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# A STATEMENT ON ABORTION\*

*On March 20, 1969, the bishops of Illinois released the following statement against abortion and against legislation to liberalize existing abortion laws.*

## **Part I: Abortion and Morality**

The concern of the Church is primarily in the preservation and advancement of life. It is her responsibility to speak with love for the life and the full human dignity and freedom of everyman. The Church speaks in the name of God and of Christ, who best guarantee the richest earthly fulfillment of man:

“How precious is your kindness, O God/ For with you is the fountain of life/ And in your light we see light” (Ps. 35).

Christ came in love and in service to the poor and disenfranchised. He gave health and life and well-being to men, healing the woman with the issue of blood and the lame and the sick, giving back to the widowed mother her only son. He said, “The Father, who is the source of life, has made the son the source of life” (Jn. 5:26). He is the “Word of life” (Jn. 1:1) who said: “I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full” (Jn. 10:10).

Therefore, the Church defends the life and the rights of the unborn child.

The Second Vatican Council document, *The Church in the Modern World*, states: “God the Lord of Life has conferred on man the surpassing ministry of safeguarding life—a ministry which must be fulfilled in a manner which is worthy of man. Therefore, from the moment of conception life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes” (§51).

This teaching of the Church has been constant. It has been expressed by the Council of Trent, Pope Pius XI, Pope Pius XII, Pope John XXIII, and has been restated again in unequivocal terms by Pope Paul VI.

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\* Reprinted with permission from the May 1969 issue of *Catholic Mind*.

The pastoral letter of the United States bishops, Nov. 15, 1968, points out that "abortion brings to an end with irreversible finality both the existence and the destiny of the developing human person." The pastoral also notes that such procedure is contrary to the Judaeo-Christian tradition inspired by love for life and our Anglo-Saxon legal tradition protective of life and person.

The Church stands in defense of life, in defense of the helpless child, for the right of woman to fulfillment as a mother, for the dignity of the creative partnership between God and man in bringing life into the world. The Church teaches that the uterine person—the fetus or embryo—has inalienable human rights, chief of which is the right to live, and that the direct taking of innocent human life is always wrong.

The Church is aware of the very special problems raised about abortion because men of good will disagree about the fundamental issue in abortion—namely, the significance of the fertilized egg in the process of human generation: when does human life begin? When does the fetus have the qualities and rights of a human person? Does the fetus have absolute rights or can its rights be superseded by the rights of the mother? What moral values must be preserved? What legal options will be helpful to society?

Replying to these questions, the Church affirms that human life begins at the time of conception, and that from that time the fetus has the rights of a human person and that its basic right to life may never be superseded by the rights of another. The Church also affirms that the rights of

the unborn child should be protected by law.

Science proclaims that human life begins at the time of conception. An authoritative statement of this fact may be found in the published report of the International Conference on Abortion sponsored by the Harvard Divinity School and the Kennedy Foundation in late 1967. At this conference it was agreed that the medical, genetic, microbiological evidence all points to the presence of the human person from the time of conception. The report says: "The potential for future development is as great in the fertilized egg as in the embryo, as in the fetus, as in the premature, as in the infant, as in the child" (p. 39).

The Church extends deepest sympathy and compassion to some women who are thrown into agonizing distress by pregnancy: the mother who is in precarious health, or who is very poor, or who already has more children than she can care for; a mother in a troubled frame of mind, an unmarried mother, a woman raped or involved in incest.

Moved by such sympathy and compassion, the Church rejoices that modern science and medicine, sociology and psychology have achieved remarkable new ways of preserving health, well-being, and life itself. She encourages state and private agencies to make positive efforts to help troubled mothers and to remove the evils that often are the occasion for desiring abortion. Every effort should be made to help the poor and to redeem them from helplessness, frustration and despair. Efforts should be made to afford better care for defective children and to advise and sup-

port their families. Sympathy and help should be given to unmarried mothers. Their children should be sheltered from stigmas and provided with institutional or private homes. Agencies for social service should be provided, especially for women for whom a new pregnancy creates painful burdens. Families should be helped through education for family living, counseling, family allowances, employment opportunities. By positive action, society should show respect for the sanctity of life and strive to enhance the quality of life for all.

“Who is ignorant that the hand of the Lord has made all these things?/ He holds in His power the soul of every living thing,/ and the breath of each man’s body” (Job 12:9).

### **Part II: Abortion and the Law**

The Church points to the moral issue involved in the question of abortion. She clearly states that the most basic and unassailable right of every human person is the right to life itself. She believes that this right should be promulgated and protected by law.

The Church believes that the most fundamental duty of the state is to protect life. America’s law enunciates the priority of this function of the state when it stresses that our union as a people is formed to provide for “the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” of its members—in that sequence (Declaration of Independence).

In a pluralistic society, the Church must enter into dialogue with all men of good will concerning the enactment of laws that will effectively defend innocent human life

and promote the good of society. The Church is aware that today the average man is more intelligent, better educated, and better informed than men of former times. She realizes that men have more autonomy and control of their lives, and that modern man and woman treasure highly the right to self-determination, to privacy, to socio-economic welfare. Many men view even basic issues from radically different viewpoints. Most men believe in God; some do not. There are differences in ethical, philosophical and theological systems to which men adhere.

With regard to abortion, there are different laws in different countries. There are different laws in different states of the Union. There is wide variation between the laws enacted and the actual enforcement of laws. Sometimes, enacted laws do not represent the opinion of large segments of society. What is legal and what is moral are not necessarily the same thing—for example, generally throughout the United States, abortion has been legalized in the single instance in which the child’s life is considered to be in conflict with the mother’s life. Even though, in our pluralistic society, abortion in this instance has been legalized in civil law, Catholics still hold that any direct abortion remains intrinsically evil and is never justifiable.

On the one hand, the Church must show respect for the opinions of others and openness to learn from their insights. On the other hand, she must insist that despite many honest, contrary opinions, further liberalization of the law with regard to abortion would lessen the correspondence between law and right moral order and would weaken the life value in our society.

While, indeed, giving full respect to the good will of deserving men and having sympathy for the problems that concern them, the Church, nevertheless, points out that the temper and aspirations of our modern civilization favor life rather than the solution of problems by abortion.

In modern times there have been cruel wars, violence and acts of inhumanity. Yet, it is equally true that our society is evidencing more and more dissatisfaction with forces of destruction and is rising toward a greater realization of the sacredness and dignity of each human person and is making an even stronger affirmation of the value of life.

In our world there is an almost universal desire for peace, a desire, at least, for an end to the tragedies of war, for disarmament, for an effective international agency for peaceful mediation. Young people are often desperately opposed to war which they see as cruel to innocent victims and threatening to their own hopes for a full life. Very widely, the death sentence is now being abandoned as too severe a penalty for even the greatest crimes. The public at large contributes generously to help scientists and doctors in their research and efforts to decrease infant mortality, to relieve pain, and to extend life. Men around the world have applauded the brilliance and courage of doctors who only recently found new ways to preserve life through the transplant of human organs, including even the heart. In war areas, at great expense, highly sophisticated methods of medical service and transportation are used to relieve and save individual wounded soldiers.

More and more, mankind endeavors to

improve the human condition. To areas of famine, flood, or other major disasters, aid flows from men all over the world. Men today regard poverty as a basic evil that diminishes man's dignity and life. To correct this evil, men are giving not only money, but the dedication of personal time and talent. Great efforts are made to improve man's chances for a full life not only in the area of physical health, but also in the areas of mental health and social environment.

Contrary to this massive social affirmation of life is the effort to liberalize the laws with regard to abortion. Leaders in the science of genetics affirm that the unborn child from its earliest stages is a true form of human life. Although the unborn child is hidden, defenseless and voiceless, it has an inalienable right to life and destiny. To destroy the life of the unborn child is immoral and is opposed to man's dignity and to the aspirations of our modern civilization.

There are two arguments that are often offered for the liberalization of the existing abortion laws:

The first argument is this:

If there is a substantial risk that the unborn child may after birth be handicapped by serious physical or mental disabilities, an abortion should be allowed. In response to this argument, the following observations might be made:

In the present stage of scientific knowledge there is no certain way of predicting deformity. The risk in each case would be that the unborn child might be entirely healthy. If this risk were regularly taken,

over a period of time, the lives of many more healthy infants would be terminated than those of truly deformed children. In some cases, where deformity might exist, the deformity might be slight. Scientific research has been increasingly successful in finding ways to prevent the chief cause of deformity.

To rid ourselves of those who are imperfect by taking their lives is to deny our human condition. Within the handicapped person there is a human spirit that in some cases might be superior in intelligence and nobility and of great service to mankind. Even the most seriously handicapped person calls upon us for an affirmation of the ultimate value of the human person and for a judgment that is human and civilized.

The second argument is this:

If the life of the mother is endangered or even if her physical or mental health is endangered, an abortion should be allowed. In response, it might be said that medically it is very difficult to determine the relationship between a given pregnancy and harmful effects to the mother. In some cases, the harmful effects of an abortion might be more damaging than the effects of a pregnancy brought to term. In the medical profession, the recommended treatment for a difficult pregnancy is providing adequate health care for the expectant mother.

Essentially, abortion deprives the uterine person of the basic right to life itself in favor of some right of the mother. Arguments in favor of abortion either misrepresent or obscure the essential character of abortion. Misrepresentation occurs when, contrary to scientific evidence, it is denied

that the uterine person has a truly human life. The character of abortion is obscured when the plight or needs of the mother are presented in emotional terms or on the basis of cases that rarely occur.

Statistics show that most abortions are performed on married women who are not poor. The needs of the mother, urgent and serious though they may be, are most often in the social, psychological or economic order and cannot rightly supersede the child's basic right to life. But the mother's need is graphic and visible and emotionally appealing beyond that of the unborn and unseen child.

The problem of unwanted pregnancies calls for the reshaping of many attitudes in our society. Sex in marriage is a joyous celebration of conjugal love and a most significant mode of interpersonal expression. But it is also the basis of procreation, the communication of life, the preservation of society. The responsibility of sex must always be kept in mind, especially the fact that the conception of new life involves parenthood and decades of maturing love and care.

It would seem also that a process of liberalization once initiated might follow an inexorable course of further and further liberalization. In England, the law against abortion was liberalized in mid-1968. In eight months, the number of abortions, now legal, easy, "respectable," has tripled. It is frighteningly plausible that the anticipated sequence might be: legal abortion in particular cases, legal abortion upon simple request, legal sterilization, legal euthanasia, removal of the choice from the mother to a medical board, to a social worker, to the state. In the end, both the mother might

lose her right to fruitfulness, and the child its right to life.

In making this statement against abortion and against legislation to liberalize the law about abortion, the bishops of Illinois are not unaware of or unsympathetic to the problems which some expectant mothers have. They wish in every way to defend the dignity and well-being of the mother, her right to achieve her fullness as a woman, to be fruitful, to be happy. They encourage the State and private agencies to give to mothers every possible and legitimate help. On the other hand, however, the bishops must also speak clearly

and forcefully in defense of the unborn child's basic right to life. Nothing is more precious to anyone than life itself. God alone is the ultimate giver and keeper of life:

"The Lord fashioned man from the earth. . . . He gave them so many days' determined time. He gave them authority over everything on earth. He clothed them with strength like his own. He put his own light in their hearts. He endowed them with the law of life. . . . All their works are as the sun to him. And his eyes rest constantly on their ways" (Eccl. 17: 1-9, 19).