

The Reproductive Rights Counteroffensive in Mexico and Central America

CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS ACTIVISTS AND RIGHT-WING GROUPS have joined forces over the past twenty years to turn Mexico and Central America into a major battleground in their fight against sexual and reproductive rights. This movement is both transnational and local. It is led by Christian conservatives—both Catholic and evangelical—who are intent on imposing their self-avowed “pro-life” and “pro-family” values through global networks such as the World Congress of Families.¹ These transnational actors work with their local and regional counterparts to strengthen heteronormative family structures, oppose same-sex marriage initiatives, impose their views of gender identity and sexual morality, and resist the expansion of the availability of contraception and abortion services. They oppose in vitro fertilization (IVF), embryonic stem cell research, and any other technique that might entail the destruction of human embryos. Since Latin American sexual and reproductive rights movements began to flourish in the 1990s, an alliance of local and transnational conservative religious activists has set its sights on Mexico and Central America, where it has succeeded in banning all abortions under any circumstances in El Salvador (1998) and Nicaragua (2006) and in generating considerable opposition to sexual and reproductive rights in Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere in the region. Writing here as sexual and reproductive rights advocates, we are committed to what many of our colleagues consider

1. See Karen Kampwirth, “Resisting the Feminist Threat: Antifeminist Politics in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua,” *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 73–100.

an odious task—understanding the logic and tactics of our opponents. Comprehending the opposition is vital to developing strategies that will allow sexual and reproductive rights activists to respond effectively to a carefully orchestrated and well-financed backlash. To date, however, there has been little research into the techniques and strategies used by conservative pro-life and pro-family social movements.²

This article addresses that gap. It takes as its central text a 2014 propaganda film released by Human Life International, a Catholic international pro-life organization based in Front Royal, Virginia. The film, *Central America and Mexico: Fighting for Life, Faith, and Family*, is a fifty-eight-minute documentary designed to build ideological support and raise funds for factions opposing sexual and reproductive rights, mainly among English-speaking Catholic audiences. The film asserts its moral legitimacy by forging a connection between concerned North American donors and Latin American Catholics who are valiantly “fighting for life, faith, and family” in their own countries. Because Human Life International is part of a global conservative movement that takes different forms in different places, the film works to convince viewers that the global Human Life International agenda is connected to the daily efforts of its southern allies and affiliates. Our analysis of the film provides valuable insights into the ideologies, strategies, and techniques used by global religious conservatives working in conjunction with their local counterparts, focusing especially on pro-life movements in Mexico and Central America.

Fighting for Life, Faith, and Family can be considered a form of transnational pro-life social activism. The global pro-life movement employs a diversity of advocacy strategies; it utilizes media and communication technologies, engages in political lobbying at the state level, and raises funds to finance diverse activities. It also increasingly produces

2. We use the labels preferred by these activists, even though we recognize that sexual and reproductive rights activists are also “pro-life” (of women) and “pro-family” (including diverse family formations). We realize that sexual and reproductive rights activists often refer to their opponents simply as “antis” (in Spanish), to indicate their oppositional stance to sexual and reproductive rights. The decision to allow groups to go by their self-designated labels is for us a matter of professional courtesy, recognizing the power of naming and the fact that we want our opponents to call us by the terms that we prefer as well.

audiovisual tools, including feature films such as the one discussed here, documentaries, and short films to be used in various media outlets. Several pro-life feature films and documentaries with a religious-political bent have recently been produced in the United States and exported to other countries where they become part of the broader political landscape. Such films are intended to achieve at least two objectives: to persuade people (especially Christian youth) to adopt antiabortion positions and to recruit donors for the cause. Films that fit this profile include *Alison's Choice* (2015), *Bella* (2006), *The 40 Film* (2013), *180* (2011), *October Baby* (2011), *Scarlett* (2016), *22 Weeks* (2009), and *To Be Born* (2011). Taken together, they constitute a contemporary genre of cinematic Christian morality tales, using similar ideas, narrative devices, and aesthetic techniques. Two Spanish-language films with an explicit antiabortion message have been produced in Costa Rica: *Gestación* (2009) and *Toque de lo Alto* [Touched from above] (2016).³

In the following sections, we describe *Fighting for Life, Faith, and Family's* key themes and presumptive goals, followed by a critique of the film's erroneous claims and factual inaccuracies, especially with reference to Costa Rica, the country we know best. We discuss three key features of the religious counteroffensive against sexual and reproductive rights as revealed in this video: 1) the radicalization of conservative religious activism and its diffusion into the realms of religion, medicine, bioethics, law, and government; 2) a strategic alliance that is developing between the Catholic leadership and evangelical Protestants in the region; and 3) the existence of often-overlooked components of the conservative religious strategy, including donor appeals and the rise of Catholic-sponsored alternatives to "artificial" reproductive technologies (modern contraceptives and IVF), namely NaProTechnology ("natural procreative technology"). This analysis provides insights into the tactics pursued by conservative religious opponents of sexual and reproductive rights movements in Mexico and Central America.

3. A more comprehensive list of pro-life films in Spanish is available on the website of the Catholic news agency ACI Press, at <https://www.aciprensa.com/vida/peliculas.htm>.

CENTRAL THEMES

The main theme of *Fighting for Life, Faith, and Family* is that Mexican and Central American cultures are rooted in fundamental Catholic values that are being threatened by sexual and reproductive rights movements. The first segment of the film opens with footage of the faithful convening in the predawn hours to embark on their annual pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of the Angels in Cartago, Costa Rica. Evidence of devout Catholicism is everywhere in Central America and Mexico, we are told, especially in the veneration of the Virgin Mary, or the Virgin of Guadalupe, who represents the antithesis of the ancient Aztec “culture of death.” Catholicism, it is argued, is vital to all that is good in these countries, including Costa Rica’s exemplary human rights record. The most important Catholic value, according to the film, is unwavering respect for human life and dignity.

The second segment of the film implies that a holy war is underway throughout the hemisphere. The supreme enemy is the “pro-abortion movement” that is “waging a culture war against the Catholic Church and the families of Central America and Mexico.”⁴ Opposition to sexual and reproductive rights movements is here reduced to railing against the evils of abortion. Foreign governments and international agencies, the film contends, pressure governments to provide contraceptives and abortions by offering financial assistance; this, they say, explains how abortion in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy came to be legalized in Mexico City in 2007. Members of the “international abortion lobby” allegedly resort to “economic blackmail” in which “the equation includes the murder of children.” Costa Rica has purportedly been targeted by international “abortionists” because, the film tells us, abortion is almost always illegal and IVF was banned from 2000 until 2016, or as Alejandro Leal Esquivel says in the film, “We are still a pro-life country.” In this way, international sexual and reproductive rights groups are portrayed as pressuring Costa Ricans to abandon their values and faith.

Like all propaganda films, this one promotes a political agenda, rallies viewers to the cause, and pillories the opposition. Another of its goals is to motivate donors for a job that requires “dedication and sacrifice.”

4. *True Story III—Central America and Mexico: Fighting for Life, Faith and Family*, Human Life International (Front Royal, VA: 2014), <http://www.hli.org/resources/true-story-iii-central-america-mexico-fighting-life-faith-family>.

Discrete projects worthy of donor support, including “vital pregnancy centers” (also known as “crisis pregnancy centers,” of which there are fifty-one such centers in Mexico and seventy-two in all of Latin America) are identified in the film. Vital pregnancy centers, typically housed in mobile vans that can move to strategic locations, are staffed by pro-life activists intent on convincing pregnant women not to abort. The film takes us inside a vital pregnancy center parked near an abortion clinic in Mexico City at 4:30 a.m., where “counselors” show the film *The Silent Scream* to pregnant women, offer them ultrasounds, and attempt to talk the women out of terminating their pregnancies. “This innovative counseling model,” we are told in the film, “has changed pro-life work.” Other featured projects include group homes for pregnant adolescents. Viewers are taken on a tour of one such home in Panama City, where the director, Ivonne de Martinelli, explains that several of the adolescent girls in residence (including a nine-year-old child) are pregnant by their stepfathers; Martinelli says the home needs help funding its adoption program.⁵ The irony of soliciting antiabortion foreign donations to combat the scourge of pro-abortion foreign donations is not mentioned.

The film is important because it shows how conservative religious activists are casting reproductive and sexual rights as assaults on religious liberty and the Catholic way of life, messages that will resonate with some US viewers. The film premiered in English and Spanish in January 2014 on the global Catholic network ETWN and has since been circulated primarily through Catholic pro-life websites. Human Life International may have decided to invest in a propaganda film about Mexico and Central America because it is relatively easy to portray these regions as pro-life and pro-family success stories, compared to other traditionally Catholic countries such as Spain, Italy, Colombia, and Argentina, which have recently loosened restrictions on same-sex marriage and/or abortion. Abortion remains completely forbidden in three Central American countries: Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras. Meanwhile, Costa Rica is the only country in Latin America that still has Roman Catholicism as its state religion and the only one to have prohibited IVF. After abortion was legalized in Mexico City in 2007, eighteen of the

5. For further information about the shelter, see “Polémico proyecto del PAN,” *La Prensa*, July 31, 2013, http://impresa.prensa.com/panorama/Polemico-proyecto-PAN_o_3719628188.html.

thirty-one Mexican states reacted by amending their state constitutions to specify that legal personhood begins at conception; many also eliminated provisions for nonpunishable abortion from their state constitutions. Such examples could lead viewers to believe that these countries are stalwart supporters of Catholicism.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Propaganda films are easy to critique, because they are simplistic and tend to omit inconvenient facts that might disrupt the central narrative. Our first criticism is that the film's rosy portrait of unwavering Catholicism is largely a fiction. While it is true that Latin America is home to roughly 40 percent of the world's Catholics, Catholicism has been on the decline in the region since at least the 1970s. Meanwhile, evangelical Protestantism is expanding rapidly. In 1970, the populations of the six countries of Mexico and Central America (excluding Belize, for which data were not reported) averaged 93 percent Catholic; in 2014, that figure was 60 percent. In 2014, Honduras reported the second-lowest percentage of Catholics (next to Uruguay) of all the Latin American countries. These figures point to changing religious affiliations and values not rooted in traditional Catholicism.

COUNTRY	% of Catholic population	
	1970	2014
Costa Rica	93%	62%
El Salvador	93%	50%
Honduras	94%	46%
Mexico	96%	81%
Nicaragua	93%	50%
Panama	87%	70%

Source: "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, November 13, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/#history-of-religious-change>.

Catholicism is losing followers at a precipitous pace, allowing some scholars to argue “there is no longer a Catholic Latin America with a supposedly ‘thoroughgoingly Catholic substrate.’”⁶ The film makes much of the fact that Costa Rica’s IVF ban marks it as a pro-life country, but it does not mention that Costa Ricans are entitled to publicly funded sterilization and modern contraception, sex education, legal prostitution, and divorce. If Catholicism were as powerful as the video claims, the country might have blocked these reforms as well.

Second, the three Central American countries where abortion is totally banned — Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras — are curiously absent from the film. Honduras rewrote its penal code to criminalize all abortions in 2016, adding to a series of religiously conservative and sexist policies (including the prohibition of emergency contraception) that have become legislation since the 2009 coup d’état. The Salvadoran abortion legislation is among the most extreme in the world as its penal code was reformed in 1998 to define all forms of abortion as criminal offenses. The result is the criminalization even of spontaneous abortion, because every woman who enters the emergency room with bleeding or a miscarriage in progress is now suspected of inducing an abortion. The burden of proof is reversed so that women are required to demonstrate that their abortion is actually spontaneous rather than induced, and assumptions of innocence are ignored. Various complaints against the Salvadoran state have been filed with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights for obstructing therapeutic abortion and subjecting women to jail terms of up to fifty years. In 2016, twenty-five Salvadoran women were serving prison sentences of between thirty and fifty years, despite there being no evidence that they had induced an abortion.⁷ In Nicaragua, no woman has been tried for the crime of abortion according to a 2015 statement by the president of the Supreme Judicial Court.⁸ Clandestine abortion is nonetheless widely practiced, which carries a high risk to women and has a major impact on maternal morbidity and mortality.

6. Hans-Jürgen Prien, *Christianity in Latin America*, trans. Stephen Buckwalter (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 558.

7. Lauren Bohn, “El Salvador’s ‘Abortion Lawyer,’” *New York Times*, September 12, 2016, https://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/09/12/el-salvadors-abortion-lawyer/?_r=2&ref=nyt-es&mcid=nyt-es&subid=article.

8. Martha Vásquez, “No hay mujer presa por practicar aborto,” *La Prensa*, March 8, 2015, <http://www.laprensa.com.ni/2015/03/08/nacionales/1795018-no-hay-mujer-presa-por-practicar-aborto>.

Instead of explaining how abortion came to be banned in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras, the film focuses on Costa Rica, where abortion to protect the health or life of a pregnant woman has been permissible and nonpunishable since the early 1970s. It depicts Costa Rica as a country in which abortion laws might soon be further liberalized because the Inter-American Court of Human Rights is currently working with the Ministry of Health on a protocol to allow nonpunishable abortion in some cases.⁹ The negotiation followed the cases of two women who were denied legal, therapeutic interruptions of pregnancy by the Constitutional Court. It turned out that doctors had been unable to terminate their pregnancies because there was no official protocol or regulation to instruct medical personnel about when or how it might be permissible to interrupt a pregnancy legally when the health or life of a woman was at risk. The Costa Rican state is currently in the process of formulating a friendly reconciliation with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for having denied the women legal abortions, which the film spins as a threat to Costa Rica's supposed pro-life values. Even so, we should note that some authorities remain determined to prevent abortion. In late 2016, Costa Rican law enforcement officials raided clandestine abortion clinics.¹⁰ Inside the national public hospitals, social workers have instructed emergency room doctors to inform the police if they encounter a woman they suspect of having induced a clandestine abortion, even though this violates the doctors' ethical obligation to protect medical confidentiality.¹¹

It seems odd for the film to concentrate on Costa Rica to the exclusion of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras; why not celebrate those

9. Ángela Ávalos R, "Estado procura seguridad de médicos en abortos terapéuticos," *La Nación*, March 13, 2017, http://www.nacion.com/amp/nacional/salud-publica/procura-seguridad-medicos-abortos-terapeuticos_o_1621237870.html.

10. Carlos C. Arguedas and Gustavo Fallas M., "Policía localiza 30 expedientes en clínica para abortos," *La Nación*, October 25, 2016, http://www.nacion.com/sucesos/seguridad/Policia-localiza-expedientes-clinica-abortos_o_1593440655.html; Johel Solano, "OIJ buscará 'negociar' con mujeres que abortaron en Desamparados," *CRHoy.com*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.crhoy.com/nacionales/oij-buscara-negociar-con-mujeres-que-abortaron-en-desamparados>.

11. Personal communication between medical students and Gabriela Arguedas Ramírez, University of Costa Rica, 2017.

apparent victories? Part of the answer may be that the film can portray the imminent liberalization of abortion in Costa Rica as an urgent matter deserving of immediate attention. Another reason might be the negative attention that the total abortion ban has drawn in El Salvador, where the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has investigated cases of women wrongly imprisoned for suffering spontaneous, rather than induced, abortions. Reproductive rights advocates note that antiabortion laws discriminate against women and do not prevent abortion. This is borne out by statistics: an estimated 29 percent of pregnancies are terminated through abortion in Central America, despite the stringent abortion laws.¹² If the goal of the Catholic hierarchy is to eliminate abortion, the film's omission of the three Central American countries where abortion is completely banned is curious.

Our third critique is related to the second: Central America is the testing ground for a new strategic political alliance between Catholics and evangelical Protestants that is built around pro-life themes. While Central Americans and Mexicans might be fighting for "life, faith, and family," many are doing so as evangelical Protestants who have joined forces with Catholics to realize their collective strength. Because Catholics and evangelicals have profound theological disagreements, we were surprised to see that many of the Costa Ricans interviewed in the video, such as Carlos Avendaño, are actually evangelical Protestants, although the film does not identify them as such. These congressional legislators work with Catholic allies such as Alexandra Loría Beeche and Rita Chaves Casanova, who also appear in the video. The film ignores this interfaith alliance, because mentioning it would contradict the film's message that persistent Catholic values are the soul of these nations. Nor does it mention that Chaves used her four-year term in office to wage a nonstop harassment campaign against pro-choice feminist organizations or that the fiery Avendaño is an evangelical pastor who led the opposition to IVF from his congressional post. Costa Rican evangelical political parties are eligible for state funding, which means that taxpayers underwrite their preaching. The Costa Rican state also provides financial support, tax exemptions, and other privileges to the Catholic

12. Michelle Oberman, "Cristina's World: Lessons from El Salvador's Ban on Abortion," *Stanford Law & Policy Review* 24 (2013): 271–308.

Church, totaling millions of colones.¹³ The alliance between Catholics and Protestants is rooted in the latter's hope that these financial privileges will soon be broadened to include other Christian churches. The pro-life movement in Costa Rica is not so much a Catholic movement, as conveyed in the film, as it is the upshot of a strategic partnership between emboldened evangelicals and anxious Catholics who have joined forces to accumulate and divide the economic, symbolic, and political privileges offered by the state.¹⁴

Our fourth critique concerns the film's emphasis on so-called international pressure, which might otherwise be described as compliance with the Pan American Health Organization's sexual and reproductive health programs and with United Nations' and Organization of American States' human rights and gender equality agreements. Not all international pressures are linked to the foundations vilified in the film. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights, for example, was responsible for rectifying human rights abuses committed during military dictatorships. Costa Rica has a reputation as a model for democratic human rights, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights is located, significantly, in the Costa Rican capital. Nevertheless, the Catholic-evangelical alliance managed to prevent IVF from being legalized for more than three years after the country was ordered by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to do so in 2012.¹⁵ While the film implies that countries should disregard international mandates that contradict Catholic values, it appears to give carte blanche to the Vatican to interfere in domestic politics. When Human Life International spokesperson

13. David Castillo, "Gobierno Transfirió Más De €1.652 Millones a Iglesia Católica En Los Últimos Dos Años," *CR Hoy*, August 17, 2012, <http://www.crhoy.com/gobierno-transfirió-más-de-€1-652-millones-a-iglesia-catolica-en-los-ultimos-dos-anos>.

14. Gabriela Arguedas Ramírez, "El (Aún) Tortuoso Camino Hacia La Emancipación: Fundamentalismos Religiosos, Los Derechos Humanos De Grupos Históricamente Oprimidos Y La Lucha Por Un Estado Laico En Costa Rica," *Anuario Centro De Investigación Y Estudios Políticos* 1 (2010): 50–65.

15. Inter-American Court of Human Rights, "Case of Artavia Murillo et al. ('In vitro fertilization') v. Costa Rica," San José, Costa Rica, 2012, http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_257_ing.pdf; Lynn M. Morgan, "IVF Ban Lifted in Costa Rica: A Success for Reproductive Rights?" *PLOS Global Health* (March 30, 2016), <http://blogs.plos.org/globalhealth/2016/03/ivf-ban-lifted-in-costa-rica-a-success-for-reproductive-rights>.

Joseph Meaney says in the film, “They [international groups] don’t want these countries to respect their own values, they want to impose their own liberal values,” he must hope that viewers will overlook his double standard. In addition, the film’s focus on international pressure ignores the many home-grown organizations fighting to liberalize sexual and reproductive rights laws within Central American countries (although, despite the film’s rhetoric, these organizations are often poorly funded; the Costa Rican pro-choice feminist group *Colectiva por el Derecho a Decidir* [Collective for the right to choose] does not currently have an office). Any discussion of “international pressure” that does not include pressure exerted by the Vatican, the Episcopal Conference of Bishops, Human Life International, and other foreign pro-life groups such as the evangelical Focus on the Family is incomplete.

Although space prevents a more exhaustive list of critiques, we will elaborate on two little-noticed aspects of conservative religious activism that are highlighted by this film.

THE RADICALIZATION OF CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS ACTIVISTS

The Roman Catholic Church is obviously not a monolithic entity, and tension between Rome and the Latin American Catholic Church has a long history. But the conservatism exhibited today by church officials in Mexico and Central America reflects a trend toward greater authoritarianism and ideological dogmatism that can be traced from the 1980s to the present. Some analysts see a resurgence of ultraconservative forms of Catholicism associated with Opus Dei and the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spanish Integrists.¹⁶ Other analysts see the Catholic Church’s meddling in civic affairs as the logical extension of policies imposed by the Vatican during the Latin American Bishops’ Conference in 1992.¹⁷ There is widespread agreement that the Vatican became more conservative under popes John Paul II (1978–2005) and Benedict XVI (2005–2013), who replaced liberation theology clerics with

16. Cedric Steinleen, “La ética neointegrista del Opus Dei,” *Si Somos Americanos: Revista Estudios Transfronterizos* XI, no. 2 (2011): 143–55.

17. Alfred T. Hennelly, ed., *Santo Domingo and Beyond: Documents and Commentaries from the Historic Meeting of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

conservatives. The Argentine Pope Francis is undoubtedly more liberal than his predecessors; nevertheless he remains firmly opposed to abortion.

In Costa Rica, there is evidence of the resurgence of ultraconservative Catholic organizations and the pastoral goals of the Latin American Bishops' Conference. To name just two examples, there is the increasing participation of conservative religious activists in public affairs and the participation of lay Catholics in political activism. The Costa Rican Catholic Church began to take a more active role in public affairs beginning in the 1990s when, as Laura Fuentes Belgrave writes, "distinct social sectors demanded greater participation in the development of public policies and questioned the representativeness of Costa Rican democracy."¹⁸ As an offshoot of this conservative Catholic activism, an increasing number of evangelical political parties sought (and won) seats in Congress. Smaller religious sects formed their own organizations, and there are now 220 evangelical service organizations including Focus on the Family and the ultra-right Catholic Tradition, Family, and Property. The latter group resembles the secretive Opus Dei, which itself reportedly has well-placed members inside the government.¹⁹

We find it instructive to read Catholic edicts for what they reveal about pro-life and pro-family strategizing. The 1992 Document of Santo Domingo, for example, identifies an opportunity in the current crisis of modernity to return to metaphysical beliefs and religious practices. In this context, the Catholic laity reintroduces moral religious values in an effort to recuperate terrain that was lost during the twentieth century. The document called on lay Catholics to be protagonists of the church's new evangelism; they would have "a special role to play."²⁰ It asks Catholic leaders to identify and train "lay people who are prominent in the areas of education, political, the media, culture, and labor."²¹ The

18. Laura Fuentes Belgrave, "Las apuestas del poder sobre el cuerpo de las mujeres. Las relaciones entre el Estado, la jerarquía eclesiástica y el movimiento feminista alrededor del aborto en Costa Rica y Nicaragua," *Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos* 32 (2006): 97–138, 127.

19. *Ibid.*, 126.

20. "Document of Santo Domingo," 103, 293, quoted in Hennelly, *Santo Domingo and Beyond*, 102–3, 152.

21. Original Spanish: "Los pastores procuraremos, como objetivo pastoral inmediato, impulsar la preparación de laicos que sobresalgan en el campo de la educación, de la política, de los medios de comunicación social, de la

strategy is to deinstitutionalize Catholicism in order to diffuse its reach; conservatives realize that power can no longer be effectively mobilized from the pulpit, so they form conservative lay organizations and recruit devout lay professionals in an effort to stem the decline.²² This explains why conservative Catholics in Costa Rica are exerting their influence in the realms of medicine, bioethics, law, government, business, and education. These evangelizing professionals fan out to introduce Catholic ideologies into public spaces.²³ The impact of these lay professionals can be seen in the film's depiction of natural family planning, discussed below.

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

The film does not simply oppose progressive iterations of reproductive and sexual rights; it also advertises Catholic-friendly alternatives such as NaProTechnology ("natural procreative technology," hereafter NPT), a natural family planning modality consistent with Catholic values as expressed in the *Humane Vitae* papal encyclical of 1968, as an alternative to IVF.²⁴ Proponents claim that NPT enhances fertility awareness and resolves infertility problems. Yet conservative religious activists have an opportunistic relationship to scientific evidence, using it only when it supports their argument.²⁵ As a pseudo-scientific method, NPT has not been subjected to scientific peer review nor to the randomized, controlled trial assessment that is the epidemiological gold standard. NPT is a religiously motivated treatment used only for the treatment of heterosexual

cultura y del trabajo." Document of Santo Domingo, 99, quoted in Hennelly, *Santo Domingo and Beyond*, 101.

22. José María Mardones, "De La Secularización a La Desinstitucionalización Religiosa," *Política y Sociedad* 22 (1996): 123–35.
23. Document of Santo Domingo, 229, quoted in Hennelly, *Santo Domingo and Beyond*, 135.
24. See Derek M. Doroski, "How *Humanae Vitae* Has Advanced Reproductive Health," *Linacre Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2014): 286–94.
25. Steven Ertelt, "Scientific Fact: Human Life Begins at Conception, or Fertilization," *Life News*, November 18, 2013, <http://www.lifenews.com/2013/11/18/undisputed-scientific-fact-human-life-begins-at-conception-or-fertilization>; Nicole Rigillo, "Faith in God, But Not in Condoms: Churches and Competing Visions of HIV Prevention in Namibia," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 43, no. 1 (2009): 34–59.

couples in Catholic hospitals and by doctors who do not offer modern contraception, conduct abortions, or perform sterilizations.²⁶

The aforementioned Alejandro Leal is a geneticist at the University of Costa Rica who has long been active in efforts to retain the ban on IVF and prevent emergency contraception from becoming available.²⁷ In the film, Leal tells viewers that IVF is not medically necessary because North American doctors are developing a new system for resolving infertility that is twice as effective as IVF and completely natural. He promotes NPT as “the ethical option” for treating infertility in contrast to “artificial treatment techniques.”²⁸ Since the film was released, he has continued to oppose IVF; his recent op-ed cites a scientific study implying that IVF might prove harmful to children conceived this way. By selecting only the evidence that supports his point, however, Leal overlooks a major 2014 review article that found “no increased risk in birth defects in assisted-conception children compared with naturally conceived children.”²⁹ Despite the lack of medical evidence, the Catholic Church is trying to promote NPT’s legitimacy. Part of their strategy involves spotlighting NPT in films like this one, where Leal stands in front of a Catholic hospital as though he were a medical doctor, juxtaposing the promise of NPT against “artificial” techniques such as IVF. This is part of a larger Catholic strategy to offer positive alternatives to reproductive technologies condemned by the Church.

26. See Jennifer Brinker, “The New Face of Natural Family Planning,” *St. Louis Review*, April 2, 2012, <http://stlouisreview.com/article/2012-04-02/new-face-natural>.

27. For a more thorough explication of his views, see Alejandro Leal Esquivel, “El Enfoque de Salud Pública de la Infertilidad y la NaProTecnología Versus la Fertilización in Vitro,” *Revista De Actas, III Congreso Internacional En Reconocimiento De La Fertilidad*, 2012, http://www.reconocimientodelafertilidad.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/15-Mesa4_ponencia2_Revista_actas.pdf.

28. Martín G. Rodríguez, “Opción Ética Para la Infertilidad, Naprotechnología” *El Eco Católico*, March 10, 2011, <http://redfamiliasentrerrianas.blogspot.com.ar/2011/10/opcion-etica-para-la-esterilidad.html>.

29. B. C. J. M. Fauser, et al., “Health Outcomes of Children Born After IVF/ICSI: A Review of Current Expert Opinion and Literature,” *Reproductive BioMedicine Online* 28, no. 2 (2014): 162–82.

CONCLUSION

Mexico and much of Central America sit at the epicenter of a strong transnational counteroffensive organized and led by the Catholic hierarchy together with its evangelical allies. Transnational support emboldens conservative activists within each country to scale up their attacks against local reproductive and sexual health and rights movements. Their platform, as depicted in the film, portrays an epic battle between good and evil, in which “good” is associated with autochthonous Catholic religiosity or culture, while “evil” is represented by sexual and reproductive rights advocates with their immoral, atheistic, foreign ideologies. The message conveyed in the film is characteristic of the conservative Catholicism of Human Life International, although it disingenuously ignores both the political alliance that the Catholic hierarchies in Mexico and Central America have cultivated with evangelical leaders as well as the consequences of the abortion bans that exist in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras. The film shows that the current strategy used by the Catholic hierarchy to advance its goals in Mexico and Central America includes the deinstitutionalization of Catholicism by recruiting devout lay Catholic professionals to carry on its evangelizing missions, the creation of a tactical alliance with evangelical Protestant denominations designed to wrest economic concessions from the state, and the promotion of pseudoscientific Catholic alternatives to assisted reproductive technologies. Contrary to the film’s message, we argue that there need not be an irreconcilable difference between a life of faith and a life of citizenship. Many Mexicans and Central Americans believe that their faith is consistent with democratic debate, global citizenship, gender equity, and progress toward greater reproductive and sexual health and rights. To think otherwise is to hold a vision of citizenship that can only be based on religious precepts, and that would be the quintessence of fundamentalism.