

Theo 101, Session #14:
What the Church Teaches on Abortion
CATHOLIC UPDATE SERIES
The University of St. Francis

Abortion:
What the Church Teaches

by Helen Alvaré

If you asked an average group of Catholics to identify the Church's position on abortion, they might give you a one-word answer: "NO."

What a shame. In reality, the Church's teaching on abortion really begins with a great big "YES." It begins with a yes to all human life created in God's own image and likeness. As our Holy Father said in poetic fashion in his most recent encyclical on human life: "All human beings, from their mother's womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow..." (*The Gospel of Life*, #61).

In other words, human life is sacred, inviolable. It only makes sense, then, for the Church to reject all that violates this sacred gift, beginning with the direct destruction of innocent human life which is abortion.

But the Catholic Church's pro-life teachings are based not only on sacred Scripture about the divine creation and the divine destiny of human life. They are also based upon what is commonly called "natural law," the divine law written in our hearts and knowable by human reason. You might say that because of natural law, a person doesn't have to be Catholic, Christian or even overtly religious to

understand that human life is special among all creation and should not be violated by abortion. It is self-evident.

A deeper understanding of natural law and Scripture helps make sense of all details of the Church's pro-life teachings.

Respect human life

The most comprehensive – and inspiring – summary of Catholic teaching on abortion is the 1995 papal encyclical *The Gospel of Life* (*Evangelium Vitae*). There, the Holy Father speaks specifically and at great length about abortion, beginning first with the natural-law argument against taking human life. He describes the medical and scientific consensus on when human life begins: “From the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth...[M]odern genetic science offers clear confirmation. It has demonstrated that from the first instant there is established the programme of what this living being will be” (#60).

Some people are surprised to learn that the obstetrics textbooks used in the leading medical schools in the country today assume that human lives begin at conception! This is not a theological teaching but a medical fact. The more that science studies the unborn, and the more it develops ultrasound imaging of the unborn child, the more confirming evidence emerges of the child's humanity and truly ingenious development.

The ensoulment debate. Many people still believe that the Catholic Church bases its pro-life stance on the religious belief that a human being is ensouled at the moment of conception. But this is wrong. *The Gospel of Life* and the earlier *Declaration on Procured Abortion* (1974) acknowledge that you can't scientifically verify when a soul enters the human body. (You sure can't see it under a microscope!) Both documents note that it is more likely than not that at the “first appearance of a human life” there is a personal presence, a body/soul

unity. But even if this is doubted, they say, it remains wrong to kill what is certainly human life from the moment of conception, whether or not it is “ensouled.”

If it's human, don't kill it! From this scientific consensus about when and how human life begins, it follows that we should all respect human life from the moment of conception. And you might say that a bottom-line minimum for respecting human life is not killing it! As our Holy Father puts it, the first right that everybody has is “the inviolable right of every innocent being to life” (*Donum Vitae*). Everyone has, in other words, a right not to be killed. This is a moral principle held, if not always applied, through the ages and across the globe. When it is violated, there is almost always an outcry.

Some ‘hard cases’

1. Rape and incest. Many question why the Church won't make specific exceptions for abortion when unborn children are conceived in rape or incest, or are disabled. They also feel that the Church is being unduly hard when it makes no exceptions for situations in which a mother will have her mental or physical health taxed as a result of carrying a baby to term and/or rearing the child. But consider the implications of making such exceptions. It would send them the message that people's value depends upon their physical condition, the circumstances of their conception or others' perception of them.

2. Disabled children. Human beings have value no matter what the circumstances of their conception. They have value whether or not they have physical or mental disabilities. But, goes the usual argument, the mother or the child or both could suffer terribly if the disabled child were allowed to be born. Yes, we understand and have compassion for the anguish of these women. We feel an obligation to assist them. But such suffering doesn't extinguish that unborn person's right to life.

Furthermore, the suffering such mothers or children experience will often come not from their circumstances but from other people's

reaction to their circumstances. The raped woman is made to feel “she asked for it.” The disabled child is made to feel less than her peers. The more humane and more Christian response to a violated mother or disabled child is more love – not death!

3. Abortion doesn’t end with the baby. It should also be remembered that no matter how many times abortion is proposed as a solution to a difficult situation, abortion has a way of creating new, long-lasting problems of its own. According to post-abortion women, abortion taints the expected good result.

Even some post-abortion women who became pregnant as a result of rape or incest report that the abortion made them feel further violated. Of the other 99% of post-abortion women, many report that instead of feeling free or happy after the abortion, they feel burdened with guilt and loss.

4. Medical necessity. What about the argument that the Church must make exceptions to its teaching when abortion is medically necessary for the mother’s health or a child’s disability?

First, while the Church opposes all direct abortions, it does not condemn procedures which result, indirectly, in the loss of the unborn child as a “secondary effect.” For example, if a mother is suffering an ectopic pregnancy (a baby is developing in her fallopian tube, not the womb), a doctor may remove the fallopian tube as therapeutic treatment to prevent the mother’s death. The infant will not survive long after this, but the intention of the procedure and its action is to preserve the mother’s life. It is not a direct abortion.

There also occur, very rarely, situations in which, in order to save the mother’s life, the child needs to be delivered early. But this can be done safely with a normal, induced delivery, or a caesarean section.

The argument for killing disabled unborn children is not a medical one either. There are no disabilities which require directly killing the child

in order to save the mother. In fact, disabled children can usually be delivered with no more complications than a child without disabilities. The argument for abortion in these cases is ideological, a belief that it is better – for the child, the family and the whole society – for the child to die than to live with a disability.

5. Culpability. Here, a vitally important point must be made. While the Church teaches that the act of killing an unborn child is intrinsically bad, it does not teach that the mother who seeks an abortion is also intrinsically bad. There is a difference between condemning an act, and judging the guilt of the actor. Only God can judge these women. To the woman who has had an abortion the Church says instead: “How can we reconcile you? How can we help you, first, to face honestly what happened, repent, and be reconciled to the child, to yourself, to your family and to God?” Today, most Catholic dioceses in the United States sponsor programs of healing for post-abortion women.

‘Choice’: A failed argument

But what about the choice argument, that a woman simply must be allowed to make a choice about the life of the baby inside? Some find this argument compelling because pregnancy so intimately affects the mother’s body and the course of her life; and because the baby is carried literally inside of her, completely dependent upon her for sustenance.

As a mother myself, I can confirm that the baby’s presence affects almost every aspect of a mother’s physical person. Pregnancy may force a woman to leave school or a job. Women often serve as the single parent. More often it is women who stay home with children – and their schedules are thus altered.

Women in families assume still the disproportionate share of daily household tasks like cooking, cleaning, laundry and bills. Therefore, the argument goes, women must be given the power to decide whether to assume these burdens.

There isn't just one answer to the choice argument. Consider these four:

1. Abortion is a bad choice. I ordinarily begin by saying that, of course, it's great to have choices about some things – where to go to school, whom to marry, what kind of car to buy. But certain other choices, though they may be available (to take harmful drugs) and even legal (to kill the unborn), are intrinsically bad. This is the case with the choice for abortion.

2. Don't be fooled by a goal that looks good. Abortion remains a bad choice, even if someone is trying to use it as a *means* to a good end. Leaders of most pro-abortion groups today usually ignore this. They regularly admit that the abortion choice is bad, even a form of killing. But they continue to insist that abortion remains a morally legitimate choice because the killing is merely the means to a good end – “freedom” or “relief from suffering” for the mother. They call abortion a “tragic necessity.”

But this ignores the basic moral argument that it is wrong to use bad means to reach a good end. And it ignores the common-sense truth that “ends” get tainted when the means used to achieve them are evil. Choosing an abortion to bring about short-term “relief” regularly leads to unhappiness, depression, marital failure, even suicidal behavior in post-abortion women for years, sometimes decades, after the abortion. Really bad choices hurt the one choosing them nearly as much as they hurt the intended victim.

3. Different, yes, worthless, no. Still drawing on the choice argument, some abortion advocates will insist that even though abortion is a form of killing, it's not intrinsically bad because unborn victims are different from born ones. Unlike a born child, for example, an unborn child is nearly part of the mother – completely dependent upon the mother, they say. I usually respond that another's dependency could never extinguish their individuality or their dignity. The unborn child may be inside the mother, and rely on the mother for life itself, but he or she is

a genetically distinct human being with his or her own development and destiny.

If dependency is the cutoff point for everybody's "right not to be killed," you and I are in a lot of trouble too! Every one of us relies on the accomplishments of others, not only in the first and last moments of our life, but every day: to eat, find shelter, receive medical care, work and so forth.

Pro-abortion arguments based on the child's dependence also contradict both American ideals and Christian teaching. In both traditions, another's neediness and relative weakness are a sign of our obligation to provide greater care to the person. Recall the words on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...." Recall Jesus' special love for the poor and the outcast of his day.

4. If it's for women, it shouldn't penalize children. Abortion advocates might still insist on a woman's choice to abort because they feel so strongly that unplanned childbearing or child-rearing is unfairly burdensome to a woman and too destructive of her life plans. As a mother, I would again readily agree that children require an enormous amount of effort. But that is no argument for killing them! Mothers, rather, deserve particular help and particular respect for their labors. Any feminism that tries to advance women by demeaning other members of the human race is under-mining its own major premise: that all human beings are equal simply by virtue of being human beings!

Abortion and authentic freedom

In recent years, a new dimension has been added to the Catholic Church's pro-life teaching. It is an analysis of the meaning of authentic or Chris-tian freedom, as opposed to the false but seductive freedom promoted by advocates of legal abortion. A brilliant description of this freedom is laid out in *The Gospel of Life* in three major points.

First, freedom is never merely about the well-being of the individual. It is always also a relational matter. Freedom necessarily involves “solidarity,...openness to others and service of them.” God “entrusts us to one another” to care for and serve each other. When people act as if freedom is just about “me,” the results are predictable: The strong people exercising their “freedom” completely dominate the weak “who have no choice but to submit” (#19). Christian freedom turns this on its head, saying that there is no freedom in running away from responsibility for others, but only in accepting a special obligation to care for the weakest. The unborn – unseen, unheard, physically and legally powerless – are among these.

Second, Christian freedom sees “an essential link” between freedom and truth. Jesus told us, “The truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32). Acting against truth hurts not only the victim, but also the actor.

Finally, Christians are most free when we act in accordance with who God wants us to be. “[W]hen God is forgotten, the creature itself grows unintelligible” (*Gaudium et spes*, #36, *Gospel of Life*, #22). We become out of touch with our wonderful, divine origin and our divine destiny. We no longer see ourselves as “mysteriously different” from other creatures. Our life becomes a “‘mere thing,’” which “man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation” (*Gospel of Life*, #22).

It is easy to see how when a culture embraces the idea that “freedom” means “me” and “my opinion,” and leaves God out, abortion comes in with a vengeance. The powerless child is killed. The truth about the child’s humanity is simply denied in the face of all of the evidence to the contrary. We become blind to God’s image and likeness in the person of every single human being.

Christian freedom, on the other hand, calls for a way of life in which the weakest are not merely spared, but are looked after with greater care. When the U.S. bishops responded to *Evangelium Vitae* with their own reflection in 1995, *Faithful for Life*, they summarized the soul of

Christian freedom with the Good Samaritan story: “We are all on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and this story haunts us, for it flatly contradicts the strong presumption so widely held today that our loyalties and obligations are owed only to those of our ‘choice.’ On the contrary, it is we who have been chosen to go out of our way for them.

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You Shall Not Kill'

Scripture, Tradition and Abortion

The earliest Christian manual of discipline, the second-century Didache, clearly rejects abortion. The Church Fathers do the same. Every major Council to consider abortion has condemned it. Vatican II called abortion a “disgrace” (*Gaudium et spes*, #27). In *The Gospel of Life*, our Holy Father says: All of sacred Scripture shows such profound respect for human life, as the work of God’s hands, that it “requires as a logical consequence” that the commandment “You shall not kill” be extended to the unborn (even if abortion is not mentioned by name in Scripture). How else could one read that marvelous revelation in Genesis that all humans are made in God’s image (Gn 1:26)? How else, he asks, could one read the Psalms’ references to God’s love for human life forming in the womb? (Ps 1:4-5; 71:6; 22:10-11).

It would be disingenuous in the face of Genesis 1, and the story of Cain and Abel, to argue that God would be indifferent to, let alone approve of, destroying human beings formed in his image and likeness. The significance of the unborn child, in particular, is highlighted in the story about John the Baptist responding with joy to Jesus Christ while both were still in their mothers’ wombs.

God’s love for our frail human bodies is also beautifully shown in the Gospel stories about Jesus’ merciful healing of the sick. It isn’t just our souls he loves! Finally, of course, there is Jesus’ death and resurrection, his complete self-sacrifice. For whom? Not just some of us. But for every single human person, each of whom has a share in God’s love.