NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The next battle in the war on relativism

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 11, 2006 All Things Catholic

Perhaps the biggest win for Benedict XVI against the "dictatorship of relativism" came in Italy last summer, when a strong push by the country's bishops, in tandem with lay activists, annulled a referendum that would have liberalized the country's restrictive law on in-vitro fertilization. (Opponents prevailed by persuading a majority of Italians to abstain from voting).

Now that victory seems in jeopardy, as Italy's new center-left government has announced plans to convene a "working group" on in-vitro fertilization, which critics fear will lead to precisely the outcome that could not be attained at the ballot box.

Italy once had no national legislation on in-vitro, which led to a reputation as the "Wild West" of artificial reproduction. Then, under the previous center-right government, Law 40 was adopted in 2004, which:

- Limited in-vitro techniques to heterosexual couples, thus banning access for homosexuals and single mothers;
- Stipulated that only three embryos may be created at a time, and they must be implanted, effectively banning cryogenic preservation;
- Prohibited research on embryos;
- Declared embryos holders of human rights.

Though church leaders say the law is not perfect, they found it far preferable to the previous vacuum. Officially, church teaching condemns in-vitro fertilization because it means that a human life comes into existence outside the conjugal act, and outside the womb. The process also usually involves masturbation, as well as the destruction of embryos.

Last week, the secretary of the Democrats of the Left, the largest party in the Italian governing coalition, announced his intention to create a working group to study the law. Critics of the restrictive law welcomed the move, while supporters, generally reflecting "Catholic" opinion, called it a distraction from more urgent matters of economics and foreign policy, as well as redundant in light of the recent referendum, when, they argued, the people had the chance to revisit the legislation and chose to do nothing.

The debate comes on the heels of another controversial initiative from the new leftist government, this one launched by University and Research Minister Fabio Mussi, who last week removed Italy's signature from a "declaration of ethics" signed by seven European Union nations objecting to the use of public funds for stem cell research.

The declaration had allowed the seven signatories to block any EU plans for funding such research; now, the six remaining nations lack the votes to do so. (They are Austria, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland and Slovakia).

One leader of the center-right opposition charged this week that the new Italian coalition is shaping up in the mode of the Zapatero government in Spain, which has challenged the Catholic Church on a whole host of issues, and has become synonymous in Europe with secularizing and leftist politics.

Among other things, all this lends a special political subtext to Pope Benedict XVI's July 8-9 visit to Spain for the conclusion of a World Meeting of Families, where the pope is expected to challenge the "dictatorship of relativism" on its own turf.

The Italian news agency ANSA reported this week that Benedict will meet

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Source URL (retrieved on *09/17/2014 - 21:35*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/next-battle-war-relativism