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A Kidney versus the Uterus

Earlier this year, at the University of Ottawa, I debated with a philosophy professor about abortion. Most of the people I debate with deny the personhood of the unborn on the basis of the unborn's inability to function in certain ways. The professor, however, argued that even if the unborn are full members of the moral community, as adults are, abortion is permissible because pregnancy involves an extraordinary act on behalf of the mother. This was the analogy he used to make his case: "Suppose that you are in need of a kidney transplant in order to survive and that your mother is the only person in the world who is a physical match, meaning that she is the only person who can provide you with a kidney and hence preserve your life. Do you have a right to your mother's kidney?"

As we know from Church teaching, organ donation from live donors can be ethical, even admirable, but it is certainly not mandatory. Even when it is done, Pope John Paul II stipulated, "A person can only donate that of which he can deprive himself without serious danger or harm to his own life or personal identity, and for just and proportionate reason."⁽¹⁾

Could those who are pro-life argue, then, that because "donating" one's uterus to the unborn does not bring danger to the mother's life, it should be done? The philosophy professor anticipated that argument. Indeed, he said it would be nice to provide one's kidney or uterus, but a woman shouldn't be forced to do it. Expressing the same sentiment as the Church on organ donation, he indicated that just because one may do it, it doesn't mean one must. He explained that the kidney case is analogous to pregnancy in the following ways: "It concerns two persons who stand in the relation of mother and child. Both are, uncontroversially, full members of the moral community, with all of the rights that come with such membership. One person (the child) requires the other person's body (the mother's) to survive. In the kidney case, my right to life and my need for my mother's body to survive do not deliver any right whatsoever to her body, let alone a right that trumps her rights to control her body. The same goes for pregnancy."

If that is true about the kidney, does it follow that it is true about the uterus? While many things could be said in response to the professor's claim, this question needs to be at the heart of our reply: What is the nature and purpose of the kidney versus the nature and purpose of the uterus? The answer tells us why a woman is not obligated to give her child her kidney but is obligated to "give" her child her uterus.

The Function of the Uterus

Once one looks at the function of the kidneys and the uterus, it is quite clear why the professor's analogy does not have merit. The kidneys exist for the health and proper functioning of the body in which they reside. In other words, kidneys exist in a body, for that body. In contrast, the uterus exists in one body, to be around—and for—another body. The fact that a woman can live without her uterus but a fetus cannot shows that the uterus exists for the unborn child rather than for the mother. The unborn, as members of the human family then, must not be denied the environment that regularly waits in great expectation for them.

The fact that the uterus, an organ created to nurture the unborn, belongs to the woman tells us something very important—and beautiful—about the nature and purpose of women: that they are to be mothers (whether in physical or spiritual form). A pregnant woman becomes a tabernacle enveloping a person made in the image of the Divine. Far from being viewed as an injustice, as an intrusion on one's bodily rights, it should be viewed as a fulfillment of one's purpose—the purpose both of the woman and of her body, including her uterus. While we cannot deny the difficult, even tragic, life circumstances that a pregnant woman may face, the life in her womb is not something to be destroyed. It is something—someone—to hold in awe, to admire with sacred reverence, declaring as Elizabeth once did to her cousin Mary, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Luke 1:42)

The role of woman as mother means that she (like the father) has a responsibility to her offspring that she does not have to strangers.⁽²⁾ And while that responsibility does not obligate her to do extraordinary things, such as taking trips to Disneyland or donating kidneys, it does obligate her to do ordinary things, such as feeding, clothing, and sheltering her offspring. To do otherwise would be parental neglect. In fact, Western countries have made it illegal for parents to neglect their children. And so, maintaining pregnancy is simply doing for the unborn what parents must do for the born—providing the shelter and nourishment a child needs. It is what is required in the normal course of the reproduction of our species.

Furthermore, when unborn children are aborted, they are directly and intentionally killed in the environment made for them. A kidney patient, in contrast, dies as a result of kidney disease. As a physician friend of mine pointed out, "In the renal analogy, if nothing is done, one person dies. In the pregnancy case, if nothing is done, no one dies." Thus, the professor's kidney comparison can only be truly analogous with abortion if the mother, after denying her child a kidney, then dismembers, decapitates, and disembowels him, too.

Fundamentally, however, the issue in responding to the kidney analogy is to examine the nature of the uterus.⁽³⁾ That insight came to me during the debate as I was praying for wisdom about how to respond; I consider subsequent comments from the professor as evidence of the Holy Spirit at work: Shortly after the debate my friend told me, "The professor told his class that week that the argument that the womb was created for the child was literally keeping him up all night!"

A Much Better Analogy

Two months after that event, I traveled to the University of Minnesota to debate with an abortionist. In the concluding portion of my remarks I shared the following thought experiment: Imagine yourself flying on a plane. You are in a properly pressurized environment that will keep you safe during your time in the air. You are locked in and completely powerless to control the plane—you are at the mercy of the pilot, but that's okay as she's trained to do her job right.

So what would you think if the pilot suddenly decided she did not want to fly anymore? She parachutes to safety, leaving the plane to crash with you and your fellow passengers inside. Or what would you think if the pilot suddenly decided she did not want passengers on her plane anymore, and she ordered the stewardess to shoot them?

While these actions are all technically possible, we would say such behavior is immoral. We would say that with power comes responsibility—and the pilot must use her power to fly the plane, and its passengers, to safety.

Using power responsibly is what the world saw earlier this year when Captain Chesley Sullenberger safely landed a U.S. Airways flight on the Hudson River after both its engines blew. In an unplanned, undesirable, unwanted moment, he chose to do what was right—to land the plane as safely as possible. Not only that, but as water was filling the cabin, he walked the aisle twice to make sure every passenger had been rescued.

So it is with pregnancy. An unborn child is weak and entirely vulnerable, and the child's dependency on us does not absolve us of responsibility: it heightens our responsibility. A woman's uterus may be in her body, but every month it gets ready for someone else's body. It exists not so much for us as women, but for our offspring. With the power to control the destiny of one's child comes the responsibility to protect and respect the child's life.

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1. John Paul II, Address to the First International Congress of the Society for Organ Sharing (June 20, 1991).
 2. Chapter 7 of Francis Beckwith's book *Politically Correct Death: Answering Arguments for Abortion Rights* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993) extensively covers arguments such as this when refuting an analogy similar to the professor's. The points Beckwith makes are in response to an analogy proposed by abortion advocate Judith Jarvis Thomson, known as "unplugging the violinist" and articulated in her well-known paper, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1.1 (Fall 1971), available at <http://spot.colorado.edu/~heathwoo/Phil160,Fall02/thomson.htm>.
 3. It should be noted that this perspective about the nature of the uterus does not preclude removing a cancerous uterus of a pregnant woman, should its removal be required for the preservation of her life. The uterus is indeed a part of her body, not the unborn child's (although it exists for the unborn child). If we apply the principles of integrity and totality, we see that the removal of such a uterus would be warranted, as its sacrifice is required for the mother's very survival. Furthermore, if the principle of double effect is applied, we see that the death of the unborn child would be a foreseen but unintended effect of a good action, the removal of a pathological organ.

