



The History of Catholic Church's Position on **ABORTION**



The recent apostolic letter, *Misericordia et misera*, grants all priests the faculty to absolve the sin of abortion. Does this universal permission degrade the sin of abortion to a venial sin?



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The Catholic Church considered abortion as a grave sin and condemned it right from the beginning. The Teaching of the Apostles (94 AD) condemned abortion: "...thou shalt not use magic; thou shalt not use drugs; thou shalt not procure abortion, nor commit infanticide" (*Didache II, 2*). One of the earliest Fathers of the Church Tertullian (c.160 – c.220 AD) opposed abortion and infanticide in clear terms, "murder is once for all forbidden; so it is not lawful for us to destroy even the child in the womb," while

stating that "a future human being is a human being too." Later Jerome (c.347-420 AD), John Chrysostom (347–407) and Augustine (354-430) condemned all sorts of hindrance to the procreative act, and Caesarius of Arles (470-542) condemned abortion and called it a crime. During the patristic time, there was no unanimity concerning the moment of ensoulment, though Tertullian believed that the soul entered the new being at conception (Tertullian, *De anima*, pp. 242-346). Though they were clear that human life begins at conception, there prevailed an understanding of successive animation. Thus, they spoke of unformed and formed embryo. However, anything against conception and any harm to the unformed (unensouled) fruit of the womb was a punishable crime of contraception; and an injury to the formed (ensouled) embryo led to a punishable homicide. Con-

traception and abortion were grave sins and condemnable. Since the time of Augustine, the Aristotelean belief, that the foetus received the spiritual soul sometimes (about 40th day) after conception was prevalent among theologians. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1323 AD) held a position similar to the Aristotelean idea of ensoulment, i.e. for the male foetus after the 40th day and the female foetus after the 90th day. This was very much in practice from Augustine through the nineteenth century till 1869 (in official Church teaching), that the unformed embryo lacked a human soul and its destruction amounted to a sinful contraception rather than to a homicidal act.

However, Albertus Magnus (1200-1280 BC), the teacher of Thomas Aquinas, believed in simultaneous animation. In 1620, the Belgian physician Thomas Feynes assumed an animation on the third day, Jerome Florentius

in 1658 counted on an animation immediately after conception, so also in 1660 Paolo Zacchia, who was person-in-charge of the health system in the Church council, stated of the infusion of the human spiritual soul at the moment of conception, and so the simultaneous animation permeated increasingly at this time especially in medical science, however, theologians represented for a long time widely the traditional theory of a delayed animation.

The change with an animation theory of probability at conception began to take place since the time of Francisco Emmanuele Cangiamila (1701-1763), Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787) and Eusebius Amort (1692-1709). Though Alphonsus was non-decisive within his moral theology, he advocated the baptism of fetuses of miscarriages in his teaching of sacramental theology. Cangiamila conceded a vegetative soul to be sufficient scientific ground to grant the certainty of a simultaneous ensoulment theoretically and Eusebius held a position of simultaneous animation to a greater probability. Pierre J. C. Debreyne (1786-1867) seems to be the first one to have spoken of simultaneous animation with absolute certainty in his *Essai sur la théologie morale considérée dans ses rapports avec la physiologie et la médecine* (1845). Finally, Pius IX abolished the differentiation between ensouled and non-yet ensouled embryos in his Papal Bull *Apostolicae Sedis* (1869).

The Magisterium, the official teaching authority of the Catholic Church, says in many documents that human life begins at conception. The second Vatican Council (1965) says: *“From the moment of its conception, life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeak-*

able crimes.” The Pastoral Constitution *“Gaudium et Spes”* has consciously left the question of ensoulment and simply accepted the biological factor that human life begins at conception. The texts of the other Vatican document Declaration on Procured Abortion (1974) in paragraphs 12 and 13 explain clearly: From the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother, it is rather the life of the new human being (= *novi viventis humani*) with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already... Even if a doubt existed concerning whether the fruit of conception is already a human person, it is objectively a grave sin to dare to risk murder. *“The one who will be a man is already one.”*

That the presence of the soul

is probable (one can never prove the contrary) suffices not to take away the human life that has already come to existence. Further, the Church’s standpoints in biomedical matters dealing with human embryos are well expressed in Vatican documents of the Instruction (1987) *“Donum vitae”* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and of the Encyclical (1995) *“Evangelium vitae”* by Pope John Paul II. The Instruction *“Donum vitae”* no. 79. says: *“Thus the fruit of human generation, from the first moment of its existence, that is to say, from the moment the zygote has formed, demands the unconditional respect that is morally due to the human being in his bodily and spiritual totality. The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of*



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- John Paul II, Encyclical Evangelium Vitae, no. 60 ◀

conception; and, therefore, from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.” The Congregation makes a philosophical conclusion in its Instruction (2008) *Dignitas personae*, no.1. with its opening statement: “The dignity of a person must be recognized in every human being from conception to natural death.” In fact, even a mere probability that a human person is involved would suffice to justify an absolute prohibition of any intervention that might kill the embryo.

A renowned Catholic moral theologian Bernard Häring asserted that “the child in the mother’s womb is alive and has almost the same qualities before being born as it has after birth,”

while raising challenging questions such as these: “Could [it] be proved sufficiently that the embryo is not at all human life[?] Is a totally deformed fetus that is even lacking the biological substrate for any expression of truly human life, still to be considered a person?” The answers are self-evident. Cardinal Lehmann says it succinctly: The embryo is human from the beginning. That human life commences at conception and killing an innocent human life at any stage is never acceptable – has been expressed and reasserted – by various bishop conferences and individual theologians.

Thus, the central convictions of the Catholic Church on the beginning of human life can be summarized as follows: (i) A human life begins at conception. (ii) A human life that begins at

conception is a complete human being; (iii) this human being is sacred and created in image and likeness of God. (iv) this human being which is called embryo in the early stages is a human person; (v) being human persons, embryos have the same rights and dignity like any adult human being; (vi) thus it is morally wrong to take away the life of the embryo even for noble causes of humanity and abortion is a grave sin and a heinous crime.

The Catholic Church is however not rigid and unforgiving towards sinners of abortion. Thus, I end this article with compassion quoting from the Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et misera* of the Holy Father Francis who permits all priests to absolve the reserved sin of abortion during and beyond the Jubilee year of Mercy until further provisions are made: “I wish to restate as firmly as I can that abortion is a grave sin, since it puts an end to an innocent life. In the same way, however, I can and must state that there is no sin that God’s mercy cannot reach and wipe away when it finds a repentant heart seeking to be reconciled with the Father. May every priest, therefore, be a guide, support and comfort to penitents on this journey of special reconciliation.”

The Catholic position on abortion remains a grave sinful act, while the attitude towards the sinners of procured abortion has changed. While Pope Francis wants more opportunities of reconciliation for sinners, he has not diluted the gravity of sin of abortion. The special provision of Pope Francis is a token of God’s love and mercy for those who underwent abortion unwillingly and a stern warning to those who procured it. 