

Ethicist says ‘mistaken’ reproductive choices bring ‘surreal’ results

WASHINGTON - The case of an Ohio woman who recently gave birth to another couple's child because she was implanted with the wrong embryo at a fertility clinic shows how "potentially surreal" the situation can become when reproduction is separated from the intimacy of marriage, said a leading Catholic ethicist.

Father Tadeusz Pacholczyk, director of education at the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, said the situation faced by Carolyn and Sean Savage of Sylvania, Ohio, "reminds us how the exclusivity that is written right into marriage and the marital act is disrupted" through in vitro fertilization and other artificial reproductive technologies.

"You have the possibility now of receiving the wrong child altogether," he told Catholic News Service in a Sept. 29 telephone interview. "That's physically impossible the normal way. Once you step outside the normal elements of exclusivity, it becomes potentially surreal."

Carolyn Savage gave birth Sept. 24 at St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio, to a boy whose biological parents were Paul and Shannon Morell of Troy, Mich. In a statement, the Savages offered "our heartfelt congratulations to the Morell family on the birth of their son."

"We wish Paul, Shannon, their twin girls and their new baby boy the best as they move forward with their lives together," the statement added.

The Savages, who have three children, also asked for privacy, saying, "Our family is going through a very difficult time."

Carolyn Savage was implanted with the Morells' frozen embryo in February and was told of the mistake by a doctor from the fertility clinic 10 days later. The Savages have told news media, however, that they never considered an abortion or an

attempt to keep the child.

“Of course, we will wonder about this child every day for the rest of our lives,” Carolyn Savage told Meredith Viera of NBC’s “Today” show before the birth. “We have hopes for him, but they’re his parents, and we’ll defer to their judgment on when and if they ever tell him what happened and any contact that’s afforded us. We just want to know he’s healthy and happy.”

Father Pacholczyk said the situation shows that the question that often follows the “mistaken decisions” to have in vitro fertilization is “how can we best pick up the pieces?”

“The best thing we can do is to make sure that no abortions take place, and that was done here,” he said.

“But that does not in any way address the moral dilemmas posed by the prior act – the root cause of the mistaken decision,” said the priest of the Diocese of Fall River, Mass., who holds four bachelor’s degrees – in chemistry, biochemistry, molecular and cellular biology, and philosophy – as well as a doctorate in neuroscience from Yale University.

“We’re always picking up the pieces in one way or another,” he added.

Father Pacholczyk said he often receives requests for guidance from couples who have frozen embryos that they can no longer use.

“It’s a burning question for them,” he said. “But I tell them there is no simple answer.”

The priest said the “minimal obligation” for such couples is to “acknowledge that they have children trapped in these frozen orphanages” and to “pay the monthly fees to be sure that their children don’t end up thawing and dying.”

Then, he said, they should “wait and see if someday an answer might present itself,” although he said he is skeptical that science will come up with a solution.

Father Pacholczyk also said he sees a need for long-term psychological testing of the

children produced through in vitro fertilization or in other unusual reproductive circumstances.

“I think studies will find that these children do not do as well (psychologically) as children conceived in the marital embrace,” he said. “I think there will be effects that will be demonstrable, if the studies are done.”