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## **AUXILIARY REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHINGS OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH**

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33876/2224-9680/2021-1-21/02en>

***Ссылка при цитировании:***

Bakhmatova M.N. (2021). Vspomogatel'nye reproductivnye tehnologii v kontekste uchenija Rimsko-katolicheskoy cerkvi [Auxiliary Reproductive Technologies in the Context of Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church]. *Medicinskaja antropologija i biojetika [Medical Anthropology and Bioethics]*, 1(21).

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**Keywords:** Roman Catholic Church, reproductive technologies, in vitro fertilization (IVF), zygote, embryo, Catholic Church doctrine, medical anthropology, anthropology of religion, surrogacy, donor's gametes

**Abstract:** In the 1970s and 1980s, the progress in biotechnologies of human reproduction, thanks to some revolutionary methods – among them IVF, the use of donor's gametes and surrogate motherhood – allowed couples suffering from infertility to have children. This breakthrough research got under the scrutiny of the Roman Catholic Church, which evaluated these practices based on fundamental Christian doctrines, emphasizing that the birth of life belongs to the sacred sphere and the human being has the right to protection and respect of his or her dignity from the very moment of conception.

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The revolution of reproductive technologies in the past few decades constitutes a challenge for world religions. The process of the creation of a new life left the sphere of the sacred to enter the sterile walls of a laboratory in a medical center. The technician took the place of the demiurge. Issues such as the erosion of the concepts of fatherhood and motherhood, the possibility of having multiple parents, the status of the embryo, the use of donors and of surrogate motherhood required serious consideration from religious institutions. Alongside ethical issues, these institutions also face questions of anthropological-religious and ontological character: what is the real essence of a human being, if human intervention is permitted in the mystery of procreation? Since the vast majority of religious systems attributes a metaphysical essence to the process of procreation, endorses taboos, and strictly regulates many aspects of domestic life, fatherhood and motherhood, the structures of filiation, the social recognition of the child etc., the appearance of a new link in this chain creates a host of new ethical and religious problems (Godelier 2004).

The aim of this article is to show how the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) answers the challenges posed by biotechnology in the reproductive sphere. In the exploration of these problems we will appeal to approaches stemming from the anthropology of reproduction, as well as the anthropology of religion, understood here as sociocultural anthropology. In this, we follow M.V. Mikhel, who notices that “human reproduction is not merely a biological, but a sociocultural process” as well (Mikhel 2010: 46). When talking about IVF, it’s important to take into account both epistemological and ethical considerations, which became in the past decades a prime target of research within the anthropology of Christianity (The Anthropology of Christianity 2006). Let’s also make an ad hoc remark that anthropological research of Christianity is an important and promising direction for the humanities in general, which requires a multifaceted approach.

To understand how the RCC responds to the questions posed by new reproductive technologies, we need to explore this topic through the lens of the dogmatic teachings and of Catholic anthropology and bioethics. Three main factors belong to this domain. First, the RCC traditionally pays a great deal of attention to questions connected with the context of conception, in particular to marital relations – since reproduction is considered one of the main aims of a Catholic marriage. The deep connection between marriage and childbearing, between the sexual and reproductive functions, causes a series of consequences, which, as we will see, restricts the available choices of reproductive biotechnologies and practices.

The second factor, which makes the intervention into the human reproductive functions a delicate affair, is the existence in Western Christianity of the dogma of the immaculate conception of Jesus Christ and his mother Mary (we briefly note here that the idea of immaculate conception could remind of parthenogenesis).

What is important for us is that in the idea of “immaculate conception” the reproductive function is contrasted with the sexual function, which implies that the union of these two functions belongs to the profane, or even animal, dimension of human life.

The opposition between immaculate and not immaculate conception notwithstanding, the question here is not about the creation of a binary opposition, since in the context of a marriage sanctified by the Church the conjunction of the partners integrates the two functions. This is why the act of conception includes not only the outcome of marital conjunction, but also the incarnation of “God’s will”, without which the bodily union is barren: “the parents provide the inheritance of the human genome to the individual, and collaborate with the creation of the Almighty, who provides the soul and the human essence to the whole body” (Famiglia e procreazione umana 2006: 24). This brings us to the third factor: the conviction that conception happens with the direct and mandatory participation of God, who is here associated with the anthropomorphic figure of the “father”. As a result, the question of the conception of a new life is included in the taboo sphere of the sacred, a sphere under the exclusive and direct control of the Catholic church.

Such a view of the problems linked to human reproduction can be easily integrated in the conceptual scheme of religion proposed by Clifford Geertz: “A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” (Geertz 2004: 107).

Such a definition allows us to introduce the question of the degree of correlation between the directives of the RCC, the policies of the Italian government in the matters of bioethics, and the reproductive strategies of Italian Catholics, given that the appurtenance to the Catholic Church is one of the main aspects of Italian identity (Romano 2007; Bakhmatova 2016).

This is why all practices aimed at regulating reproduction, either by controlling it or by artificially enhancing it with the help of modern biotechnology, are seen by the RCC as a kind of infringement of the order created by God.

At the end of the 1970s, the RCC had to face the rise of a new phenomenon resulting from the breakthroughs of biomedical technologies and the appearance of cutting-edge enhancements of human reproduction, which allowed previously infertile couples to become parents. The first outcome of these scientific breakthroughs happened on June 25, 1978 with the birth of Louise Brown at Oldham General Hospital in the United Kingdom, the first “in vitro baby”. The efforts of the scientists and physicians made possible the development of IVF (in vitro fertilization) techniques, which belong to the group of technologies called “assisted reproductive technologies”. An egg is fertilized with sperm in an artificial setting and the resulting embryo can be implanted in the uterus.

Apart from IVF, there exist several other methods, such as artificial insemination (the insertion of the sperm in the uterus via a catheter), ICSI (IntraCytoplasmic Sperm Injection), and many others. When the woman is unable to carry a pregnancy to term, it’s also possible to insert her fertilized egg in the uterus of another mother, who thus becomes a “surrogate mother”.

According to data from WHO, the problem of infertility touches between 48 million and 186 million people in the world (WHO 2020). What could be more noble in this situation than to use the tools science gifted us to create a new life? Many of the couples standing in line for a “miraculous” conception are devote Catholics. They long for the fulfillment of the God-given ideal of a family with children and don’t want to carry the cross of a childless marriage or to adopt a strangers’ child. And yet, the RCC perceives the new reproductive technologies as a new bold defiance and considers them a symbol of the attempt of man to take the place of God, and thereby influence the sacral sphere of reproduction and meddle with the most sacred mysteries of life.

The most important document tackling the problem of new reproductive technologies is “Donum vitae”, which was published on the 22nd of February, 1987 and signed by Joseph Ratzinger, at the time Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and future Pope Benedict XVI (2005–2013). Even if the document is presented as an “instruction” (“instructions about the respect of human life since the moments of its conception and the dignity of the process of human reproduction”), not only it raises practical questions, but it also tackles dogmatic, ontological, axiological, ethical, anthropological, philosophical and juridical issues. The aim of the document is to provide an answer, compatible with the dogmatic positions of the Catholic Church, on matters of interventions in the life of a human being from its very beginning and on the process of reproduction,

as well as on their compatibility with the principles of Catholic ethics (DV: premessa).

The title “The gift of life” already suggests that life is conceptualized not as the result of the human free will, but as a gift from the creator: “The transmission of human life is entrusted by nature to a personal and conscious act and as such is subject to the all-holy laws of God: immutable and inviolable laws which must be recognized and observed”. Having children is not a right, but a gift, and requires from the married couple a “responsible collaboration with the fruitful love of God; (21) the gift of human life must be actualized in marriage through the specific and exclusive acts of husband and wife, in accordance with the laws inscribed in their persons and in their union.”

These statements show a certain degree of cognitive dissonance: on the one hand, they talk about the conscious decision to become parents; on the other hand, they de facto deprive the future parents of free will, because having children is characterized as the outcome of God’s will, and therefore beyond the scope of human comprehension.

In order to understand the meaning of the document, we need to engage in a hermeneutical examination of the scientific terminology used. The document particularly emphasized the fact that, whereas the language of biology uses different terms (such as “zygote”, “pre-embryo”, “embryo”, and “fetus”) to describe different stages of human development, for the Church all these terms have “an identical ethical relevance, in order to designate the result (whether visible or not) of human generation from the first moment of its existence until birth.”

The document examines different types of assisted reproduction techniques and for each of them issues a verdict concerning its degree of moral permissibility or non-permissibility, up to absolute prohibition.

### **The preconditions on the conception and the birth of a child**

The main position expressed in the document is that the birth of a child is possible only in a heterosexual marriage consecrated by the church, where the groom and the bride are the servants, and not the masters, and participate in the work of the Creator, which is love. It follows that the acts of sexual union and reproduction are indivisible. Reproduction can only happen within the act of sexual union of the husband and wife which is an “act of union and love”. As a result, the practice of IVF is forbidden, since it replaces the marital act. However, there are some nuances: the church distinguishes between “heterological” insemination (which uses a donor)

and “homological” insemination (which doesn’t appeal to a donor). The document strictly forbids the use of heterological insemination (whether it uses a donor for male or female gametes), because it breaks the oath of faithfulness, causes the dissolution of marriage, and prevents the child from the right of having two parents. The creation of a scission between genetics, pregnancy, and education is not possible. At the same time, homological insemination, even if it doesn’t break the oath of faithfulness, still delegates to a third party matters of life and personhood. This carries the risk of allowing technology to dominate over the origin and destiny of a person. Nevertheless, this method is considered to be not as bad as the birth of a child outside the bonds of marriage, because it preserves the family. Ultimately, however, the church cannot condone such a method, because it separates the two functions of the marital act. Surrogate motherhood (“*maternità sostitutiva*”) is categorically forbidden, because it causes the dissolution of bodily, psychological, and moral functions. Surrogate motherhood is described as a full-blown negation of the performance of maternal duties and of the duty of marital faithfulness. It also damages the rights and dignity of the child.

### **The embryo as a subject of rights**

The main position about the zygote is that the fecundated cell is a full-blown subject, understood as the union of the biological, social, and spiritual beginnings, not only from a religious-ethical point of view, but also from a biological point of view since it contains all the information about the genetic make-up of the future individual. From this it follows that the zygote, just like any fully formed human being, has a human dignity that needs to be defended. In relation to this position, experimental work which treats the zygote as “biological material” is forbidden. Experiments *in vitro* are likened to actions that pursue a contradictory aim: bringing both life and death; and a choice between zygotes is seen as endorsing an “abortive frame of mind”. The destruction of some embryo during experimentations is compared to abortion. An experimenter performing such acts is seen as trying to replace God in deciding who can live and who must die. The “disgusting crime” of abortion is thus accompanied with the deadly sin of pride. These practices inevitably become an endorsement of radical forms of eugenics, which by definition is considered to be a crime. The cryogenic preservation of embryos is immoral since it diminishes the dignity of the person. Cloning or parthenogenesis via “embryo splitting” are forbidden as they contradict morality. The only admitted practices are therapeutic

interventions on the embryo with the aim of saving its life, when there are no other alternatives. This is why biotechnological examinations ought to be carried out in conformity with the doctrines of Christian morality, and consider that a human being, as a person, has to be respected and defended from the very moment of its conception.

The positions expressed in “Donum vitae” were further supplemented and refined during the pontificate of Benedict XVI with the publication of a new document called “Of the dignity of the person” (*Dignitatis personae*) published on September 8, 2008. Pope Francis also touched upon these issues in his exhortation “The Joy of Love” (*Amoris Laetitia*) on March 19, 2016 (Scopel 2012). The position and authority of the RCC had an impact on a range of juridical initiatives on the regulation of the use of new reproductive technologies in Catholic countries.

The attempts of catholic groups to influence the jurisdiction of secular life have caused negative reactions from public opinion, not least because these groups don't take into consideration the pluralistic and multicultural aspects of contemporary societies, nor do they pay attention to the existence of alternative marriage models, which have nothing to do with the concept of “mystery”. Needless to say, the doctrinal positions about immaculate conception, about the role of God in the beginning of a new life, and about the existence of a soul are far from being shared by everyone in a secular society and not all are willing to endorse the universalist paradigm put forward by Catholic morality.

This is why the tension caused by public discussions about assisted reproduction is still high, and the prohibitions imposed in some countries have created the phenomenon of “reproductive tourism” (Isupova 2015). The debate about the morally acceptable limits of new reproductive practices is on-going and deserves a closer look from the community of medical anthropologists.

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