

Vatican condemns popular infertility treatments: Reaffirms prohibition of embryonic stem cell research

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In a long-awaited document, the Vatican has condemned advanced infertility treatments and contraception technologies and reaffirmed its strong prohibition of embryonic stem cell research.

The document was released December 12 by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with the approval of Pope Benedict XVI.

Church officials said the text was meant as an update to a 1987 statement under Pope John Paul II. While the two documents are complementary, the newer one covers 21st-century medical advances that were not on the horizon 20 years ago.

Like the 1987 document, the new 36-page statement condemns in-vitro fertilization and all other techniques that involve "replacement of the conjugal act by a technical procedure."

Vatican officials know from experience that their pronouncements on sexual and medical ethics generate controversy and resistance, and the response from the liberal wing of the U.S. church was swift and strong.

"There is little new in the statement, but it remains difficult to reconcile the Vatican's self-avowed pro-life approach with the rejection of in-vitro fertilization and embryo freezing, not to mention the condemnation of the potential of stem-cell research," said Jon O'Brien, president of Catholics for Choice, which supports abortion rights and access to contraceptives.

Dissent was also voiced by Cherie Blair, the Catholic wife of former British prime minister Tony Blair, in a lecture December 12 at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, commonly known as the Angelicum, in Rome. "I am on record as having had difficulties with accepting the current teaching on responsible

parenthood,” said Blair, a human rights lawyer who has supported contraception.

Cardinal William Levada, the former archbishop of San Francisco, who now heads the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was not present at a press conference to announce the release of the document.

At the press conference, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, acknowledged that the document would encounter a variety of reactions, including indifference, ridicule and accusations of “dark obscurantism that impedes progress and free research.”

In the document, church officials cast ethical and scientific debates in starkly human terms. An embryo is referred to as a “human being in his or her embryonic state,” not a cluster of cells that is subject to “manipulation” or “utilitarian treatment” in a laboratory.

Moreover, the Vatican strongly states that reproductive technologies that may appear to be life-giving or life-affirming, such as in-vitro fertilization for infertile couples or stem cell research using discarded embryos, are actually destructive to the most nascent of human lives.

The Vatican appeared to give its blessing to treatments like Viagra and other measures that “assist the conjugal act, either in order to facilitate its performance or in order to enable it to achieve its objective once it has been normally performed.” – *Religion News Service*