



Stephen and Bridget Patton have been married 16 years and live in Sacramento with their three children: Krystena, left, 11, Jacinta, center, 10, and Dominic, 5.

## The unexpected gifts of infertility

Steve and I began our marriage just knowing that it wouldn't be much beyond nine months before we would be holding our own perfect little newborn. Granted we were both 38, but we were both healthy and otherwise "successful" people. And the Natural Family Planning charts we had observed during our engagement looked normal enough.

It had been overwhelmingly clear to everyone else about how our relationship – including the way we had met and gotten engaged – had been part of a divine plan. Surely a

brood of our own little ones would follow easily and naturally, right?

Well, six months of marriage and no pregnancy made us begin to wonder. We took a naturalist approach first – dietary changes and supplements – but that didn't help. By our first anniversary, we heard about Dr. Tom Hilgers (at the Creighton University School of Medicine) and his newly developing science of NaproTechnology. Not only was he achieving remarkable results with infertile couples, but he was doing it fully in keeping with Catholic teaching.

When I first walked into the waiting room of the Pope Paul VI Institute in Omaha, Neb., what first caught my eye was a wall covered with photos of babies, children, parents and families.

By Bridget Patton | Photography by Cathy Joyce

We felt immediately wrapped in the warmth of a love for life.

Nine months after first meeting him and his staff, Steve and I were blessed with the announcement that I was pregnant. As we watched our little one's heart beat at five weeks, our hearts overflowed with joy and gratitude. That was only to last for a month, however.

The next ultrasound showed no heartbeat. Our tiny child had died. The brimming joy of a brand new life all too soon gave way to the numb sorrow of a very early death. But we wanted our joy, not our sorrow, to be our lasting memory and so we named our little one Cause of Our Joy, one of the titles of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

We kept our hope up for a while longer, but as we began progressing through our early 40s, it was dawning on us that we would not likely conceive another child. God was asking us to bear the cross of infertility. Hard as it was to carry, another would be added.

We still knew we wanted to be parents, so we turned to adoption. We ended up suffering through not one, but three failed adoption attempts. So, not only could we not conceive a child the normal way, we couldn't even adopt one the normal way.

While we didn't give up hope of adopting, we decided that while we were waiting, we would provide state-licensed foster care. God was quietly preparing the way.

Five years, two months and 17 days into our marriage, we got a call from our assigned caseworker. "We have a newborn girl, will you take her in?" What a little beauty she was: a full shock of hair, eyelashes to die for, elfin eyes and a bubbling, happy spirit.

With foster care, when you take a child in you never quite know how long she or he will stay. We had already taken in a boy a few weeks earlier, only to see him leave a month later. But in Krystena's case, her stay was for life.

Within six months, it was clear to the state that it was never going to be safe for her to return to her biological parents, and we were asked if we would adopt her. Oh yes! And so our little

Krystena was ours.

Jacinta came shortly afterwards. An ob-gyn friend of ours contacted us out of the blue: She had a birth mom who wanted her child to be adopted and our friend thought, knowing our story, that we would be the right fit. Was she ever right!

We were introduced to Jacinta's biological mother when Jacinta was five months old in her mother's womb. God had cleared the way for our dear little, dark-eyed and deep-spirited Jacinta to be placed in our arms at birth.

Before we knew it we were a family of four, and it had happened in ways we could never have imagined or even prayed for at the beginning of our marriage. But God wasn't finished with us yet.

Six years later, having already turned 50, God stirred within Steve's and my hearts. We decided, "Let's welcome one more." We reactivated as foster parents and asked for a boy under two. We first took care of an 8-month-old boy for about a month and then we welcomed in a 15-month-old.

He was sick and scared when he arrived, but after several weeks of good meals and loads of "TLC" – which the four of us were delighted to give – he emerged as a spunky and bright little boy. And, as with Krystena years earlier, we were soon asked if we would be willing to adopt him. Again, yes! And so he became our Dominic.

What is the moral of our story? Children are gifts freely given by God. We can and should ask him for these gifts, but we can never expect him to give them – not in the way that we might have expected. That is the nature of a gift.

Naturally conceived children are God's normal gift for married couples, but with some couples that is not his plan. But even if God might not give his gifts to these couples in the normal way – in the way they might have expected – he still wishes to give gifts to them.

Steve and I cannot imagine how a family with three naturally conceived children could be any happier and more grateful than we are with our three adopted ones. But we could never have known that when we began our journey together as a married couple.

### What can infertile Catholics do?

**The Catholic Church understands that children are the supreme blessing of a marriage. The church likewise appreciates the great suffering of infertile couples and encourages scientific research and medical care aimed at treating infertility.**

**However, out of deep respect for the true nature and dignity of human sexuality, the church also places certain limits upon this research and care. For instance, treatments that physically disconnect the sexual act from procreation – such as in vitro fertilization – must be avoided.**

**So what is morally acceptable? It's anything that assists the reproductive act without replacing it. For instance, many infertile couples get pregnant simply by learning about their cycles of fertility through instruction from a Natural Family Planning instructor. For a list of certified instructors in the Sacramento Diocese, visit [www.diocese-sacramento.org/nfp](http://www.diocese-sacramento.org/nfp).**

**It also is acceptable to receive any care that assists or repairs the reproductive organs. For example, trained FertilityCare practitioners and physicians provide treatment proven to be at least as effective as in vitro while being more humane, less invasive and commonly less costly. For more information, see [www.fertilitycare.org/view-videos](http://www.fertilitycare.org/view-videos). Such care is available in Sacramento at the Mercy Women's Center at 916.614.2216.**

**Some couples simply will not be able to bear children of their own. The church empathizes with such couples – like Bridget and me – and encourages them to "unite themselves with the Lord's Cross, the source of all spiritual fecundity. They can give expression to their generosity by adopting abandoned children or performing demanding services for others." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2379)**

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