

17 February 2025

Submission to Committee Secretariat of the Health Committee on the **Gene Technology Bill**.

We are conditionally supportive yet highly cautious in our approach to the Gene Technology Bill.

As a Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, we recognise the potential benefits Gene Technology can offer in health, agriculture, and environmental sustainability. At the same time, Catholic Social Teaching (CST) calls for a careful, responsible approach to ensure that these technologies are used ethically and with respect for the dignity of the human person and the integrity of creation.

Gene technologies, including gene editing and gene therapy, offer significant potential to address pressing issues such as genetic diseases, food insecurity, and climate change. However, as the Catholic Church emphasises in its social teachings, these advancements must be guided by moral principles that protect human dignity, promote the common good, and ensure equity for all. This submission outlines the importance of balancing innovation with ethical responsibility.

1. Potential for Good

Gene technology presents numerous benefits, particularly in the fields of medicine and agriculture. Gene editing technologies, such as CRISPR, offer the promise of addressing genetic disorders, potentially eradicating certain diseases and improving public health outcomes. Similarly, advancements in genetic modification of crops and livestock could help address food security challenges and enhance the sustainability of agricultural systems, which is increasingly critical when considering factors such as climate change.

The Church recognizes the value of science and technology in advancing human well-being: “Science can contribute to the development of society and the progress of the human person” (GS, 57).¹ The Gene Technology Bill, with proper safeguards, can play a role in these advancements, improving the quality of life for many.

¹ Pope Paul VI. (1965, November 7). *GAUDIUM ET SPES - Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. Vatican II: The Holy See.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html n. 57.

However, while CST affirms the positive role of technology, it also underscores the need for ethical considerations in its use, particularly in terms of human dignity and the common good. The Church cautions against technologies that might undermine the human person or disrupt the integrity of creation (*Laudato Si'*, 33).² We, therefore recommend the bill should include robust ethical guidelines to ensure these benefits are pursued responsibly.

2. Ethical Oversight and Responsible Application

CST emphasise the importance of respecting human dignity and the sanctity of life. We believe that "Human life is sacred... From its beginning, it involves the creative action of God" (CCC, 2258)³. This principle must guide the use of gene technologies, particularly when they involve the human genome.

Gene editing, especially in humans, raises concerns about genetic manipulation that could alter the natural course of human life. As Pope Francis warns in *Laudato Si'*, "We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us" (LS, 67).⁴ Gene technology, if misused, risks reducing the human person to a genetic object to be engineered according to human desires rather than a unique being deserving of respect.

This Bill requires careful monitoring to ensure that it does not open the door to genetic practices that violate the integrity of the human person or reduce human beings to commodities. The Bill must include strong ethical guidelines that prevent the misuse of gene technology, particularly in the context of eugenics or the creation of "designer babies," which is incompatible with CST's view of human dignity (GS, 51).⁵

3. Inequality and Exploitation

We place great emphasis on the common good and the preferential option for the poor. As we understand that "Solidarity... is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" (SRS, 38).⁶ The CST principle of solidarity is especially relevant in the context of gene technology, where there is a risk that the benefits of genetic advances could be disproportionately accessible to wealthier individuals or countries.

² Pope Francis. (2015, May 24). *LAUDATO SI'* – Encyclical Letter. Vatican: The Holy See.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html n. 33.

³ Vatican, The Holy See. (1993). *CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH*.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P7Y.HTM CCC, 2258.

⁴ *Laudato Si'*, n. 67.

⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 51.

⁶ Pope John Paul II. (1987, December 30). *SOLLICITUDO REI SOCIALIS* – Encyclical Letter. Vatican: The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html n. 38.

We call for the Bill to ensure that access to genetic interventions, whether for disease prevention, enhancement, or food security, is assured to be equitable and inclusive, as not to create or exacerbate social inequalities. The Church consistently advocates for justice in the distribution of the benefits of technological advancement. If genetic technologies are available only to the privileged, they risk reinforcing social stratification and leaving vulnerable populations behind.

In addition, the potential for exploitation of vulnerable groups must be considered. The application of gene technologies could be misused in ways that harm marginalised communities. Safeguards must be in place to prevent any form of exploitation, ensuring that these technologies benefit all people, especially those most at risk of being left behind (GS, 63).⁷

4. Environmental Stewardship and Sustainability

The Church has long emphasised the responsibility of humans to care for creation, noting especially that “The ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion” (LS, 218)⁸. Genetic technologies, particularly in the realm of agriculture, have the potential to contribute to environmental sustainability, improving crop yields and reducing the impact of farming on the planet.

The counterbalance is that genetic modifications, if not carefully managed, could also have unintended ecological consequences. The introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into ecosystems may disrupt natural balances, with unpredictable outcomes for biodiversity and the environment. As stewards of creation, we must be responsible in our use of these technologies, ensuring they do not harm the natural world or future generations.

In this light, we recommend this Bill must include rigorous environmental safeguards to assess and mitigate potential ecological risks. It should ensure that the modification of organisms does not lead to irreversible damage to ecosystems or biodiversity (LS, 138).⁹

5. Ethical Review and Public Scrutiny

Given the rapidly evolving nature of gene technology, it is essential that this Bill includes provisions for ongoing ethical review. The Church advocates for a continuous examination of technological developments to ensure that they serve the common good and respect human dignity. Specifically, that “The technological society must maintain a balance between progress and respect for human dignity” (CV, 71).¹⁰ This review

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 63.

⁸ *Laudato Si'*, n. 218.

⁹ *Laudato Si'*, n. 138.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI. (2009, 29 June). *CARITAS IN VERITATE – Encyclical Letter*. Vatican: The Holy See.

should not only be scientific but also include public dialogue, involving a broad range of perspectives to ensure that the use of gene technology aligns with ethical principles.

Conclusion

The **Gene Technology Bill** has the potential to contribute positively to society by advancing health, food security, and environmental sustainability. However, it is imperative that this potential is realised within an ethical framework that aligns with Catholic Social Teaching. The Bill should include safeguards to ensure that gene technologies are used responsibly, with respect for human dignity, the common good, and the integrity of creation.

We conditionally support this Bill in principle, but urge the government to incorporate strong ethical oversight, equitable access, environmental protection, and ongoing ethical review. The Gene Technology Bill should be a model of responsible innovation that will balance scientific progress with a commitment to justice, sustainability, and respect for all people and creation.