

Poland's bishops warn against law allowing in vitro fertilization

WARSAW, Poland – Poland's Catholic bishops have warned government leaders and legislators not to back a law allowing in vitro fertilization, adding that the practice resembled Nazi-era eugenics.

"The in vitro method incurs huge human costs – the birth of one child requires in each case the death, in various stages of the medical procedure, of many living beings," the bishops' conference president, Archbishop Jozef Michalik, said in a letter to Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski, Prime Minister Donald Tusk, political party leaders and legislators.

"While sympathizing with families suffering infertility, we voice acknowledgment for all those who, despite personal drama, seek to stay faithful to the principles of Christian ethics and are open to accepting children through adoption," the letter said.

It was published amid controversy over a planned debate in Poland's Sejm, or lower house, on several draft laws to regulate in vitro fertilization for the first time.

The bishops' letter said research showed the procedure endangered children conceived in this manner by weakening immune systems and causing genetic illnesses. It said the process had "incalculable social consequences" because it created multiple mothers and anonymous donors of genetic material, some of whom demanded alimony payments.

"Separating procreation from the marriage act always has bad social effects and is especially unfavorable to children coming into the world," said the letter, co-signed by Archbishop Henryk Hoser, who heads the Polish church's bioethics team, and Bishop Kazimierz Gorny, chairman of the bishops' Family Affairs Council.

"In vitro fertilization is the younger sister of eugenics, the so-called medical procedure which has the worst associations from not-distant history. The fertilization procedure outside the womb means 'selecting' embryos and putting

them to death. It's a question of eliminating the weakest human embryos, which are diagnosed as unsuitable – in other words, 'selective eugenics,' " it said.

Legislators will vote again in late October for several alternative drafts, one banning in vitro fertilization outright and another allowing the freezing and selecting of embryos.

In their letter, the bishops said some drafts conflicted with "objective scientific conditions," as well as with the "unambiguous moral injunctions flowing from the Ten Commandments and Gospel."

They added that legalized in vitro fertilization would mean "inevitably redefining fatherhood, motherhood and marital fidelity" and "undermining the foundations of social life" and said Poland urgently needed "programs for treating infertility" instead.

Archbishop Hoser told the Polish Press Agency Oct. 14 that the church would only accept a law that banned or "largely restricted" in vitro fertilization and warned that politicians voting for the procedure would face excommunication.

He added that the October awarding of the 2010 Nobel Prize for Medicine to British IVF pioneer Robert Edwards was like giving a technology prize to the inventor of atomic bombs.

"You can't obtain a pregnancy at the cost of the life of many other children," Archbishop Hoser said. "If (members of Parliament) know what they're doing and want such a situation to occur, and if they don't act to limit such a law's harmfulness, then in my view they are automatically outside the church community."

Polish government spokesman Pawel Gras told the popular Radio Zet Oct. 16 that the archbishop's remarks were an attempt "to pressure and blackmail lawmakers."

"Judging by the reaction of MPs, I think the bishops will have achieved exactly the opposite of what they intended," Gras said. "They will not succeed in trying to block the work on IVF – on the contrary, the work will be speeded up and the bill will probably pass this year."