

A Christmas letter I got from friends gives me an update on their daughter. They write, "She is now going to be a teenager for the next 7 years. Pray for us. She is convinced that her parents were placed on the face of this earth for the sole purpose of embarrassing her." Teenage years are difficult on kids and their parents. There is so much joy over the birth of a child, that it is hard to imagine the challenges ahead when the kid turns 13.

The conception of a human being is miraculous. The conception of Jesus and his mother were even more so. Mary was conceived without original sin; she is the Immaculate Conception. Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, as Luke says in his gospel.

The conception of any human is miraculous, but the field of embryos and fetuses has become morally complex. Last week the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith released an instruction on bioethical questions, called the Dignity of a Person. You can read it online; its foundational principal is that every human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception. A child deserves to be conceived within the context of marriage and family life. Even a non-believer should agree that human beings deserve respect from the start. God's own Son became one of us through conception and birth into a family. The Vatican restates positions that have not been popular, including the belief that adoption is a more respectful option than artificial insemination because of the sacredness of the conjugal act; additionally, *in vitro* fertilization creates multiple embryos, most of which are deliberately destroyed. There are thousands and thousands of frozen embryos in existence, and the Vatican's Congregation states that the injustice to those human persons cannot be resolved; that the practice simply has to halt. The instruction goes on to restate our position *against* the destruction of embryos for the sake of obtaining stem cells, but *for* the use of adult stem cells with all they promise science and human health. The media often paint the Catholic Church as an organization opposed to science, but in this instruction the Vatican clearly states that science provides an invaluable service to the life and dignity of every human being, especially when it helps those who are poor, afflicted by disease, and in need of humanitarian assistance. Science is good, but it needs to live by high ideals.

Many people will look at the Church's position on these issues and say, "Well, those are nice theories, but they just can't work." I wonder what would have happened if Mary had said this to Gabriel when he told her in today's gospel, "You will conceive and bear a son." Mary did object, "How can this be?" She knew her biology. But the angel said, "Nothing will be impossible for God." Then, Mary did not say, "Well, those are nice theories, but they just can't work." She said, "May it be done to me according to your word."

In the spiritual life we try to figure out what is the word from God. Sometimes when we know what God asks of us, we are tempted not to do it because it sounds hard, nonsensical, or half-baked. But what God asks is never immoral. God will send the power of the Holy Spirit to overshadow us whenever we say, "May it be done to me according to your word."