



The Infant in My Womb Leaped For Joy

ABORTION AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING By Rev. Thomas D. Williams, L.C.

When the 2004 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* first fell into my hands some months before its promulgation, one pleasant surprise was the text's specific treatment and forthright condemnation of abortion in the context of human rights and, also, of the family as the sanctuary of life. The disconcerting fact is that, more commonly, the topic of abortion is seen as falling outside the discipline of Catholic Social Doctrine as it is taught in most seminaries and universities.

This is due in large part to the relatively few references to abortion in the corpus of social encyclicals, beginning with Pope Leo XIII's groundbreaking 1891 letter *Rerum Novarum*. Of all nine widely recognized social encyclicals, the word "abortion" appears a scant four times, and none treats it in any depth.

In part, this silence stems from the relatively recent advent of abortion as a large-scale ethical problem. With the development of medicine's ability to kill as well as to heal, the number of abortions has risen alarmingly in the past four decades. Therefore the first mention of abortion in a social encyclical appears only in 1971, in Pope Paul VI's *Octogesima Adveniens*. Here Paul mentions abortion in the context of Malthusian solutions to the unemployment problem (no. 18).

In part, too, the silence reflects the widespread understanding of abortion as an issue of *medical ethics* rather than one of *social justice*, the proper domain of Catholic social thought. It was Pope John Paul II who effectively turned the tide, forcefully introducing abortion into the realm of Catholic social teaching. In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* he addressed the issue at great length, placing it in the context of social justice. On beginning his discussion of the gravity of attacks against life in our day, particularly abortion, John Paul explicitly invoked the memory of *Rerum Novarum* and compared the life issues of today with the worker question of Leo's time:

Just as a century ago it was the working classes which were oppressed in their fundamental rights, and the Church very courageously came to their defense by proclaiming the sacrosanct rights of the worker as a person, so now, when another category of persons is being oppressed in the fundamental right to life, the Church feels in duty bound to speak out with the same courage on behalf of those who have no voice. Hers is always the evangelical cry in defense of the world's poor, those who are threatened and despised and whose human rights are violated. (no. 5)

This text, from the first pages of *Evangelium Vitae* frames the entire question of abortion in terms of the Church's social teaching. If Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical concentrated its attention on the plight of the working class as the social group most in need of courageous defense at the time, the attention of the social Magisterium should now shift toward this new class of the oppressed. John Paul II goes on to say:

Today there exists a great multitude of weak and defenseless human beings, unborn children in particular, whose fundamental right to life is being trampled upon. If, at the end of the last century, the Church could not be silent about the injustices of those times, still less can she be silent today, when the social injustices of the past, unfortunately not yet overcome, are being compounded in many regions of the world by still more grievous forms of injustice and oppression, even if these are being presented as elements of progress in view of a new world order. (no. 5)

WHY ABORTION DESERVES SPECIAL ATTENTION IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Pope John Paul saw that abortion is an emblematic and singular socio-ethical problem, deserving central attention in Catholic social thought. To illustrate the uniqueness of abortion as a matter of social justice, here are six characteristics distinguishing it from related social phenomena:

1. Abortion deals specifically with the destruction of *innocent* life. This differentiates discussion of abortion from other related topics. We are not discussing the killing of enemies, as in war, or convicted murderers, as in capital punishment, with all the nuanced moral considerations that must be brought to bear on these cases. This is why then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in June 2004 wrote: “There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia.” Though all life is precious, moral theology has always differentiated the destruction of “innocent life” as particularly heinous and always and everywhere worthy of condemnation. No one can, “in any circumstance, claim for himself the right to destroy

Later, he remarked on the peculiarity of abortion as a legal right. After listing a series of terrible threats to human life, such as poverty, malnutrition, war, and the arms trade, he contrasted these with a new class of threats to life. Not only are these new attacks on life no longer considered crimes, he wrote, but “paradoxically they assume the nature of ‘rights,’ to the point that the State is called upon to give them *legal recognition and to make them available through the free services of health care personnel*” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 11).

4. A fourth distinguishing aspect of abortion is its arbitrary division of human beings into those worthy of life and those unworthy. Abortion deals not with the random killing of unrelated individuals, but with the *cir-*

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directly an *innocent* human being” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*, 76-77; emphasis added). No one is more innocent and defenseless than an unborn child.

2. Another factor distinguishing abortion as a social phenomenon is the sheer *magnitude of the problem*: an estimated 46 million abortions performed worldwide each year, a figure that alone makes abortion a social problem of staggering proportions. “Humanity today offers us a truly alarming spectacle,” wrote Pope John Paul, “if we consider not only how extensively attacks on life are spreading but also their *unheard of numerical proportion*” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 17; emphasis added). An isolated murder would be a social problem, but one of limited proportions. A serial killer would pose a more serious social problem still. But yearly killings in the millions cry out for immediate and decisive action. The volume of abortions underscores the social nature of the problem, and makes abortion one of the most serious social justice issues of all time.

3. A third factor separating abortion from other justice issues is its legal status. Unlike other instances of massive killing of human life, like terrorism or serial killing, which stand clearly outside the law in advanced nations, abortion enjoys *legal sanction*. It involves the systematic, hygienic, *legal* elimination of human life. Pope John Paul wrote of the novelty of such “*scientifically and systematically programmed threats*” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 17).

cumscription of an entire class of human beings (the unborn) as non-persons, excluded from the basic rights and protections accorded to all other human beings. In this way abortion mimics the great historical tragedies of all time, which always began with the denigration of an entire class of people as unworthy of life or freedom.

Historically the greatest social evils perpetrated on humanity—genocide, racism, abortion, anti-Semitism, sexism, slavery—have always violated the principle of equality, relegating an entire sector of the human family to an inferior status, with a dignity lower than the rest. Since human rights flow from human dignity, once dignity is called into question equal rights cannot but share in the same fate. If human dignity depends on anything other than simple membership in the human race—be it intelligence, athletic ability, social status, race, age, or health—we immediately find ourselves having to distinguish between persons who count and those who don’t. As John Paul wrote: “How is it still possible to speak of the dignity of every human person when the killing of the weakest and most innocent is permitted? In the name of what justice is the most unjust of discriminations practised: some individuals are held to be deserving of defence and others are denied that dignity?” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 20).

5. Abortion even distinguishes itself from related questions of medical ethics, such as euthanasia and assisted suicide, by the absence of any possibility of *informed consent*. The status of the unborn as voiceless and most

vulnerable adds a further dimension to discussions of the morality and gravity of abortion. Here the bioethical category of “autonomy” cannot be applied, since unborn children have no way of speaking for themselves.

6. Finally, abortion differs from other major social ills such as unemployment and divorce because of its relative *invisibility*. Not only are the victims themselves voiceless, but those who profit from abortion have no interest in speaking publicly about it; nor, generally, do the mothers and families who are the secondary vic-

A case in point is the Church’s *preferential option for the poor*, an evangelical principle, which refers to a deliberate emphasis on and attention to those most in need. Pope John Paul II called it “a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity” that should affect the life of every Christian (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 42). On numerous occasions the Magisterium has clarified that the “poor” in question are not a social class, or merely those who suffer material need, but include the entire sphere of human misery and indigence. “This misery,” we read in the Catechism, “elicited the compassion

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tims of abortion. Even our legislators are squeamish about frank discussions of the phenomenon of abortion, and pro-life advertising is banned from most network television. Abortion takes place behind closed doors, and is hushed in public. As in the case of slavery, ending the social injustice of abortion relies mainly on the courage and willingness of persons and institutions not directly involved in abortion to speak out.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT’S SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION TO THE ABORTION QUESTION

Catholic social thought offers two distinctive elements to the abortion debate. First, it lays a bridge between moral theology and public discourse. In its long experience dealing with social questions, the Church has sought not only to set forth the Christian truth in all its richness, but to influence Christians and all people of good will in building a civilization of justice and love. To this end, Catholic Social Teaching often employs a natural-law vocabulary directed to all persons of good will, and frames its arguments using accessible concepts and constructions that can be brought to bear on moral discourse in a non-confessional environment.

Second, perhaps more than any institution in the world, the Church in its social teaching has developed a series of *principles* to address the complex moral questions in the social order. As new situations have arisen from the rapidly changing socio-political landscape, the Church has shown admirable elasticity in accommodating new states of affairs while ever defending the essential dignity of the person and the family.

of Christ the Savior, who willingly took it upon himself and identified himself with the least of his brethren” (no. 2448).

Just as a mother or father dedicates a disproportionate amount of time and energy to a child who is sick, without for that reason loving their other children any less, Christians are called to focus their efforts preferentially toward the most needy and defenseless among us. Applying this principle to contemporary society, the social injustice that most cries out to Christian conscience, for the reasons we saw earlier, is the deliberate and massive attack on the most vulnerable members of society, the unborn.

In its venerable tradition of standing up for society’s most defenseless members, the Catholic Church is uniquely qualified to speak out authoritatively on the abortion issue. This, as John Paul the Great so clearly taught, is the number one priority for Catholic social thought today—which must inevitably be expressed not only as social *thought*, but as social *action*.

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Targeted District-wide Postcard Campaign

Sometimes the legislative process seems intimidating or confusing.

Two basic points. First, in the United States, every citizen is guaranteed the right “to petition the Government” (U.S. Constitution, Art. 1), that is, to communicate with your elected officials. Exercise this right. As with all things, you will grow proficient with practice. Second, work together with others. A message arising from a community of persons is much more effective than the lone letter, postcard, or e-mail.

Here’s an example: Federal conscience protection law needed to be strengthened. In 2004, parishes in the Dioceses of Youngstown and Cleveland conducted a local postcard campaign in which they asked their representative, chairman of a key Congressional committee, to support an important conscience protection amendment. More than 80% of the parishes located in that Congressional district participated and thousands of postcards with a unified message were sent to the representative. The level of public concern was high. He responded promptly with a pledge of support. At year’s end, the amendment was signed into law. Comments from parishes: “Good response!” “Very happy with the response from our very small community.” “Contact me if you need anything else.” The undertaking was successful – in both the parishes and in Congress.

For more information on federal legislative programs, see: www.nchla.org.

Wash for Life.

The first annual Wash for Life was held September 16, 2006, with 2,932 youth across the country taking part. They washed over 6,000 cars and raised \$85,325.24 for their local pregnancy care centers. This year’s Wash for Life takes place on September 15, 2007 and there’s no reason every parish and Catholic school in the country cannot participate in this fun and worthy fund-raising campaign. It’s a great way to advertise the name of your local pregnancy care center (PCC) and to raise funds so the PCC can help more women and children in need. Find out more about this event, sign up and compete with other groups of young people around the country to see who can wash the most cars, bring in the most donations and get their picture on the event website: www.washforlife.org. Step by step instructions for running a car wash are posted at http://www.washforlife.org/get_involved/how_to.html.

Generations for Life

Generations for Life has developed a complete how-to guide for young people to start and run their own successful pro-life club at their school or parish. The “curriculum” describes all the steps to organize and recruit effectively, what to feature at meetings to keep kids coming back, suggested topics to cover and events to hold. It’s pro-life activism made very, very easy! The curriculum is described generationsforlife.org/2007/0110/curriculum-post, and can be purchased at www.pro-lifeaction.org/store/#student.

Catholics for Life Coalition

Tired of hosting meetings or speakers at your parish and having only a small turnout? Your parish Council of Catholic Women (CCW) and Knights of Columbus Council (KCC) are filled with pro-life Catholics who’d love to know more and do more for life. Link these organizations’ e-mail networks with your own parish pro-life e-group. Even better, link up with other parishes in your deanery or county for maximum effectiveness. Meet monthly to plan joint events or programs that all parishes can individually participate in.

Prayer: Hold prayer walks for life, Eucharistic Adoration or a Holy Hour for Life, Spiritual Adoption campaigns, or plan a Memorial to the Unborn or Marian pro-life prayer garden.

Education: *Study The Gospel of Life* (using the KofC study guide, for example), the U.S. Bishops’ *Pastoral Plan for Pro-life Activities* (2001), “Life Principles” video series (www.lifeprinciples.net) developed by Fr. Robert Spitzer, S.J., and invite a local Catholic doctor to discuss medical ethical issues at the beginning and end of life and a local Catholic lawyer to discuss abortion law and legislation.

Public Policy: E-mail Action Alerts from the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment (www.nchla.org), columns and press releases from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities (www.usccb.org/prolife), and National Right to Life (www.nrlc.org). Sponsor a bus trip to the Capitol for legislative lobbying day and plan visits to Congressional district home offices.

Pastoral: Take part in Gabriel Project (parish-based pregnancy assistance), raise funds for local pregnancy care centers, lobby your state for a “Choose Life” license plate, and organize respite care for those caring for aging loved ones or special needs children.

Contact Jeanne Berdeaux at berdeaux@dioceseofvenice.org to learn how successful her efforts have been with such a coalition.

Resources*Teaching Documents*

The Gospel of Life. Pope John Paul II (1995).

Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics. National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1998).

Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2001).

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2004)

Print*Books*

Erika Bacciocchi (ed.). *The Cost of Choice*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004.

Americans United for Life, Denise Burke (ed.). *Defending Life 2007: Proven Strategies for a Pro-Life America*. Chicago: Americans United for Life, 2006.

Thomas W. Strahan (ed.). *Detrimental Effects of Abortion: An Annotated Bibliography with Commentary, 3rd ed.* Springfield, Ill.: Acorn Books, 2001.

Joseph W. Dellapenna. *Dispelling the Myths of Abortion History*. Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2006.

Pro-Life Office, Archdiocese of Boston. *Living the Gospel of Life*. (Podcast Text with discussion questions and resources; contact Marianne Luthin: (508) 651-1900.)

Elizabeth Ring-Cassidy and Ian Gentiles. *Women’s Health After Abortion: The Medical and Psychological Evidence*. Toronto: The deVeber Institute for Bioethics and Social Research, 2002.

Daniel N. Robinson et al. (eds.). *Human Nature in Its Wholeness: A Roman Catholic Perspective*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006.

Other Print

Abortion: Test YOUR Grip on Reality. USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities (2007). See how knowledgeable you are about the breadth of legal abortion. Great for teens!

Partial-Birth Abortion: A Bridge Too Far. Susan E. Wills (2006). (4 pp.) The gruesome practice of partial-birth abortion may prove the un-doing of the abortion license.

Partial-Birth Abortion On Trial. Family Research Council (2006). Pamphlet contains chilling excerpts from the partial-birth abortion trial transcripts.

Roe Reality Check. USCCB Pro-Life Secretariat (2005). A full-color 8-page booklet, rebuts myths and lies concerning *Roe* with well-documented facts.

Roe v. Reason. Professor Richard Stith, Esq., Ph.D. (2005). (4 pp.) Critique of *Roe v. Wade* focusing primarily on the Court’s “deeply arbitrary description of reality” in mandating that everyone assent to the falsehood that a child before birth is not a child.

Roe v. Wade: Questions and Answers. USCCB Pro-Life Secretariat (2005) One-page bulletin insert.

Ten Legal Reasons to Reject Roe. Susan E. Wills, J.D., LL.M. (2003). (6 pp.) Summarizes major legal and historical errors of *Roe v. Wade*.

Periodical and Miscellaneous

Life Insight. Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities (Susan E. Wills, ed.). Newsletter, published six times a year.

Life Issues Forum. Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. Bi-weekly columns on abortion and other pro-life issues, available at www.usccb.org/prolife/publicat/lifeissues/index.htm.

Posters

From the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities

Second Look Project posters: “9 Months” and “The Supreme Court Says” 11” x 17”. Can be viewed at www.secondlookproject.org.

“Something Inside Dies after an Abortion” (22” x 17”) and four mini-posters (11” x 12”) on abortion aftermath. (see www.hopeafterabortion.org/ and click “The Jubilee Program”).

Internet

www.usccb.org/prolife (USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities)

www.nchla.org (National Committee for a Human Life Amendment.) See link to USCCB’s “End the Roe Litmus Test” campaign at www.endroe.org.

www.nrlc.org (National Right to Life Committee)

www.ru486facts.org (factual medical and other information on the abortion drug RU-486)

www.hopeafterabortion.org (Supports the Church’s Project Rachel outreach to women and men suffering from an abortion. Personal stories and contact information)

www.noparh.org (National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing)