News



Phil and Meghan Young hold their son Henry with their surrogate mother Rachelle Simon, and her wife Ariell Watson Simon, in April 2021. Meghan Young was born with Mayer-Rokitansky-Kuster-Hauser syndrome, which caused the absence of her uterus so she was unable to become pregnant. (Courtesy of Meghan Young)



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In 2002, 18-year-olds Rachelle Simon and Meghan Young became best friends after being paired as roommates at Rockhurst University, a Jesuit college in Kansas City, Missouri. Young confided in Simon that she was born with a condition called Mayer-Rokitansky-Kuster-Hauser syndrome — which caused the absence of her uterus. Young was angry and sad, because she felt called by God to motherhood, something she was unable to fulfill because she could not become pregnant. Simon, on the other hand, had never harbored any desire for motherhood. That afternoon, when Young wept on her bed in their dorm room, Simon offered to be a surrogate mother for her future children. At the time, Young did not seriously consider Simon's proposal.

When Young was a senior at Rockhurst, an adviser suggested that she organize a mourning and grief liturgy to come to terms with the fact that she could not get pregnant. That service consisted of gathering items in a box to commemorate pregnancy and newborn lives. For Young, it was a funeral for her dream of biological motherhood, to forever put to rest this expectation and be open to alternatives. During that service, Simon approached her, and picking up a pair of baby socks that had been placed inside the box, said, "I want you to remember that you might have a baby one day that wears these socks. This could be true for you."

Catholic Church teaching on surrogacy

In the 1987 document *Donum Vitae*, written by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and strongly supported by Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church officially declared that artificial reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilization, or IVF, are to be considered unethical because "they are in opposition to the dignity both of human procreation and of the conjugal union."

Church teaching on surrogacy

- *Dignitas Infinita* (2024)

- *Dignitas Personae* (2008)
- *Donum Vitae* (1987)

According to the 2008 CDF document *Dignitas Personae*, endorsed by Pope Benedict XVI, the Catholic Church cannot accept IVF because it involves practices such as selective reduction, prenatal diagnosis, preimplantation diagnosis and cryopreservation, all of which, according to Catholic doctrine, violate the dignity of unborn babies.

The practice of gestational surrogacy — when an embryo is fertilized through IVF and then transferred into the uterus of a woman who will carry the pregnancy but not parent the child — has been fiercely condemned by the Catholic Church, including recently by Pope Francis.

> 'The pain of not living up to church teachings on sexuality and marriage can be spiritually alienating.'
> —Emily Reimer-Barry
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In an official speech at the Vatican Jan. 8, Francis called on all diplomats accredited to the Holy See to consider a global ban on surrogacy, calling it "deplorable." In April, the CDF issued *Dignitas Infinita*, which along with slavery, human trafficking, genocide and torture, condemned surrogacy. It constitutes "a grave violation of the dignity of the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother's material needs," the document said. "A child is always a gift and never the basis of a commercial contract."

In June, the Holy See hosted a panel at the United Nations at which international conservative advocates and politicians highlighted the "exploitation and commodification" that, they said, is inherent in the surrogacy industry, calling for the need to regulate and eventually abolish surrogacy around the world.

These condemnations, however, have not stopped Catholic couples from engaging in surrogacy, especially in countries such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, where it is heavily regulated and where women must undergo physical, psychological and other types of screenings before they participate. For example,

under the rules of the overwhelming majority of states in the U.S., a woman cannot become a surrogate unless she has already given birth at least once, has a stable partner and meets specific income requirements.

In Canada and the U.K., surrogacy is allowed only if carried out without financial compensation. In many cases, the surrogate mother shares a close degree of kinship or friendship with the intended parents, as in the case of Simon and Young.



A panel of Italian lawmakers offers a presentation about Italy's current policies and new proposals to end "the trafficking of maternity" at an international conference in Rome April 5. (CNS/Carol Glatz)

The body of Christ for one another

Young and her husband, Phil, decided in 2017 to have a child via surrogacy with the help of Young's sister. But due to a traumatic event, her sister decided against serving as a surrogate mother. It was then that Young called Simon to tell her that she was about to give up the idea of having biological children.

Simon volunteered again to be Young's surrogate. At the time, she was working as a Catholic campus minister at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and had recently met her future wife, Ariell Watson Simon, who also was a Catholic minister. Watson Simon has been supportive of her now wife's choice since they first discussed it.

"We as Catholics believe that we've all been given all of our resources, all of our abilities, as a body of Christ for one another, to work together in community. God designed us to all have pieces of the puzzle that we have to put together. Rachelle was given a uterus, and Meghan wasn't," Watson Simon told NCR.

"Rachelle has something that Meghan needs in order to live her vocation of mother. So that doesn't mean that she's being exploited, as the Vatican says. That means that she has an opportunity to collaborate and to be generous," she added.



Pope Francis blesses three pregnant women at an annual meeting on Italy's declining birthrate at an auditorium in Rome May 10. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Young and her husband adopted a foster child in 2019. In 2020, after creating five embryos through the IVF process, they froze four and with one started the transfer process in Simon's uterus. Simon immediately got pregnant, and she remembers the months of her surrogate pregnancy as among the most joyful and moving of her life.

The Youngs named their baby Henry Simon, in honor of their friends' last name. They have not yet baptized Henry, due to their disappointment with how the Catholic Church views artificial reproduction practices such as IVF and surrogacy. The Vatican's further 2024 condemnations have left Young feeling uncomfortable.

"It's devastating and very othering," Young said. "The beautiful gift and process that we went through to bring Henry to this earth is meaningful and just as important as a baby who was able to be conceived naturally without the use of scientific help. I just feel not welcomed. I feel ostracized."

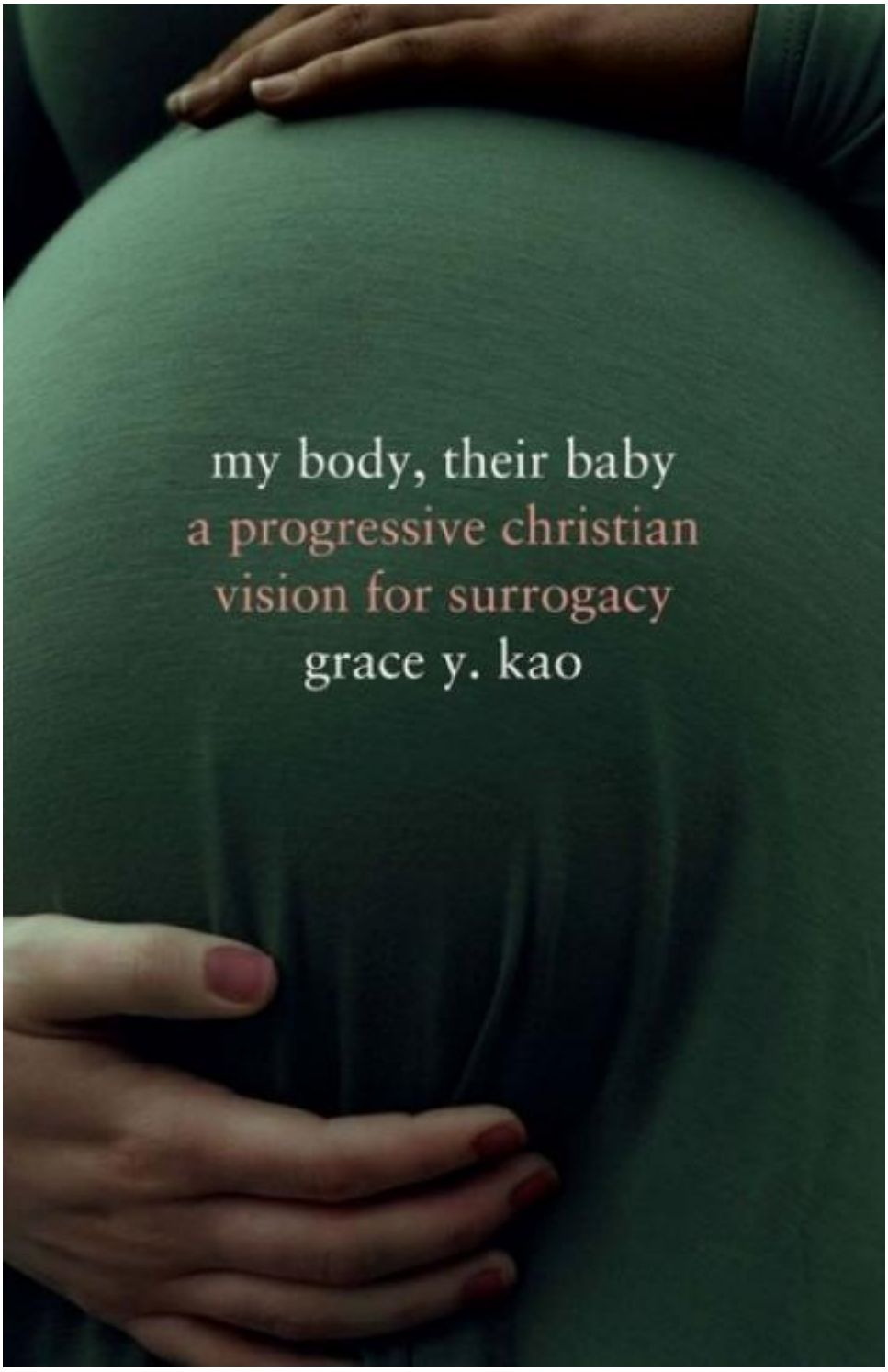
"Jesus was not born by a conjugal union. Were Jesus' rights as a person violated? Was his personhood less because he didn't come about through sex?" Watson Simon said, smiling.

A progressive Christian vision for surrogacy

Grace Kao, professor of ethics at the Claremont School of Theology, has for the past decade combined her work as a theologian with her experience as a surrogate mother for one of her best friends. In her book *My Body, Their Baby: A Progressive Christian Vision for Surrogacy*, which for many has become a go-to resource on the topic, Kao, who is a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), explores reasons why IVF, surrogacy and the Gospel should not be seen as in opposition.



Grace Kao is professor of ethics and Sano Chair in Pacific and Asian American theology at the Claremont School of Theology. (Courtesy of Ken Fong)



(Courtesy of Stanford University Press)

According to Kao, there is an innate drive for self-giving behind the choice of hundreds of women — many of whom identify as Christians — who each year want to serve as surrogate mothers while asking for little to no money in return. Some request a minimal compensation beyond medical reimbursement to carry out

surrogate pregnancies. She refers to this self-giving surrogacy as "supererogation," meaning an act that is above and beyond the call of duty and that not all Christians are called to undertake.

Kao wrote in her book about people who are transformed and moved by their surrogacy journeys, creating human bonds that last lifetimes. There is typically no biological relationship between the surrogate mothers and the children, since the latter, having been inseminated through IVF, have the chromosomal traits of their biological parents. (Worldwide, 9-10% of surrogacies do use the egg of the surrogate mother, but this rarely occurs in Western countries, to avoid creating a biological link.) Surrogate mothers, Kao says, do not "give away" these children in exchange for money, but rather they "give back" the babies to their intended parents.

"I really believe that families can be formed and shaped in all sorts of ways, and if done with love, consent and all these ethical parameters, we can overcome an impediment to infertility and to two men becoming parents in a loving relationship," Kao told NCR.

Even though she doesn't think a blanket approval of surrogacy will ever emerge in Catholic spaces, Emily Reimer-Barry, a professor of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego, said there is still hope for a renewed focus on discernment and justice.

"Many Catholic couples who seek to build their families through surrogacy have already experienced intense alienation from official Church teachings. Often this is because they are a same sex couple or a heterosexual couple facing infertility. For both couples, the pain of not living up to church teachings on sexuality and marriage can be spiritually alienating," she said via email to NCR.



Emily-Reimer-Barry is a professor of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego/(Courtesy of Emily-Reimer-Barry)

"We need to listen to their experiences too, as our ecclesial community begins to better understand both the distress of infertility and the various pathways to building a family."

Alternative paths to parenthood

Matt Vidal and his husband Rick always knew they wanted to be fathers. Both born and raised Catholic, they never saw their faith as opposed to growing their family. After meeting in 2006 and then moving to New York together, they founded in 2010 — the same year they married — Out at St. Paul, a formally recognized LGBTQ+

Catholic ministry at St. Paul the Apostle Parish in Manhattan. Out at St. Paul remains a safe and vibrant place for LGTBQ+ Catholics in New York City.

During those years Vidal began to pray for his vocation as a father to take a clear path. "I remember very clearly a Franciscan friar telling me during my years in college 'God never puts a true desire in your heart that He doesn't intend to fulfill,' " he told NCR. Surrogacy was not the first path the Vidals took.



Matt and Rick Vidal pose with their first son, Finn, and their first surrogate mother, Alex, in June 2017. They later had twins, Charlee and Luca, with another surrogate mother. (Courtesy of Matt Vidal)

After relying on an adoption agency, they were put in contact for more than a year with multiple women who intended to place their babies for adoption immediately after birth. In some cases, however, the women stopped all contact with the Vidals after months of phone calls and personal meetings. Other women lied about being pregnant, or struggled with alcohol and drug dependence.

After bonding with one woman who then stopped contact with the Vidals during the eighth month of her pregnancy, the couple decided to consider alternative paths to parenthood, including surrogacy. They spent weeks in spiritual discernment with their then-pastor at St. Paul the Apostle, Paulist Fr. Gil Martinez. Vidal was particularly concerned about the destiny of embryos created through IVF that would never be born, but would be frozen, donated or die.

"They really took the church teaching seriously and wanted to really make a well-formed conscience decision," Martinez told NCR.

> 'God gave us reason, science and so many things in our lives as the result of our ingenuity and our science to make love happen.'
> —Matt Vidal
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Vidal said that one takeaway from that discernment process was that "many embryos are formed in natural fertilization without leading to successful births all the time, but no one even knows that they were potentially even formed," because the woman simply goes on to have what appears to be her usual menstruation cycle. Another takeaway was that "God gave us reason, science and so many things in our lives as the result of our ingenuity and our science to make love happen," he said. "We were doing something to increase love. We were making an effort to grow a family out of love."

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Vidal's eyes glisten with emotion as he talks about the surrogate mother they connected with through a Connecticut agency, through whom he and Rick had their first child, Finn. Alex, a woman based in Chicago with a husband and three children, was motivated by a drive for "self-donation," Vidal said. In 2016, after the embryo transfer went smoothly, within weeks he and his husband established a close relationship with Alex and her family, whom they visited frequently.

Vidal says Alex's pregnancy "amplified my gratitude and love for God. My prayer in those months has always been with St. Joseph, saying 'Help me learn from you, and give the love and the dedication you fulfilled.' "



Supporters of legislation safeguarding in vitro fertilization treatments hold a rally at the Alabama State House in Montgomery Feb. 28. The state Supreme Court in February ruled that frozen embryos qualify as children under the state's wrongful death statute. (OSV News/Reuters/Julie Bennett)

Vidal recalled the strong bond between the two families by the time Alex had her first contractions. When it was time to return home to New York a few days after Finn's birth, "We were all sobbing," he said.

The families also shared a painful grieving period. In 2019, after they succeeded in making new embryo transfers in Alex's uterus, she had a miscarriage at the fifth month of pregnancy. Doctors said it would be risky for Alex to have another pregnancy. In 2020 the Vidals connected with another surrogate mother, thanks to whom they had twins, Charlee and Luca.

Baptizing their first child at St. Paul the Apostle came naturally to the Vidals, who asked Martinez to be Finn's godfather. After the ceremony, they held a party on the parish rooftop. Finn integrated perfectly into the life of the community, being looked after by parishioners who never failed to show their support.

Related: Four lost pregnancies. Five weeks of IVF injections. One storm.

"Pope Francis has asked us that when kids are presented by their parents, whatever their background, we baptize them," Martinez said. "It's true children are to be loved at all times. They draw the breath of God within them, and we can never turn them away."

However, that did not happen for twins Charlee and Luca, who have not yet been baptized. Shortly after their births, the Vidals moved to the Hudson Valley, where they could not find a parish that would welcome them as married LGBTQ+ Catholics and baptize their children.

At one parish, the pastor delivered a homily on the illegitimacy of families that are not composed of a man and a woman. At another, the pastor pointed to Vidal's wedding ring and asked about his wife. When Vidal replied that he was gay, it seemed the pastor was not opposed to it. But when Vidal asked if it was possible to baptize children born through surrogacy, the priest said he could not in good conscience baptize a child that would be raised in an environment that taught same-sex marriage was OK.

"I felt awful," Vidal said.

At a third parish in the Hudson Valley, the pastor at first seemed interested in Vidal's proposal to establish an LGBTQ+ Catholic ministry there, but later said it was not possible.

The Vidals have since moved to Lake Placid and have found a more welcoming parish, but they decided to wait until they can coordinate with Martinez to hold a ceremony in New York City to baptize their twins.



A nurse and newborns are seen in the Hotel Venice in Kyiv, Ukraine, May 14, 2020. The hotel is owned by BioTexCom, a surrogacy agency. (OSV News/Reuters/Gleb Garanich)

Despite the continuing challenges to be accepted in the Catholic Church for families like his, Vidal said his faith remains strong. Regarding people in the church who condemn surrogacy, he offers them compassion.

"It doesn't shake my faith," he said. "I know what's right, and I know God loves me in what I'm doing."

Vidal acknowledged that part of what Pope Francis says in *Dignitas Infinita* is true, as in recent history — especially in India and Russia — impoverished women have been exploited to allow Western couples to have children. However, the same problem also occurs in many cases of international adoptions, where children are taken from their parents without consent. The church has not condemned adoption like it has surrogacy.

Vidal said he is teaching his children how to pray, especially his oldest, to whom he reads Gospel passages every night. His dream is that they can grow up knowing the kind of church he and his husband have felt supported by in their adult lives. "I hope that God reveals himself to them, and that they live a fulfilling life with God," he said.

Spiritual and psychological support for surrogacy

Chris, although born and raised Catholic, for years chose to practice his adult faith as a gay man more distant from the church. Chris, who did not want his full name used to protect his privacy, reconnected with his faith when he discovered the New York chapter of Dignity, one of America's oldest and most prominent LGBTQ+ Catholic organizations. He began to attend weekly Catholic services with the Dignity group, which meets at St. John's in the Village Episcopal Church in Manhattan.

After about eight years together, Chris and his husband decided in 2021 to start considering parenthood. It took two years for them to be paired with a surrogate mother in New Mexico, who gave birth to their baby in December 2023.



Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, takes notes during a news conference to present the dicastery's declaration, "Dignitas Infinita" ("Infinite Dignity") on human dignity, a copy of which is nearby, at the Vatican press office April 8. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

Dignity's spiritual support, along with the psychological accompaniment offered by a workplace therapist, have been crucial for Chris to overcome reservations about surrogacy. Some of Chris' closest friends at Dignity prayed during his son's surrogate mother's labor. The parishioners have since met the baby at church.

"Now it's like he has 40 grandparents," Chris said, joking about the fact that, on average, Dignity New York members are rather elderly.

Largely because of the Catholic Church's opposition to surrogacy, Chris decided to baptize his son in the Episcopal Church. "I don't want someone in a Catholic context to tell my son one day that he's the son of an abomination," he said. "I think I will raise him in the Episcopal Church, because I don't think the Catholic Church will change its mind about these things."

Chris lamented that "almost no one" has come to the defense of surrogacy in the Catholic Church after Pope Francis recently condemned it. He feels "too many things" will not change in the Catholic Church in his lifetime and is open to exploring ecumenical faith practices, although he will forever think of himself as a Catholic.

"I would like my son to have faith," he said. "I already sing church songs to him to put him to sleep. When he starts talking, I would like us to pray every night."