Eugenics and the discourse of the Catholic Church
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Starting from the second half of the Nineteenth century, the Catholic doctrine was confronted with the practices of birth control and biopolitical intervention on the reproduction. In this perspective, the Congregation of the Holy Office – the guardian of the orthodoxy of the Catholic discourse – examined issues such as therapeutic abortion, obstetrical practices, contraception, and artificial insemination. The inquisitors acquired knowledge on the practices of controlling human reproduction and set binding standards for the Catholic discourse. In 1930, Pius XI issued the encyclical Casti connubii dedicated to the discipline of marriage that, among others prohibitions, also established the condemnation of eugenics. This document proved to be decisive for the development of the Catholic doctrine concerning marriage, birth control, and sexuality, both in individual practices and institutional actions. The encyclical condemned any medical, social and eugenical motivation for abortion, sterilization, and birth control practices. In the same year, the Congregation of the Holy Office issued a decree of condemnation of eugenics.

Based on the sources of the Archive of the Congregation of the Holy Office, this paper will analyze the background and features of the position of the Catholic Church concerning the birth control and the Malthusian practices, from the first intervention of the Holy Office on evolutionism in the last quarter of the 19th century to the discussions and norms concerning eugenics in the first decades of the 20th century. This paper will provide the chance for the discussion on the existence of a Catholic interpretation of eugenics and the role of evolutionism in the building of the biopolitical discourse of the Catholic Church.