

Pope Francis' comments on surrogacy prompt stir outrage and sadness among advocates

Jan 10, 2024

MARC RAMIREZ USA TODAY



Surrogacy advocates reacted with anger and disappointment after Pope Francis [called](#) for a global ban on [the practice](#), saying it violates the dignity of the woman and child.

“I feel a huge sense of sadness, because there are people all over the world who have lovingly built families through surrogacy and may feel the pope has discounted their family and the way they’ve chosen to build it,” said Barbara Collura, president and CEO of RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association.

During his “state of the world” address Monday, the 87-year-old Catholic Church leader described [surrogate motherhood](#) as “deplorable” and “based on the exploitation of situations of the mother’s material needs.”

"A child is always a gift and never the basis of a commercial contract," the pope said. "Consequently, I express my hope for an effort by the international community to prohibit this practice universally."



This undated photo provided by Immigration Equality shows Roe, left, and Adiel Kiviti, right, with their children newborn, Kessem and older brother Lev. In 2019, the Maryland couple sued to challenge the State Department's refusal to recognize the U.S. citizenship of their infant daughter, who was born in Canada to a surrogate mother.

AP

Judith Hoechst, a Denver-area resident whose son was born through a surrogate mother, said the pontiff's statement made her angry "as a Catholic and as a woman."

"It's insensitive and not in touch with the world," said Hoechst, an attorney whose practice focuses on surrogacy and assisted reproduction. "My son would not be on this Earth but for God, and God makes no mistakes."

Others, however, applauded the pope's words, including the Center for Bioethics and Culture Network in Pleasant Hill, California, which has stood against surrogacy for more than two decades.

"Surrogacy has never been the solution," said Kallie Fell, the center's executive director. Though the organization sympathizes with couple

longing to become parents, she said, “children are not commodities to be bought and sold.”

Who chooses surrogacy?

The pope’s statement was part of a 45-minute wide-ranging speech delivered Monday to nearly 200 ambassadors from nations holding diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

Critics of commercial surrogacy say it harms poor women in vulnerable communities, while proponents say it gives women a chance to offer children to those unable to conceive themselves under the protection of a commercial contract.

A number of countries have declared compensated surrogacy illegal, as have three U.S. states: Michigan, Nebraska and Louisiana.

Advocates noted couples may look to surrogate mothers for multiple reasons, including pregnancy health risks for the mother or conditions that prohibit potential parents from becoming pregnant or carrying children to term. Some couples have experienced repeated miscarriages or attempted in-vitro fertilization without success and turn to surrogacy as a last resort.

“No one desires using surrogacy,” Collura said. “I don’t know of a single person or family that intended for this to happen.”

Additionally, many same-sex couples look to surrogate mothers as a means of becoming parents.

“This is not cavalier,” Collura said. “People don’t just wake up and say they want to do this. They spend months, years preparing. There are so many safeguards, from attorneys to medical providers. It’s a very tight process.”

'I didn't think I could go through another loss'

As a pediatric nurse, Judith Hoechst regularly helped care for children, and the thought that she might struggle to have a child herself never entered her mind.

“We struggled through miscarriage after miscarriage,” Hoechst said. “I had trouble staying pregnant.”

When Hoechst, a nonpracticing Catholic, was finally able to carry her daughter to term, she experienced so much blood loss during delivery that she nearly died. A few years later, when the couple wanted to have a second child, doctors told Hoechst her uterus was so damaged that doing so could risk her life.



Some religions don't condone the use of any reproductive technology, some say it's OK without the use of donors and others say using available options is morally acceptable.

AIRSPA, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Instead, the couple turned to a surrogate mother to conceive their second child, a son who is now 19.

“Surrogacy was our only option other than adoption,” said Hoechst, a board member for RESOLVE who has worked on reproductive-law-related legislation in Colorado. “There are many birth moms who change their mind at the last minute, and I didn’t think I could go through another loss.”

The pope’s words, she said, struck her as “out of touch.”

"What could be more beautiful than having a child when you've struggled all of these years?" she said.

How might the pope's words reverberate?

Banning surrogacy would eliminate an important option for LGBTQ+ couples seeking to form families, said Pamela Lannutti, director of the Center for Human Sexuality Studies at Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania.

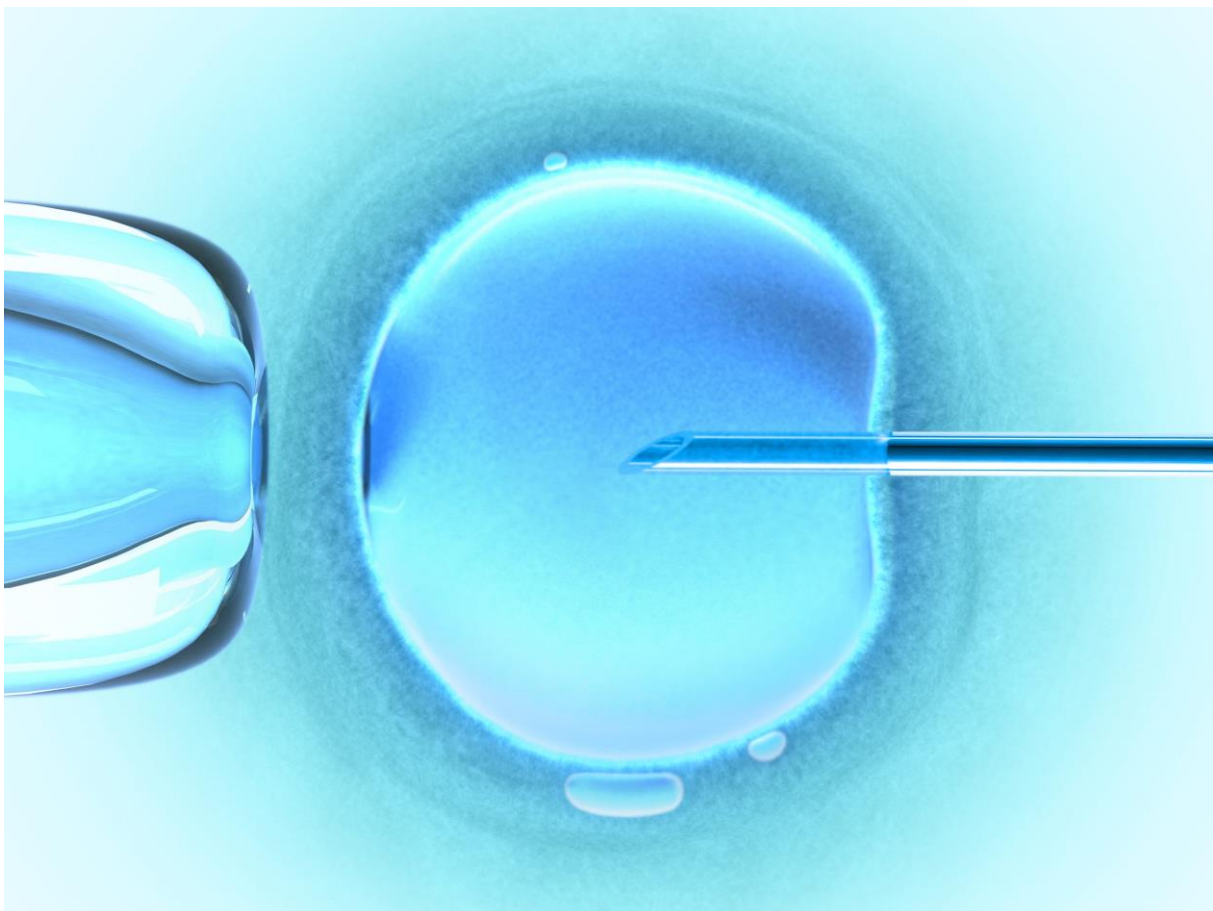
“Many gay men in the U.S. use surrogacy as a means to become parents,” Lannutti said. “The pope is suggesting that the opportunity to form a loving family be lessened not only for some LGBTQ+ couples but also for many different-sex couples who opt for surrogacy to form a family.”

Others worried that the pontiff’s call to ban surrogacy will embolden those opposed to the practice, including lawmakers.

“Politically, it adds fuel to those who are opposed to this type of technology for family-building,” said Eric Widra, executive senior medical officer for Shady Grove Fertility in Washington, D.C. “It tends to get conflated with debates over abortion, and for uninformed legislators these types of comments become part of the overall fight against reproductive rights.”

Collura, of RESOLVE, agreed.

“I don’t know how strongly the pope’s statement will be in influencing legislators, but it will fuel advocates who want to ban surrogacy,” Collura said. “They now have a big ally and will certainly use that.”



As reproductive technology advances, some faith leaders voice concerns about the business of fertility.

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Fell said the Center for Bioethics and Culture Network believes that commercial surrogacy should be illegal and that all surrogate pregnancies

should be tracked through a national database. At the very least, she said, the U.S. should close its borders to international surrogacy arrangements and institute policies similar to those governing organ donation.

“We hope voters, politicians and policymakers consider and respond rightly to the words of Pope Francis,” Fell said.

Collura said anyone opposed to surrogacy or in-vitro fertilization should refrain from such practice – but called the idea of prohibiting others from doing so “misguided and harmful.”

“There are Catholics who’ve built their families this way who will feel that their family is viewed less as a family,” Collura said. “My message to those people is, don’t listen to that. You went through a lot and should be incredibly grateful and proud that you did.”