

# Catholics for Choice and Abortion

PROCHOICE CATHOLICISM 101

By Jon O'Brien and Sara Moretlo

**W**E STRIVE TO BE AN expression of Catholicism as it is lived by ordinary people. We are part of the great majority of the faithful in the Catholic church who disagree with the dictates of the Vatican on matters related to sexuality, contraception and abortion.

In all parts of the world, women, men and their families suffer and some die because they lack the resources to plan their families and the comprehensive information and education to keep themselves safe and healthy. The Catholic hierarchy's role in influencing public policy affects everyone—Catholic and non-Catholic—by limiting the availability of reproductive health services worldwide. The Catholic hierarchy's lobbying against contraception and abortion has disastrous effects on women's lives both in the US and abroad and especially on the lives of poor women.

We believe in a world where every woman and man has access to quality and choice in contraception. Wherever possible, we believe in working to reduce the incidence of unplanned and unwanted pregnancy and that society and individuals should strive to give women and men real choices.

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We believe that young and old should have access to the best information so we know and understand our bodies and can make the best and most responsible decisions to enjoy and share our sexuality.

We believe that social services should exist in our communities where people can freely access quality health care and child care—where woman and men have real choices and where no one is ever forced for any reason to have an abortion or forced to give birth. We believe that women should have access to abortion when they need it, and when, in consultation with their doctors, it can be performed safely.

We work for a world where all women and men are trusted to make responsible decisions about their lives, where skilled and compassionate doctors, nurses and health-care providers are allowed and supported in the work they do to enable people to exercise their right to choose.

We are part of the great majority who believe that the teaching on the primacy of conscience means that every individual must follow his or her own conscience—and respect the rights of others to do the same.

We affirm that the moral capacity and the human right to make choices about whether and when to become pregnant or to end a pregnancy are supported by church teachings. We believe that people should be empowered and given support

to exercise their rights and responsibilities. We believe that women have a right to choose.

## ABORTION AND MORAL DECISION-MAKING

Church teachings on moral decision-making and abortion are complex. In Catholic theology there is room for the acceptance of policies that favor access to the full range of reproductive health options, including contraception and abortion.

At the heart of church teachings on moral matters is a deep regard for an individual's conscience. The *Catechism* states that "a human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience." The church takes conscience so seriously that Richard McBrien, in his essential study *Catholicism*, explained that even in cases of a conflict with the moral teachings of the church, Catholics "not only may but must follow the dictates of conscience rather than the teachings of the Church."

Casual disagreement is not sufficient grounds for ignoring moral teachings. Catholics are obliged to know and consider thoughtfully Catholic teaching. Catholics believe that "the Church...is a major resource of....moral direction and leadership. It is the product of centuries of experience, crossing cultural, national, and continental lines" (*Catholicism*, HarperOne, 1994). But in the end, a well-formed conscience reigns.

## CATHOLIC TEACHINGS ON ABORTION HAVE CHANGED OVER TIME

Although the Catholic hierarchy says that the prohibition on abortion is both "unchanged" and "unchangeable," this does not comport with the actual history of abortion teaching, and dissent, within the church.

The *Catechism* contains only six paragraphs on abortion. This brief section starts: "Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable."

While the Catholic church has long taught that abortion is a sin, the reasons for judging abortion sinful have changed over time. In fact, through most of history the church did not pay much attention to abortion except as a sexual issue. The early prohibition of abortion was not based on concern about the fetus. It was based on a view that only people who engage in forbidden sexual activity would attempt abortion and that abortion is wrong from either an ontological perspective or from a negative judgment about sexuality and sexual behavior, known as the perversity view. "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" (*A Brief, Liberal Catholic Defense of Abortion*, University of Illinois Press, 2000).

The perversity view is no longer much argued explicitly in the Catholic church, though it underlies many of the hierarchy's arguments. Many church officials and antichoice Catholics now focus on the ontological view, which argues that the



A father of Catholic theology, St. Augustine, did not consider the fetus in the early stages of pregnancy to be a person.

fetus is a person from the moment of conception. This view, however, is based on faulty science, dating from the 17th century, when scientists, looking at fertilized eggs through magnifying glasses and primitive microscopes, imagined that they saw tiny, fully formed animal fetuses.

The church hierarchy has since rejected the notion that a fetus is a fully formed person. In its last statement on abortion, the 1974 *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, the Vatican acknowledged that it does not know when the fetus becomes a person: "There is not a unanimous tradition on this point and authors are as yet in disagreement." This disagreement has a long history as well; neither St. Augustine nor St. Thomas Aquinas, two of the most important theologians in the Catholic

tradition, considered the fetus in the early stages of pregnancy to be a person.

The US Supreme Court explored fetal personhood at some length in its *Roe v. Wade* decision and concluded: "When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, at this point in the development of man's knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer."

Even in a predominantly Catholic country, laws governing access to abortion need not adhere to the official Catholic position. The Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Religious Freedom* reinforced the call for Catholics to respect the positions of people of other faiths. This is particularly significant given that the Catholic church's positions on health policies, including abortion, is more conservative than that of other major faith groups. In addition, as noted, many Catholics do not support the Vatican's position on abortion.

Sound public policy on abortion would affirm respect for developing life without diminishing respect for women's lives. Catholics can and do support public policies that acknowledge the moral agency of women, respect developing life, and appreciate the Catholic tradition while honoring the views of other faith groups.

## CHURCH TEACHINGS MAY NOT BE IMPOSED

Despite what many think, the Vatican may not impose teachings on an unwilling faithful. Through the concept of reception, Catholics have a role to play in the establishment of church law.

The popular notion that whatever the pope says on a serious topic is infallible is an exaggeration of the principle of infal-



libility. While some ultra-conservative groups claim that the teaching on abortion is infallible, it does not in fact meet the definition of an infallible teaching. Since the doctrine of papal infallibility was first declared in 1870, only three teachings have been declared infallible: the Immaculate Conception of Mary; the Assumption of Mary; and the declaration on infallibility itself.

Before the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life) was published in 1995, there was speculation among theolo-

efforts of theologians and the lived experience of Catholic people. "Since the Church is a living body," the Vatican declared in the 1971 *Communio Et Progressio*, "she needs public opinion in order to sustain a giving and taking between her members. Without this, she cannot advance in thought and action."

There is a diversity of opinion among leading theologians on the Vatican's teaching on abortion. As long ago as 1973, noted Catholic theologian Charles Curran wrote in the *Jurist* that "there is a sizable

firmed an understanding that "the obligatory force of church law is affected by its reception by the community."

Like the concept of the primacy of conscience, the principle of reception does not mean that Catholic law is to be taken lightly or rejected without thoughtful and prudent consideration. Coriden writes, "reception is not a demonstration of popular sovereignty or an outcropping of populist democracy. It is a legitimate participation by the people in their own governance."

Many of the hierarchy's teachings on reproductive health and rights have not been received by the faithful. Rather, Catholics all over the world have soundly rejected the church's ban on contraception and in many countries only a minority of Catholics agree with church leaders on abortion.

Barely a fifth (22%) of Catholics in the US agree with the bishops that abortion should be completely illegal, and Catholic women in the US have abortions at the same rate as women in the population as a whole. Majorities of Catholics in Bolivia (66%), Colombia (54%) and Mexico (69%) feel abortion should be permitted under some or all circumstances. In Italy, which is 97 percent Catholic, 74 percent favor the use of RU-486 (a drug used instead of surgical methods in some early abortions).

When it comes to the Vatican's teachings on abortion, Catholics the world over stand well apart from the hierarchy.



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After considering the inclusion of the word "infallible" in early drafts of his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life, 1995), Pope John Paul II decided against declaring the teaching on abortion to be infallible.

gians and others that Pope John Paul II would assert the infallibility of the teaching on abortion. Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's chief doctrinal officer, confirmed that the word infallible had been considered in early drafts but was rejected. Ratzinger explained that while the teaching on abortion is authoritative and deserves obedience, the encyclical stopped short of the "formality of dogmatization" (*National Catholic Reporter*, April 7, 1995).

The teaching authority of the church is not based solely on statements of the hierarchy; it also includes the scholarly

and growing number of Catholic theologians who do disagree with some aspects of the officially proposed Catholic teaching that direct abortion from the time of conception is always wrong."

The importance of lay Catholics' experience in the establishment of church law is recognized through the concept of reception. Leading canon lawyer James Coriden shows how the principle of reception, "asserts that for a [church] law or rule to be an effective guide for the believing community it must be accepted by that community." Through the centuries, church law experts have reaf-

## CONCLUSION

Church teachings, tradition and core Catholic tenets—including the primacy of conscience, the role of the faithful in defining legitimate laws and norms, and support for the separation of church and state—leave room for supporting a more liberal position on abortion. The church has acknowledged that it does not know when the fetus becomes a person and has never declared its position on abortion to be infallible. Catholics can, in good conscience, support access to abortion and affirm that abortion can be a moral choice. Indeed, many of us do. ■