number of persons who are not in a position to give birth to and raise a child but who have the possibility of being the source of a rich harvest of gametes. Sperm and egg donors, whether they already have children of their own or do not wish to ever have children themselves, have at their disposal spare parts that through their donations can help their fellow man and in turn receive financial compensation for their anonymous biological contribution in response to the dire situation in which infertile persons find themselves. As one donor has said, "In the end it's what's in your heart, what the feelings are, what the sentiments are, if you're doing the right thing and you're doing it from the heart you can't go too far wrong" (p. 18).*

*The advantages of the proposal of donor conception are obvious and many, as well as of the highest importance. I can think of no one objection that will possibly be raised against this proposal, unless it should be urged, that the number of unwanted children would thereby be lessened. This I freely own, and 'twas indeed one principal design in offering it to the world. Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients: where there is suffering it must be eliminated, for nothing good has ever come of man not getting what man himself determines, wants, and deserves.*

This is the ideology from which this book is born; one that denies that the givenness of being born has an objective meaning at all.

Certainly, the experience of infertility is a circumstance that feels contrary to man's nature, which has been made for happiness and fulfillment. While infertility is a painful state of affairs, it can also be lived as a grace that puts man in front of his own life realizing that he is not the maker of himself. However, the proposal of this book suggests the contrary: when man cannot make his own life, his response is to take matters into his own hands to make the life of the child he so ardently desires. In this, he rejects the grace offered to him in the suffering of infertility.

In this book the act of donating a gamete is viewed as a way of taking control of one's life. The body has no relation to the person and becomes simply raw material to be used. Lorbach writes: "Years ago I used to donate blood and would walk out of the blood bank proudly wearing the sticker given to me which read, 'Be nice to me, I gave blood today.' Imagine if stickers were given to sperm and egg donors: 'Be nice to me, I donated sperm today.' Men and women who donate their reproductive tissue are rarely recognized in any public way" (p. 73). Lorbach implies they should be.

As a consequence, donors often find themselves wondering what has resulted through their donations. "Donors have often been faced with inevitable questions such as: 'How many other children are there?'" (p. 80). "I asked one clinic, I said, 'Is it possible for you to tell me how many I've fathered?' They told me that I'd fathered six, three boys and three girls" (p. 82). While it is most common for donors to remain perpetually unknown and therefore without conscious relation to the families that care for the offspring produced through their gametes, some have said: "I would be eager to hear about the offspring from my donation, not to meddle in their lives to supplant their parents, but just to be available. Also, I have been very successful, so I would think nothing of helping them with college tuition in a few years" (p. 82).

In this book, donor conception is presupposed to be a great good answering an acute need, regardless of the inevitable consequence of the task of telling others and also the offspring produced by donor conception. The author laments that this is made more difficult by the societal censure surrounding this mode of coming into being. "Donor conception is nothing to be ashamed of, and if we tried to hide it, it would be as though there was something to hide" (p. 118). Therefore, some parents have said, "We have told anyone who will know our child because we want the child to grow up feeling that their circumstances are quite normal," even though from the beginning, "we never even thought past having the child" (pp. 95, 113).

The number of children by donor conception is growing. These children are formed to affirm the normality of coming into being this way, marked by comments such as: "Daddy didn't have any seeds. We went to a hospital where they had seeds from lots of different men, and we picked one, and that went with Mummy's eggs and made this fantastic boy" (p. 127). Children can now confidently proclaim, in "referring to the 'lady that helped us out'... 'Oh yes, it's almost like she's our 'ex-mother'" (p. 131).

This book reads as a project seeking to help recipient parents affirm their experiences of donor conception as conventional and benign. Unfortunately, what is denied in this effort is the truth of the human person and his relation to God. Rather than entering into an understanding of life, children, reality, and even suffering as gift, this book instead presupposes that where there is suffering it must be eliminated, because nothing good has ever come of man not getting what man himself determines, wants, and deserves. The truth of the frustration with infertility is ultimately a profound fear that man is not God.

I close with a quotation from the final chapter of the book entitled, "Thoughts and Experiences of Donor Offspring." This chapter offers a surprisingly inconsistent conclusion compared with those that precede it, which mostly read as an effort of the author to affirm her own decision in favor of donor insemination when faced with her own infertility. These stories of donor children confirm that the truth of the human person's relation to his origin is something that can never, no matter how much the relation is rejected, ignored, or kept secret, be blotted out from one's ontological memory.

I'll never give up [finding information about my donor]. How can you just accept injustice and carry on with dignity? (p. 180).

*Paige S. Sanchez completed a Master of Theological Studies degree at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC. She is currently the Associate Superintendent for Mission Effectiveness in the Catholic Schools Office of the Archdiocese of New York.*

