

CATHOLICS MAY HAVE GOOD REASONS TO SUPPORT ABORTION REFORM

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See also "Abortion, Person, and the Fetus"

The law does not provide that the act abortion pertains to homicide,
for there cannot yet be said to be a live soul in a body that lacks sensation....

--Augustine of Hippo

The intellectual soul [true person] is created by God
at the completion of man's coming into being.

--Thomas Aquinas

Many modern philosophers and theologians return to St. Thomas' view.

--Joseph F. Donceel, S. J.

The Scriptures are silent in defining when one becomes a person.

--Evangelical John Pelt

In April of 2007 the Mexico City government voted 46-19 to decriminalize abortion, the first city in Latin America (except Cuba) where elective abortions are now legal. These Countries do allow therapeutic abortions in the case of rape and a threat to the life of the mother. A papal envoy sent to the Mexican capital before the vote declared that any Catholic legislator who supported the bill would be excommunicated, but a large majority ignored the threat. Other scare tactics, such as comparing abortion to suicide bombing, apparently did not work.

Most people do not realize that at one time the Vatican had a less strict view on abortion. The killing of a first trimester fetus was not murder until a papal decree of 1869, and canon law on this point was not changed until 1917. It is worth noting that over 90 percent of all American abortions are performed in the first trimester.

Drawing on Greek ideas of fetal development that are partially confirmed by current science, St. Thomas Aquinas believed that the fetus was not a person until late in pregnancy. The Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain declared that "to admit that the human fetus" is a person "from the moment of conception . . . sounds to me like a philosophical absurdity."

The 1917 change in canon law may have been the result of applying genetics to the abortion issue. Some have argued that the conceptus is a person because it has a unique genetic identity. Most animal fetuses have unique genetic identities, so does this mean that we have to protect their lives as well?

This argument confuses genetic and personal identity. Twins have the same genetic identity, but they become two different moral and legal persons. With the technology of cloning every cell in the body could be made into thousands of persons all with the same genetic identity. It is supremely ironic that the genetic argument completely undermines the idea of the person as a spiritual being. Genetics deals only with the material body, not our spiritual natures, which are, according to Judeo-Christianity, special creations in "the image of God."

St. Thomas believed that the divine image is implanted late in pregnancy, not a conception. He concluded that the person "is created by God at the completion of man's coming into being." As surprising as it sounds, the greatest Catholic theologian, declared infallible by Pius IX, would have agreed with Roe v. Wade.

Not only can Catholics make sound philosophical arguments for abortion reform, they can also make strong practical arguments. Just because abortion is illegal does not mean that it does not happen. The gruesome ways that it does occur cries out for reform.

The Alan Guttmacher Institute (www.guttmacher.org) has estimated that 4 million illegal abortions are performed in Latin America each year, and approximately 800,000 women are hospitalized because of complications resulting from unsafe techniques. It is estimated that 1,500 Mexican women die each year because of clandestine abortions.

The Guttmacher report has made a list of the techniques Latin American women use because they are not offered safe, legal abortions. These desperate women take caustic substances orally and vaginally, or they insert rubber tubes (sometimes with toxic fluids), wires, knitting needles, or just sticks.

Compared to an abortion rate of 11 per 1,000 women in Western Europe and 26 per 1,000 in the U.S., there are an estimated 37 abortions for every thousand Latin

American women. More abortions are performed in Brazil alone than in the U.S, even though the U.S. has 122 million more people. The Guttmacher report demonstrated that Latin American abortion rates have dropped since 1980 primarily because of increased use of contraceptives. In direct opposition to church doctrine, Mexico and Columbia have national family planning programs; and, significantly, they also have the lowest abortion rates in Latin America.

When Pius IX moved personhood back to conception in 1869 that meant that stricter controls had to be placed on all attempts to prevent fertilization. The double ban on abortion and contraception has been disastrous for women's health in Catholic countries. Using sound philosophical and practical arguments, Catholics can promote sex education, systematic family planning programs, and safe, legal abortion. The logic is simple: fewer unwanted pregnancies mean fewer abortions and healthier mothers.