

A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion

This article first appeared in Conscience, Spring 2002 by Daniel Dombrowski

A common assumption exists, both within and outside of Catholicism, that opposition to all abortion is the unchanging, infallible position of the institutional Catholic church. While diversity of opinion and debates within even official church circles are recognized on issues of the ordination of women, celibacy, contraception, homosexuality, and premarital sex, most people believe what most bishops and the pope say: the position of the Catholic church against abortion has been constant and unchanged throughout history. Abortion is the taking of human life and is absolutely forbidden. The matter is not so simple. It is well known that a significant number of Catholics have quite a liberal view of abortion. What is less well known is that those positions are well-grounded in Catholic teaching. In our book, *A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion*, myself and co-author Robert Deltete argue that the Catholic prochoice stance is compatible with Catholic tradition, and may even be more compatible with Catholic tradition than the current anti-abortion stance defended by most Catholic leaders. We are convinced that the monolithic 20th century theology on abortion is a caricature of the rich and variegated tradition in Catholicism on this topic.

Official opposition to abortion in the history of Catholicism has been based at different times on two distinct types of arguments: the ontological view is that the human fetus is a person from the earliest moments of conception, hence to abort it is either murder or something closely approximating murder; the perversity view is that sex is only licit within marriage and for the primary purpose of having children, hence abortion perverts sex and is immoral in the same way that contraception is immoral.

According to the perversity view, then, abortion is

not murder, or anything closely approximating murder, but an indication that sex was practiced for the wrong reason. Over the last 30 years, the emphasis of church officials and antiabortion Catholics has been almost exclusively focused on the ontological view. However, the "fetus as person argument" is not the traditional Catholic position. One of the best kept secrets in the history of Catholicism, or indeed in the history of ideas, is that Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas—two of the most important thinkers in the Catholic church—did not see the fetus in the early stages of pregnancy as a human person. In fact, Augustine remarkably compares the fetus in the early stages of pregnancy to vegetation. The belief that the human fetus in the early stages of pregnancy is not a person worthy of much moral respect was the norm in the pre-modern period.

The early "fetus as person" view was based on mistakes made in 17th century science by scientists who were infatuated with then-new technology that they both used and abused. Looking through magnifying glasses and primitive microscopes at fertilized eggs, these scientists imagined that they saw tiny, fully formed animal fetuses. In the case of human fetuses, they called the image a "homunculus" and the mistaken idea took, within science and the church, that from the very beginning the human embryo was a fully developed creature that needs only to get bigger until birth. That view changed among scientists as biology progressed, and even though the Catholic church no longer subscribes to this outdated view of fetal biology, the church's moral view did not return to the older, more consistent position of Augustine and Aquinas that fetuses are not fully formed persons in the early stages of pregnancy.

The problem faced by contemporary opponents to abortion in Catholicism should be apparent. Once the glaring defects in the ontological position are on the table, one must revert to the perversity position; create some new defense that has little to do with the history of Catholicism; or, as we urge, drop opposition to abortion in the early stages of pregnancy.

The other view that abortion is a perversion of the true function of sex regardless of the personhood status of the fetus provides the traditional grounds in Catholicism for opposition to abortion, but very few contemporary Catholics, even conservative ones, oppose abortion on these grounds. Nor should they, since it rests on a defective view of sexual ethics that fails to incorporate the concepts of mutual respect and Christian love (agape). A liberal Catholic view of sexual ethics counteracts the positions of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas regarding sexual ethics, where moral sex requires that the partners be married and have sex that is open to procreation.

Given the weaknesses of both the fetus as a person position and the abortion perverts sex position, contemporary opposition to abortion in Catholicism is on a shaky foundation, at best, and should be significantly altered or dropped.

The purpose of our book is to focus the debate within Catholicism regarding abortion. By stating the case for a liberal Catholic stance on abortion in bold terms (which is not the same as overstating it), we will be better able to discover through exchange with others what the strengths and weaknesses are of the position we propose. Tentativeness (as opposed to boldness) is an overrated intellectual virtue that creates only an illusion of safety surrounding the theories one cautiously defends and makes it less likely that one will find out where one's errors are or make intellectual progress.

We define our position using the term "liberal" as used in popular culture, where the liberal view of abortion (the prochoice stance) contrasts with the "conservative" view (the antiabortion stance). But these two terms cannot be the whole story if our liberal view conserves more of the Catholic tradition on abortion than the supposed conservative view. For example, Augustine's and Thomas Aquinas' belief that the fetus is not a human person in the early stages of pregnancy is not conserved—indeed, it is contradicted—in the contemporary conservative position on abortion.

"Liberal" also refers to contemporary political liberalism. Our liberal position is both compatible with Catholic social teaching and conducive to a healthy spirit of toleration in Catholicism that is not necessarily connected to relativism, to selfishness, or to a denigration of tradition, in spite of what some Catholic detractors of contemporary liberalism say.

Our defense of a liberal "Catholic" stance regarding abortion is not intended in a narrow, sectarian way. A contemporary philosopher of religion and metaphysician who influences our position a great deal is Charles Hartshorne, the son of an Episcopal minister. And our view of the history of abortion is influenced by the nonbeliever James Rachels. Although Catholics are the primary audience for this book, it is written in such a way as to potentially be of interest to all who are concerned about the abortion debate whether they be Protestants, Jews, members of other religions, or agnostics.

We have kept the word "Catholic" in the title for several reasons. First, we are Catholics rather than free-floating religious believers, and we would like to contribute in a positive way to an ecumenical and cross-cultural debate on the topic of abortion from the particular position from which we start.

Second, the key points in the history of opposition to abortion all occur within the history of Catholicism: Augustine's defense in the fifth century of the view that moral sex has to be within marriage and for the purpose of having children; Thomas Aquinas' defense in the 13th century of the view that the human fetus early in pregnancy is not yet a person; and the gradual switch that was started in the 17th century by various thinkers, many of whom were Catholic, to the view that the human fetus is a person in the earliest stages of pregnancy.

And third, our view is Catholic in the sense that the method we have used is based on reasoning that follows from a premise regarding the status of the fetus. But there is a significant difference of

opinion in Catholic tradition on the status of the early fetus. The Catholic position as articulated by Daniel Callahan in his groundbreaking Contemporary opposition to abortion in Catholicism is on a shaky foundation, at best, and should be significantly altered or dropped. 1970 book Abortion: Law, Choice and Morality that has received the most attention recently is set forth as:

- A. God alone is the Lord of life.
- B. Human beings do not have the right to take the lives of other (innocent) human beings.
- C. Human life begins at the moment of conception.
- D. Abortion, at whatever the stage of development of the conceptus, is the taking of innocent human life.
- E. The conclusion follows: Abortion is wrong.

However, "human life" can mean at least two different things, and distinguishing between these two different meanings will be crucial in our effort to argue against the premises of C and D above. First, "human life" can mean merely that something is alive with human genetic material or that it has human parents; and second, it can mean being alive in a sophisticated enough way that it qualifies as a human person, with sentience (the ability to experience pleasure and especially pain) being a necessary condition for human personhood, as in the views of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

One of the problems with intellectual debates on abortion is that there is no commonly agreed to set of technical terms to deal with the moral issues. However, our own definition of terms includes the above distinction between merely being human in the sense that one has human genetic material or human parents, on the one hand, and being a human person in some morally relevant sense, on the other. Further, we try to avoid speaking vaguely about when "life begins," since plant cells, paramecia, individual sperm and other cells are alive. The important question is, when does prenatal life become sophisticated enough that it can be coherently seen as having significant moral status? Our relationship with tradition, in our case with Catholic tradition, is articulated well by Josiah Royce in The Philosophy of Loyalty: Whenever I

have most carefully revised my moral standards, I am always able to see...that at best I have been finding out, in some new light, the true meaning that was latent in old traditions. ... Revision does not mean mere destruction. ... Let us bury the natural body of tradition. What we want is its glorified body and its immortal soul.

The need for our book becomes painfully apparent when one considers that even those who know that the dominant position in the history of Catholicism is not the view that the fetus in the early stages of pregnancy is a person, nonetheless shy away from an explicit defense of the right of a woman to an abortion in the early stages of pregnancy. It is quite common to find philosophers and theologians and historians of ideas who criticize the current "pro-life" stance in Catholicism, and who understand that the traditional Catholic attitude toward abortion was informed by a view regarding sex and not regarding the personhood of the early fetus. But it is not common to find these scholars actually defending a "prochoice" position on a Catholic basis. Our hope is that readers will be inspired to participate more fully in a focused debate on the positions presented in this book. At the very least, we believe we can alter the false assumption that there is one, and only one, Catholic position on abortion. Nothing could be further from the truth. READ THE FULL LIST OF CFFC ARTICLES AVAILABLE ON OUR WEB SITE

VIEW COMPLETE PUBLICATIONS LIST

Catholics for a Free Choice

1436 U Street NW, Suite 301

Washington, DC 20009-3997 USA

Phone: 011-202-986-6093

Fax: 011-202-332-7995

www.cath4choice.org

Central Family Medicine, 2005, catholic.wpd

A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion