



A Catholic Answers ...

25
Questions
About
Abortion

Emily Stimpson Chapman

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A Few Introductory Notes

This book might make you angry. If it does, I'm sorry. My intent is not to anger you. Or hurt you. Or judge you. My intent is to explain, to the best of my ability, the Catholic Church's teachings on abortion—on why she opposes it and how she understands the controversies surrounding it.

But I might upset you just the same. How could I not? Few issues today are more politicized than abortion. People on both sides struggle to see past our individual experiences, misconceptions, and beliefs. Each of us also has our own wounds and our own histories—with abortion, infertility, pregnancy, childbirth, parenting, and more. These color our thoughts on abortion. Especially for women, every part of this conversation is personal. It's hard to talk about it in an abstract way.

So, before I begin, I want to issue a few warnings and notes.

First, if you are still healing from a painful experience with abortion, this might not be the book for you. Or maybe just skip to the parts about how much God loves you and wants to give you all the healing graces you need. Because He does love you. And He does want to heal you. If reading this book hinders your healing, put it down, then go to Him in Adoration or Confession or prayer. Do that work with Him first, then maybe come back here someday, when you're ready.

Second, if the title hasn't clued you in already, I am answering these questions as a Catholic, someone who loves Jesus Christ and who trusts with heart and mind in the teachings of the Church. Many secular arguments against abortion exist. Many people who have no religious affiliation oppose abortion. If you want to understand their reasons for doing so, check out the work of Rehumanize International, New Wave Feminists, Feminists for Life, and others. But in this book, you will hear arguments from a Catholic perspective. That changes how some questions get answered. It changes how I approach the issue.

Sometimes, possibly, there is more mercy in these answers than there might otherwise be. At other times, there is more firmness. I also suspect that having a Catholic understanding of suffering, the human person, and eternal life makes consistency in the hard situations easier. When you believe every person is the image of God, when you believe suffering can be sanctifying and redemptive, and when you believe that this life is not the end—that more will come and enjoying the more to come depends upon us choosing the good now—what’s at stake with every abortion comes into sharper focus. If I seem alternately too soft, then too hard, this might be why.

Like everyone else, though, some of my gentleness or passion flows out of my experiences. I am not just approaching this issue as a Catholic. I’m approaching it as a Catholic adoptive mother whose three children were conceived and carried to terms in circumstances often used to justify abortion. My babies, in different ways, are all the hard cases, the ones debated at the margins of the abortion fight and for which even some pro-life people are inclined to support abortion. Some of these questions are personal to me. They’re about my babies, who I know are every bit as precious as yours, regardless of how their life began, and who I know are unrepeatable gifts. The world would be so much poorer if their first mothers had made a different choice, and I think about that possibility every day.

The last warning I have for you is this: For as gentle as I try to be in these answers, some topics don’t lend themselves to gentleness. There is no gentle way to describe what happens to a child in a surgical abortion. There just isn’t. Again, if you are still struggling with the wounds of a past abortion and something I write here is painful to read, please know I am sorry for your pain. I don’t want to add to it. But I also don’t want to sugarcoat reality. Our culture needs to wrestle with the truth of these situations. And the truth can be hard. The truth can hurt.

Now, moving on to those quick notes. First I want these explanations to be simple, clear, and brief (ish), so I’m not extensively quoting from

Church documents. Most words are mine. The method of explaining is mine. But underlying these words and behind my method, stands the teaching of the Church's Magisterium. I'll give you a solid list of Church documents at the end if you want to read the actual words of the popes on the questions at hand (something I highly recommend).

Second, remember this is a short e-book, not a doctoral dissertation. I cannot answer every question about abortion or make every argument. This book's content, like its purpose, is limited. If you have a question this book doesn't answer or answer sufficiently, keep reading, keep asking questions, keep searching for answers. Again, I'll give a list of resources at the end that might offer what I can't.

Either way, thank you for taking the time to read my words. I pray they make it easier for you to understand the Church's teaching on abortion or talk about it with others.

1. Why are Catholics opposed to abortion?

Because abortion ends a human life. It stops a beating heart. It destroys the image of God.

As Catholics, we believe every life, born and unborn, is sacred. We see every human person not simply as a complex biological organism, but as the beloved of God, His living image, an unrepeatable work of wonder. We believe every person images God in a unique way. Each of us makes visible something of Him—His strength, beauty, wisdom, mercy, gentleness, kindness, sense of humor, goodness, greatness, grace, and a nearly infinite number of other qualities. Every person shares in our common human nature. But every person is also a one-of-a-kind, holy masterpiece made to reveal to the world something of the heart and mind of God.

When you see the human person in this light, you see that every person matters. Every person is important. Every person has a dignity that surpasses that of the angels. And every person has a mission in this world that is unique to them, a special task for which God made them. This is true of men and women, young and old, rich and poor, born and unborn, of every color, creed, and nation on earth.

To end a child's life before she has a chance to draw her first breath is to deprive the world of a great gift. Abortion robs mothers and fathers of sons and daughters, boys and girls of brothers and sisters, men and women of friends and spouses, and the whole society of the fruits these lives were meant to bear. It leaves us all poorer in ways we can't begin to fathom.

More fundamentally, abortion violates the dignity of the child, not simply through the violence done in the womb, but by treating the child as an object, a problem which can be disposed of at will, not a person, who was created to love and be loved.

Lastly, abortion violates the dignity of all those involved in the act. By participating in the destruction of an innocent child, people partici-

pate in their own destruction. They hurt themselves—not in a way that can't be forgiven or healed—but nevertheless in a real, objective, and devastating way. Taking part in an abortion cuts someone off from sanctifying grace, killing the life of God in their soul. Or, if that person is already separated from God, abortion hardens their heart even more, widening the distance they've put between themselves and the life of grace. Whether these people perceive the harm their choice has done to their souls or not, the harm is still there. It will play out in a thousand different ways over the course of their life—blinding them, hardening them, and leading them deeper and deeper into sin—unless they call upon God's mercy and ask for His forgiveness.

The Church's desire to see abortion end isn't simply rooted in her desire to see children live. It's also rooted in her desire to protect men and women from the hurt and harm that taking an innocent life brings to them.

2. Why does the Church believe a zygote is a human being from the first moment of its conception?

What else would it be? It's not a dog or a cat or a snaggle-toothed snake eel. It's a human life, just one at its earliest stage of development.

Over the last several decades, we have gained a tremendous amount of knowledge about the beginnings of human life and how it develops in the womb. Thanks to amazing advances in technology and medicine, we now know that unborn babies have heartbeats and limbs as early as four weeks, sexual differentiation and major organ growth starts around eight weeks, and pain can be experienced as early as twelve weeks. At eighteen weeks, unborn babies start to hear their mother's heartbeat, and by twenty-four to twenty-six weeks, they respond to voices and sounds outside the womb. We also know a great deal more about the first moments of their existence.

That existence begins the second a sperm fertilizes an egg. When the two fuse together, the instantaneous result is a new human being, a single-cell human zygote, with forty-six chromosomes (plus or minus a chromosome in the case of those with Down's or Turner Syndrome), who immediately begins producing specifically human proteins and enzymes. Importantly, this growth and development is directed by the new human being's body, not the mother's body. And while the human being possesses twenty-three chromosomes from its mother, it also possesses twenty-three chromosomes from its father. This makes the zygote an individual human being—not an extension of the mother or a clone of the father, but a new and unique human life, who will, in the normal course of things, pass through every stage of human development, growing first into an embryo, then a fetus, then an infant, baby, toddler, child, adolescent, and adult.^[1]

In these earliest stages, both inside and outside the womb, the baby depends upon the nourishment and loving care of his mother. But the baby is always a separate individual, with his own genetic makeup and needs. There is never a moment where his life is not his own.

That's the argument from reason, which is one way the Church teaches we can know truth. There is also an argument from faith. In the Book of Jeremiah, God declares, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you," (Jeremiah 1:5). Elsewhere, in Psalms, the psalmist proclaims:

*For thou didst form my inward parts,
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful.
Wonderful are thy works!
Thou knowest me right well;
my frame was not hidden from thee,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.
Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;
in thy book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them (Psalm 139:13-16).*

In these words, the Church hears God's affirmation of every unborn child's personhood and dignity. It hears the Lord telling us that we began not simply as a sperm and egg coming together, but rather as a thought in the mind of God. He conceived us as a thought before our mother conceived us as a body. God thought up every part of us—how we look, what we love, what great things we can do—and loves every part of us, seeing us and knowing us as no one else can or will. It's that thought which takes form in the womb, a form that is always precious to God, always seen by God, always loved by God, no matter how small it may be.

At different points in Christian history, theologians have debated if we can know the exact moment a human soul animates a human body. Is

it when the baby first moves—the quickening as it once was called? Is it when the heart beats for the first time? Is it that glorious moment when sperm and egg unite and the human equivalent of the Big Bang takes place, with a new human life exploding into existence? The Church hasn't given a definitive doctrinal statement on this. But it has doctrinally recognized what reason tells us, that a new individual human being comes into existence at the moment of conception. The Church also has doctrinally taught that every individual human being, from that moment of conception onward, must be treated as a human person—the living image of God—possessing innate dignity and an inherent right to life. The risk for doing otherwise is too high.

3. Has the Church always been against abortion or have her teachings changed over time?

The Catholic Church has always absolutely and unequivocally condemned the practice of abortion.

During the first centuries following Christ's Death and Resurrection, abortion remained a common pagan practice throughout the Roman Empire. Women from all classes routinely aborted their children if the pregnancy was unwanted. They also routinely left their newborn daughters outside to die if they had been hoping for a son. No one blinked an eye at this. The culture viewed abortion and infanticide as morally neutral acts.

In contrast, Christians strongly condemned both practices, and the earliest known collection of Christian rules and practices, *The Didache* (c. AD 50-100) states, "Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill him when born," (2.2).^[2]

Over the next two centuries, numerous Christian documents echoed that statement, including *The Letter of Barnabas*, which was written around AD 74 ("Thou shalt not slay the child by procuring abortion; nor, again, shalt thou destroy it after it is born;") and *The Apocalypse of Peter*, authored around AD 137 ("And near that place I saw another strait place ... and there sat women ... And over against them many children who were born to them out of due time sat crying. And there came forth from them rays of fire and smote the women in the eyes. And these were the accursed who conceived and caused abortion.")^[3]

Early Christian theologians such as Tertullian, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine, and Saint John Chrysostom all vigorously condemned the practice of abortion, while the Synod of Ancyra in AD 314, laid out the canonical penalty for participating in one:

Concerning women who commit fornication, and destroy that which they have conceived, or who are employed in making drugs for abortion, a former decree excluded them until the hour of death, and to this some have assented. Nevertheless, being desirous to use somewhat greater lenity, we have ordained that they fulfill ten years [of penance], according to the prescribed degrees (Canon 21).

In its opposition to abortion, the Church has been unchanging. What has changed (and confused more than a few journalists with a poor understanding of the Church) are the canonical penalties attached to abortion. As noted in the passage above from the Synod of Ancyra, for a time, in some places, women who had an abortion or those who assisted in an abortion were excluded from the sacraments for the whole of their life, until the last moments before death. That was then reduced in the year 314, to a mere ten years away from the sacraments. As the Church's penitential structure grew more merciful, that was relaxed even further, and priests could routinely forgive the sin of abortion in the confessional.

In the 1570s and 1580s, however, this changed again. Some bishops became concerned with the growing number of abortions taking place and, to drive home the seriousness of the sin, began reserving the forgiveness of abortion to themselves; if a woman wanted to confess an abortion she needed to see her bishop, not her priest. In 1588, Pope Sixtus V went even further, reserving the forgiveness of an abortion to the pope alone and attaching the same canonical penalty to abortion that already existed for willful homicide.

Three years later, that pope died and his successor, Pope Gregory XIV, tempered Sixtus' bull by again allowing priests to forgive the sin of abortion for any woman whose baby had not yet quickened (Gregory set the date for that at one hundred sixty-six days). Women who procured abortions after that point, still had to go to their bishops to confess. This

policy remained in place until 1869, when Pope Saint Pius X removed the canonical distinction between early term and late term abortions and again reserved the forgiveness of the sin to bishops alone (although, the bishops in turn could designate certain priests to act in their stead).^[4]

In some parts of the world, like the United States, it became common practice for most bishops to permit every priest in their charge to forgive the sin of abortion. This was not the case everywhere, until Pope Francis issued a papal bull in 2016, declaring that all priests had the authority to forgive the sin of abortion.

It's important to understand that not one of these changes in canonical penalties reflect a change in Church doctrine. They reflect changes in Church discipline, made by different men in different ages, as they've tried to help the faithful understand the gravity of abortion and receive Christ's healing graces. At no point, however, did the Church not consider abortion—any abortion, at any stage—a serious sin. It was always considered grave matter. And it always had to be confessed before a person could return to the sacraments. It still does.^[5]

As Pope Saint John Paul II states in *Evangelium Vitae*:

Throughout Christianity's two thousand year history, this same doctrine has been constantly taught by the Fathers of the Church and by her Pastors and Doctors. Even scientific and philosophical discussions about the precise moment of the infusion of the spiritual soul have never given rise to any hesitation about the moral condemnation of abortion (61).

4. I had an abortion. Can God ever forgive me?

God loves you. He made you. He holds you in being every second of your existence. And He wants you to be with Him always, knowing the perfect joy and peace of Heaven. So yes, of course, He can forgive you. He wants to forgive you. If you've already confessed your sin, He has forgiven you. Your sin is gone, burned up in His love. And if you haven't yet confessed your sin, He is patiently waiting for you to come to Him and allow Him the opportunity to pour out His healing graces upon you. There is no sin God can't forgive. There is no sin God doesn't want to forgive. And there is no sin God won't forgive if we sincerely ask for that forgiveness.

Remember, God sees all. He knows all. Every circumstance, every thought, every movement of your heart on the day of your abortion and every day before and since, is known to Him. He knows your every fear and your every desire. He understands the "why" behind your abortion better than anyone. Better than you even. And He doesn't just want to forgive you for your decision. He wants to help you heal from all that led up to it and all that followed. He wants to bind up all the wounds that led to this wound. He truly wants to help you start anew. You just need to let Him.

5. Does the Church think women who have abortions should go to jail?

If you hear a Catholic say women should go to prison for their abortions, that sentiment is their own, not the Church's. The Church makes no recommendation of any kind to any state or nation about the civil penalties for abortion. Rather, her words for women who've had abortions are focused on their spiritual healing. The Church understands that women are, in a certain respect, abortion's second victim. Most make the decision with great reluctance and great fear. Their reason is often compromised by those fears. Others are pressured into an abortion by family, friends, or the baby's father. Their free will is not complexly free. And no matter how or why a woman makes the decision to abort her baby, all those who have an abortion must live with that decision. They must live without their baby. Which is a terrible cross already.

The Church sees that for many women this grief becomes almost unbearable and wants nothing more than for women to seek forgiveness for their part in the decision, reconcile themselves to God, and receive His healing graces, both through the sacraments and through the support of therapists and friends.

Addressing post-abortive women, John Paul II writes:

Do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child. With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth

of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life (Evangelium Vitae, 99).

6. I had an abortion. Does this mean I'm excommunicated?

When people think of excommunication, they tend to think of popes signing formal declarations or making grand pronouncements, banishing someone publicly from the Church. But that's rarely how excommunication works. Most excommunications are automatic; people do it to themselves by committing serious sins. And (except for particularly public sins and sinners) nobody knows about it save for God and the individual.

Likewise, most people think excommunication is a form of punishment from the Church—something handed down to exact justice on a sinner. But excommunications aren't meant to be retributive. They are meant to be healing. The Church sees excommunication as strong medicine, something given to help awaken the conscience of a person to the wrong they have done, so they can return to Christ. This is always the goal: a return to Christ. Excommunication is not meant to be permanent. The hope is that it will drive the person to repentance and back to God as soon as possible.

The Church's canon law lists nine sins that lead to automatic excommunication. If you choose to commit one of those sins, you choose to separate yourself from the graces of Christ that come to us through His Church. For the excommunication to occur, though, you must have full knowledge that what you are doing is wrong and that you will be excommunicated for it.

Abortion—either receiving one, performing one, assisting at one, or helping someone get one—is one of those nine sins. So, if you are a baptized Catholic who had an abortion of your own free will when you were over the age of 16, knew the gravity of the sin, knew you would be excommunicated for your choice, *and* you have never confessed this sin to a priest, yes, you are excommunicated.

The same penalty (*with the same conditions of full consent and full knowledge*) applies if you performed an abortion, drove someone to get an abortion, paid for an abortion, fundraised or directly donated to an abortion provider (like Planned Parenthood), took direct action as a government official to provide for abortions, voted intentionally in support of legalized abortions, or assisted professionally in an actual abortion.

What does this mean in practice? Spiritually speaking, you suffer the same consequences you would with any other grave sin. God's life in your soul—sanctifying grace—is driven out by your rejection of Him, and you can no longer receive the sacraments. If you choose to receive them anyhow, you don't receive the graces from them. If you have confessed other sins but knowingly withheld a sin related to abortion, you have received no healing graces in Confession. If you married with this sin on your conscience, your marriage is valid but illicit—the graces of the sacrament are not present. If you receive the Eucharist while excommunicated, it has the opposite effect on your soul, bringing condemnation instead of healing.

It doesn't have to be this way, though. God doesn't want you far away from Him, and the Church doesn't want you cut off from His graces. God wants you with Him. The Church wants you united to Her. Which is why the Church does not make returning difficult. She makes it as easy, quick, and painless as possible, requiring just five minutes of your time ... and true repentance.

All you need to do is go to Confession, tell Christ through one of His priests that you are sorry for your sin, and do whatever simple penance he assigns. And don't worry; you're not going to shock the priest. He has, unfortunately, heard the same sins confessed before. There is truly nothing new under the sun.

Just remember, God loves you. He wants to heal you from all the damage abortion has done to you. But He can't do that if you shut Him out. You have to say yes to His presence in your soul. You give that yes

when you go to Confession, tell God you're sorry, and ask Him for the grace to sin no more. Repentance is always a two-fold act. It's a turning from sin and a turning towards Christ. It's saying to God, "I don't want my sin; I want you." You can't have both: serious sin and Christ. You must let go of one to have the other. Excommunication is meant to help us understand that, choose God, and let our sin go.

7. I had an abortion and have gone to Confession, but I can't shake the guilt. Where can I find someone to talk to about this?

First, please know you are not alone. There are many Christian women in the same place as you—good, faithful women who are missing the child who isn't here, struggling with accepting God's mercy, unable to forgive themselves, and worried friends and fellow parishioners will reject them if their secret is discovered. I am sorry you are carrying this cross, and pray you come to see how real and powerful God's mercy is. He loves you and your child. He is holding you both close.

If you haven't yet, please reach out to Project Rachel¹ or Rachel's Vineyard², two organizations that walk with post-abortive women and help them find healing. Both will bring you together with other women who share your struggle and understand what you're going through. Having friends to walk this journey of healing with can make a huge difference, both in finding the peace God wants you to have and in finding the courage to share your story, whether with a few people or many.

1. <https://www.usccb.org/topics/project-rachel-ministry>

2. <https://www.rachelsvineyard.org/>

8. If a young girl is forced by her parents to have an abortion is it still a sin?

For something to be a mortal sin, grave matter isn't enough. There also must be full knowledge and full freedom. You must know what you are doing is seriously wrong. You also must freely choose that wrong. Anything that limits your freedom—mental incapacity, immaturity, threats and force from other people—limits your complicity in that sin. It doesn't make the action any less wrong; it just makes you less responsible for choosing that wrong.

It's hard to say yes or no to the question above because there are no other specifics. But the younger the girl, the more pressure her parents exerted on her, and the fewer outside people she had to turn to, the less responsibility she has for her choice and the less guilt she bears for it. Some girls, especially the very young, would bear no guilt at all.

This isn't just true for young girls, though. In all cases where inordinate pressure was put on a woman to abort, the Church recognizes that the primary blame belongs elsewhere. *Evangelium Vitae* states: "Sometimes the woman is subjected to such strong pressure that she feels psychologically forced to have an abortion: certainly in this case moral responsibility lies particularly with those who have directly or indirectly obliged her to have an abortion," (59).

9. Is it ever okay to have an abortion? Does the Church allow for any exceptions?

It is never okay to *intentionally* and *directly* take an innocent human life. Not for any reason. Under any circumstances. The Church admits no exceptions. Every direct abortion is itself gravely wrong, regardless of the circumstances that prompt a woman to seek one or the factors which might limit her own culpability.

10. What about in cases of rape or incest? Why should a woman be forced to carry her rapist's baby?

Rape is a horror and a tragedy. Incest is a horror and a tragedy. A baby is not a horror or a tragedy. A baby is precious, always innocent, always a gift, always deserving of life. Killing a child because of the sins of the father does not make the rape go away. It only makes the innocent child go away. It compounds the tragedy which has already taken place, adding evil to evil, wrong to wrong, hurt to hurt. Far too often, abortion in these cases also allows rapists, child molesters, and human traffickers to hide their crime. They remove the "evidence" with a convenient abortion, then continue abusing their victim.

Abortion cannot bring healing to a woman, no matter how it might seem to her at the time. It only creates another wound and destroys the one beautiful thing to come out of such an evil act: the child...her child. For the baby is the mother's child too, not just the rapist's, not some stranger who has taken up residence in her womb, but her own flesh and blood, her baby as much as the father's.

Many of the women who conceive because of rape and choose to carry their child will say that nothing helped them heal more than the child. Whether these mothers parent or place their child for adoption, they find comfort in seeing something good come out of a tragedy. The child, through his or her existence, becomes an experience of God's mercy and an affirmation of His promise to work through all things to bring about good for His children.

Regardless, babies conceived through rape or incest are no less deserving of life than any other children. They are no less deserving of love. And they are no less deserving of protection. In cases of rape or incest, the just thing to do is punish the perpetrator of the crime, not harm the

victim for a second time and make a second victim out of the innocent child.

11. Is it considered an abortion to take the Morning After Pill?

Yes? No? Maybe? Sometimes? Really, no one knows for sure.

Here's the problem. Twenty-two years ago, when Plan B (the first emergency contraceptive) came on the market, the Vatican spoke out against it because, in addition to preventing ovulation, it also seemed to prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg. It was believed to act not just as a contraceptive, but also as an abortifacient.

Since then, things have changed a bit, and it's now less clear if today's Plan B can still cause an abortion. It might simply stop the ovaries from releasing an egg, making fertilization impossible.

That assertion, however, isn't settled science. If a woman is currently ovulating or has recently ovulated, fertilization can still occur, and at that point some evidence suggests Plan B still can prevent the fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus, which Catholics consider an abortion (but a lot of medical literature does not).

Similar questions exist about whether or not Ella and a copper-releasing IUD (two newer, commonly used forms of emergency contraception) act as abortifacients: Here, evidence indicates they probably do.

Does this mean Catholic hospitals can't administer emergency contraceptives to women who have been sexually assaulted? Some Catholic ethicists say, "Yes". Others say, "No." Some dioceses forbid them. Others don't. Some Catholic hospitals dispense them. Others won't.

The reason for this difference of opinion stems from the United States Catholic Bishops' *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Healthcare*, which reiterates Church teaching that in non-consensual sex, women have the right to defend themselves from their attackers' sperm. Directive 36 states:

A female who has been raped should be able to defend herself against a potential conception from the sexual assault. If, after

appropriate testing, there is no evidence that conception has occurred already, she may be treated with medications that would prevent ovulation, sperm capacitation, or fertilization.

Given that, if ovulation hasn't yet occurred, a woman who has been raped should be able to take Plan B and have moral certainty that she is not causing an abortion. But determining if ovulation or conception have taken place can be challenging in certain situations, especially since women usually come to the hospital anywhere from a few hours to a few days after an assault. The National Catholic Bioethics Center has suggested hospitals could obtain the woman's menstrual history and administer a urine test for leutinizing hormone, which can tell them if the woman is ovulating or has ovulated in the past 24 hours. But some think that isn't conclusive enough.^[6] For now, it is up to individual bishops to decide how to implement Directive 36 in their diocese and hospitals.

So, yes the Morning After Pill might cause an abortion sometimes, but not usually in most cases. And that's the best I've got on this one.

12. What about when the life of the mother is endangered? Is a mother expected to give her life for her child?

There are few situations in life more challenging than when a mother believes she must choose between her life and her child's life. Fortunately, these situations are extremely rare. When they do occur, the Church does not teach that the life of the child should be prioritized.

Then what does she teach?

First, she continues to teach that no child can ever be directly and intentionally killed. The willful taking of an innocent life remains wrong, even under difficult circumstances. The child is not an aggressor. The child is not the threat. The aggressor or threat is some underlying condition within the mother's body. This is what needs to be addressed.

Second, the Church asks healthcare workers to remember what most mothers want them to remember: they have two patients—the mother and the child—and they should take every measure to preserve the life of both.

Third, when possible, she urges doctors to pursue treatment options for the mother that allow the child in utero to reach, at minimum, the earliest possible age of viability—generally twenty-two to twenty-three weeks. At that point, to give the child the best chance at life outside the womb, treatment should be continued for as long as the mother's health permits.

If the mother's health deteriorates to the point where it's no longer possible to continue the pregnancy without a serious threat to her life, the Church believes it is moral to induce labor at any point between viability and term. This is true even if the baby's chances of survival are slim. If the mother decides she wants to pursue this course of action and delivers her baby early, doctors should take all ordinary measures to help the

child survive after delivery or, if survival is not possible, provide comfort care until the baby passes.

This is where the principle of double effect comes into play. This principle recognizes that in seeking a good end, bad things sometimes happen. If the good end sought is proportionate to the bad consequence, and the bad consequence is never the end sought or the means to achieving the good end, the act is morally permissible.

The classic example of this is unintentionally killing someone in self-defense. If a mad man charges at you, and you push him away, but then he falls backwards and tumbles off a cliff, you have done nothing wrong. Your intent was not to kill the person. Nor did you try to kill the person. You simply pushed him back to protect yourself. An unintended consequence was that he fell off the cliff and died.

When labor is induced post-viability but pre-term, the intent is not to kill the child. It's to save the life of the mother. Examples of medical conditions which might necessitate this course of action include pre-eclampsia, HELLP (hemolysis, elevated liver enzymes, and low platelet count) syndrome, or chorioamnionitis, which is an intrauterine infection following preterm premature rupture of membranes (PPROM).

But what if the baby is not yet viable and will absolutely die outside the womb? Again, following the principle of double effect, direct abortions are always prohibited, but indirect abortions, where the baby's death is not sought, but are rather a consequence of another life-saving procedure, are allowed. With indirect abortions, the goal must be treating an immediate and life-threatening condition in the mother, and directly killing the baby cannot be the means by which the mother is treated. The U.S. Bishops explain:

Operations, treatments, and medications that have as their direct purpose the cure of a proportionately serious pathological condition of a pregnant woman are permitted when they cannot be safely postponed until the unborn child is viable, even if they

will result in the death of the unborn child (Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Healthcare, 47).

For example, when life-threatening preeclampsia or chorioamnionitis occurs pre-viability, most Catholic ethicists agree that inducing labor is morally acceptable, as the goal is expelling the infected membranes from the body, and inducing labor, which is not an evil act, accomplishes that.

Likewise, in cases of uterine cancer, doctors can perform a hysterectomy even though the baby will most certainly not survive. This is possible because the goal is to remove a cancerous organ from the woman's body and the means is the removal of that organ; the goal is not killing the child and the means is not directly killing the child. The child's death is a tragic secondary effect.

With other forms of cancer, the Church recognizes medical experts' opinion that chemotherapy is an acceptable option in the second and third trimesters, and, at times, during the first trimester, although that does pose an increased risk to the child. Taking that risk, however, is more ethical than directly killing the child. Chemotherapy might possibly result in harm to the baby (this is not always known since pregnant women are excluded from cancer drug trials).^[7] Abortion will absolutely result in the death of the child.

Putting your child at risk is not an easy decision for any mother. No one wants to make that decision. Some women might choose to simply delay treatment for another month or two until they reach the second trimester, taking the risk themselves rather than putting it on the baby. Neither are easy decisions. They're hard horrible decisions that only need to be made in a fallen, broken world like ours. But ultimately, both are more moral than directly ending the life of an innocent child.

It's important to note that prior to 2013, Ireland did not permit abortion for any reason, including to save the life of the mother. Yet during the preceding decade, Ireland had one of the best maternal health

rates in the world—not a perfect record, but an excellent one and far better than the maternal health rate in the United States.^[8] Doctors there took seriously their responsibility to treat both mother and child and provided life-saving care for mothers with every possible disease and pregnancy complication. They were trained, from the start, to not see abortion as the first solution to every maternal health problem, and look for better, life-saving measures. They understood that healthcare should be just that—caring for the health of your patient, not killing your patient. It's that kind of understanding and training that allows for doctors to provide ethical care for mother and child.^[9]

For now, since every abortion law in the United States makes exceptions for the life of the mother, this is a non-issue in America. If you, however, ever find yourself in a situation where abortion is being urged as an option, the National Catholic Bioethics Center provides a free consulting service 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to both families and medical professionals faced with making difficult decisions about abortion. You can reach out to them anytime, at 215-877-2660, for a free consultation.

13. What about when the baby has a life-limiting or terminal diagnosis? How can a compassionate Church ask a mother to carry that pregnancy to term?

In a perfect world, no parent would ever hear the news that their child will not live a long, full, and healthy life. Whether this news comes when the child is thirteen-weeks in utero or thirteen-years-old, it is heartbreaking and unnatural. This is not how it's supposed to be.

It is the most understandable thing in the world to grieve this news. It is also the most understandable thing in the world to want to run from it—to want to spare ourselves this pain and spare our unborn little ones from any suffering that lies ahead for them. This is why many parents choose abortion when they learn their child has a developmental issue, congenital disorder, or life-limiting condition. They believe they're being compassionate.

But the way of compassion never involves killing an innocent child.

I need to be blunt for a minute. I want to be gentle, but it is impossible to be gentle and explain truthfully what happens in abortions that take place past ten to twelve weeks. This is when practically all abortions due to a child's medical diagnosis occur because it's not usually until early in the second trimester that ultrasounds start picking up on major developmental issues. The second trimester is also when most pre-natal screenings can be done. Accordingly, by the time parents receive difficult diagnoses, their child is usually between twelve to twenty weeks old. Their body is fully formed. They are likely capable of feeling pain. And they are too old to be killed with an abortion pill (at least in the United States). Instead, a surgical abortion must be performed.

With abortions that take place between twelve and twenty-four weeks, this requires abortionists crush the baby's skull before they pull him out, piece by piece from the womb, either through aspiration (a suc-

tion method used before sixteen weeks) or with forceps. When the child is older than sixteen weeks, the abortionist makes removing him easier by dismembering him in the womb first. The abortionist keeps track of each body part as he pulls it out of the mother. No pain medication of any type is administered to the baby.^[10]

In babies older than twenty-four weeks, a lethal dose of Digoxin is injected into the baby's head, torso, or heart to induce cardiac arrest. The needle goes through the mother's abdomen and into the baby. If the baby is still alive after several days, a second shot is administered. The mother either then gives birth to her dead baby or an abortionist will use forceps to dismember the baby and pull her piecemeal out of the womb.

Either way, before or after twenty-four weeks, the baby experiences pain and suffering as she is killed. Either way, the baby dies alone, with no loving words spoken over her, no loving touches or glances given. And either way, the mother has to deliver her dead baby. There is nothing kind or compassionate about the process for mother or child.

In contrast, carrying the baby to term or near term allows the child to be born into the world. If the child's condition isn't fatal, she can live the life God has for her, a life that can still be beautiful, meaningful, and full of grace, for her and her parents, despite whatever limitations she might have. If her condition is terminal, she can pass away in the loving arms of her parents, feeling the warmth of their touch in her last moments and receiving all possible comfort care. It also gives the mother and father the chance to see their child, love their child, and know the soul with which they've been entrusted, even if it's only for a few short minutes.

Abortion is passed off as the compassionate, dignified choice for parents facing the illness or death of their child. But there is nothing compassionate or dignified about this path. It may be more convenient for doctors and hospitals, but convenience doesn't make it compassionate. And while it may spare parents the pain of walking through months of a pregnancy that will end in certain death or other significant challenges, it also deprives them of the joy of meeting their precious baby face to face,

holding her in their arms, and being changed by that encounter, whether it be long or short.

As an alternative to abortion, the Church would hope to see hospitals, family, friends, and parishes walk with the parents through these difficult situations, providing counseling, prayer, and material forms of assistance, both before and after birth. If you or someone you love is facing this situation, two apostolates that can help are Be Not Afraid¹ and Elizabeth Ministry². Please reach out to them. They will be with you every step of the way.

1. <https://benotafraid.net/>

2. <https://www.elizabethministry.org/>

14. Isn't the Church worried about doctors not being able to treat women experiencing miscarriages or ectopic pregnancies?

Currently, every anti-abortion law in force in the United States, makes clear provisions for the treatment of ectopic pregnancies and miscarriages. Likewise, at Catholic hospitals, where abortions cannot be performed, miscarriages and ectopic pregnancies are routinely and safely treated, following directives provided by the U.S. Bishops.^[11]

If, at some point, a law would come through a State legislative committee that doesn't make those provisions and distinctions, the Church would indeed want people to push back against that to ensure clarity in the final bill. Likewise, if a hospital would fail to provide the best possible standard of care, the Church would want that hospital to improve its standards, both for the care given and the ethics training provided to its workers.

The answer to lack of clarity in legislation, however, isn't allowing the killing of babies. It's greater clarity in legislation. And the answer to inadequate care of mothers and babies, isn't ending the life of one of those patients. It's better care.

15. The news recently reported on a ten-year-old who was raped and became pregnant. Would the Church object to an abortion in her case?

A horrible, heinous, unspeakable evil was done to that child. She was raped—violated in body and soul by someone who should have protected her. You can't overstate the evil of that action. It's a sin that cries to the heavens for justice. At the same time, we need to remember that the rape is the horrible, heinous, unspeakable evil. Not the baby.

As a culture, we have bought into the lie that babies are punishments, that they are problems, that they are the horrible things. They are not. They are persons. They are very little, very weak, very defenseless persons, who deserve to be loved and protected just as the young girl who is raped deserves to be loved and protected. But the girl doesn't need to be protected from her baby. She needs to be protected from being victimized in the future. She needs to be protected from predatory men and boys. She needs to be protected from negligent caregivers. She needs to be protected from a culture that thinks killing one child is the way to help another child.

Accordingly, the Church would want to see the rapist punished to the fullest extent of the law. It would want the young girl to receive extensive therapy and counseling, during and after the birth of her child. It would also want the young girl to receive excellent medical care from doctors who understood that delivering the baby early, at any point past viability, is a moral way to save the child's life if it is endangered by a full-term vaginal delivery. If the young girl has no family who can raise the baby, the Church would hope that a loving, emotionally and spiritually healthy couple would adopt the baby.

This is a difficult, hard situation. Like all the rare hard cases debated at the margins, no easy paths forward exist. It's not easy for one child to

carry another child. But it is better than killing one child for the sake of another child.

16. What does the Church say is permissible in ectopic pregnancies and molar pregnancies?

For a woman longing to conceive or any woman excited to be pregnant, it is devastating to learn that the pregnancy is either molar, partial molar, or ectopic. That diagnosis means, without a doubt, she will have no baby to hold. The Church mourns these lost hopes with the woman and wants her to receive the necessary medical care.

In terms of molar pregnancies, that care is straightforward and simple, because these are not actually pregnancies. Molar pregnancies occur when the sperm fertilizes an egg that contains no genetic material. This makes it impossible for a zygote to form. No human life is created. Instead, tissue begins to grow that can make the body behave like it's pregnant. But there is no baby. There is only a tumor that threatens the mother's life if it is not removed. The Church has zero objections to removing that tumor.

In partial molar pregnancies, an egg is fertilized by two sperm, resulting in a baby with massive chromosomal defects. Those defects are so severe that the baby cannot survive and usually passes before the end of the first trimester. At that point, the placenta sometimes continues to grow, taking on tumor-like characteristics. Once the baby has passed, doctors can and should ensure that the placenta is vacated from the womb. This is responsible medical care, and again, the Church would never object to this.^[12]

With ectopic pregnancies, there is a baby. Unfortunately, that baby never makes it to the mother's womb and instead implants somewhere outside the uterus, in a place incompatible with life (usually in a fallopian tube). Not only can the baby not grow or live past eight weeks in such a place, but the life of the mother is also threatened. Fallopian tubes can

only stretch to a certain point, and if they rupture, heavy bleeding, sepsis, and death for the mother can follow.

Here again, the principle of double effect provides an ethical way forward. Part of the woman's body is about to rupture and will likely kill her. Under these circumstances, it is legitimate to remove the fallopian tube before that can happen. This is called a salpingectomy. With a salpingectomy, the child still dies. This is heart-breaking. But the death is a secondary consequence of removing the tube, which, in and of itself, is a morally permissible act.

The vast majority of Catholic theologians and ethicists endorse salpingectomies as a moral way of addressing the complications of ectopic pregnancies. There is less unity, however, on the two other most common ways of dealing with them.

The first alternative treatment option is administering an injection of methotrexate, which stops the trophoblast (forerunner to the placenta) from growing. In this case, ethicists are split over whether the shot constitutes a direct abortion, as the shot targets the trophoblast, not the child. Some ethicists argue since the child is not being targeted, this is an indirect abortion and subject to the principle of double effect. Others say since the child is dependent upon the trophoblast, it does directly target the child.

The second alternative to removing the fallopian tube is salpingostomy, where the baby and embryonic sac are removed from the fallopian tube. Here, most Catholic ethicists agree that if the child is alive, removing it constitutes a direct abortion. The Church, however, has neither condemned nor endorsed either method yet, so it's up to hospital ethics boards, doctors, and parents to form their consciences on the question using the best available information and guidance, then decide accordingly.^[13]

17. If the Church is opposed to abortion, shouldn't she approve of contraception since that would mean fewer abortions?

If the Church's goal was simply fewer abortions, supporting contraception might seem like it makes sense from one perspective. But that's not the Church's goal. The Church's goal is all men and women accepting the saving love of Jesus Christ and living lives in accord with God's law and our dignity. Contraception is a grave violation of both—God's law and our dignity.^[14] The Church considers its use between consenting individuals mortally sinful and won't ever endorse one wrong to prevent another. Besides that, the idea that more contraception will lead to fewer abortions is only seeming. First, because many forms of contraception actually cause abortions, acting as abortifacients in the early stages of pregnancy. Second, because contraception can encourage the mindset which leads to abortion.

To understand this, we need to back up a bit, and look at God's plan for human sexuality. In that plan, sex was not supposed to be casual. God did not create it to be something in which strangers or anyone outside of marriage engage (Genesis 1:22; 2:24; Exodus 20:14; Matthew 15:19; Ephesians 5:3). In His plan, sexual intercourse is meant to be a loving act between husband and wife that is equal parts pleasure and responsibility—pleasure because sex is fun and draws the couple closer together; responsibility because sex is how new life comes into being.

Have people violated that plan in a myriad of ways almost since time began? Absolutely. Have people turned a blind eye to the responsibilities of sex and simply indulged in the pleasure of it with partners to whom they weren't joined in marriage. Yup, they sure have. But the price they paid for that (or more accurately, the price women paid for that) was so high, that it happened with far less frequency than today. Premarital sex or casual sex was not the norm.

Today it is. And that is largely because of modern methods of contraception, which are highly effective compared to those in previous centuries.

The goal of contraception has always been to separate the pleasure of sex from the responsibility of sex. All methods in all ages have sought to allow people to experience the fun and bonding parts of physical intimacy without the weighty parts—without the possibility of creating new life. Prior to the development of hormonal contraceptives, however, contraceptive methods never did a very good job at achieving those goals. Only with the release of the birth control pill in 1960, did that change.

Suddenly, with the advent of modern contraception, the stakes for sex were lowered, with contraception making it easier for men and women to enter into physical intimacy without dealing with the possible consequences of a child ... or without doing all the work it once took to get someone into bed. At least in theory, people could be a lot less picky about who they slept with because they no longer had to worry if their sexual partner would make a good parent or even be pleasant to talk to the next day.

The Church recognizes that not all people use contraception with the goal of having abundant casual sex. Many married couples resort to it when dealing with real and great pressures. Nevertheless, inside of marriage and outside of marriage, contraception changed people's understanding of sexual intercourse. It led people to forget that sex had consequences. It caused people to stop thinking of sexual intercourse as a baby-making event. The link between intercourse and children was severed, and as that happened, the culture stopped seeing children as gifts and started seeing them as either choices or mistakes.

Whole books can and have been written about the myriad of ways contraception hurts men, women, and culture. But, in terms of abortion, there is a clear line between the advent of modern hormonal contraceptives and an increase in abortion. Statistics vary wildly when it comes to the number of abortions that took place in the United States before

1960, the year the FDA approved the first hormonal birth control pill. The most reasonable estimates, however, place that number between 50,000 and 200,000.^[15] Those numbers steadily climbed each year for the next thirty years after the pill came on the market, peaking at 1.6 million abortions annually in 1990. Since then, numbers have slowly dropped, leveling out at just under a million each year for the past decade. ^[16]

It's not difficult to see the connection. The delinking of sex and babies (and sex and marriage) in the cultural mind has led people with no desire or ability to parent a child to more frequently enter into sexual relationships. More babies are then conceived by couples who have no desire or ability to parent a child. When this happens, abortion often becomes the backup plan. It serves as a kind of emergency contraception.

Recognizing this, John Paul II writes:

But the negative values inherent in the “contraceptive mentality”—which is very different from responsible parenthood, lived in respect for the full truth of the conjugal act—are such that they in fact strengthen this temptation when an unwanted life is conceived. Indeed, the pro-abortion culture is especially strong precisely where the Church's teaching on contraception is rejected (Evangelium Vitae, 13).

He goes on to explain.

In very many other instances, such practices are rooted in a hedonistic mentality unwilling to accept responsibility in matters of sexuality, and they imply a self-centered concept of freedom, which regards procreation as an obstacle to personal fulfillment. The life which could result from a sexual encounter thus becomes an enemy to be avoided at all costs, and abortion becomes the on-

ly possible decisive response to failed contraception (Evangelium Vitae, 13)

Ninety-six percent of abortions in the United States today are elective. They are not because of rape. They are not because of incest. They are not because of health problems for mother or baby. They are because someone was having sex when they weren't prepared to deal with the most life-changing consequence of sex: a baby. The culture told them they had a right to sex without consequences. It told them children were problems, not gifts. It told them their right to consequence free sex trumped any "problem's" right to life. And they believed the culture.

The answer to lowering abortions isn't more contraception. It's helping people see through the lies contraception promotes. It's helping men and women remember that sex, at its most fundamental, is a baby-making event. It's helping the culture recognize that no one has a right to consequence-free sex; sex will always come with consequences because that's how God designed it. It's also changing the way people see children, helping them welcome unexpected little ones as gifts and supporting them as they do. Above all, it's encouraging everyone to start treating the gift of sexuality with respect and reverence once more.

18. Why does the Church care more about abortion than about other social justice issues?

The Church cares deeply about the poor. It cares deeply about racism and human trafficking, gun violence, and food deserts. It cares deeply about unjust criminal justice systems, unjust educational systems, the unjust treatment of women, and the unjust treatment of anyone. But its concern for all those issues and all those people is predicated on one simple truth: the human person is made in the image of God.

That truth—that man is the living image of God—is why the Church advocates for women and the poor. It’s why the Church advocates against racism, communism, socialism, and unfettered capitalism. It’s why the Church does everything it does in the social and political spheres: running hospitals, administering soup kitchens, caring for orphans, housing refugees, ministering to the imprisoned, helping people overcome their addictions, educating children, and caring for women facing unplanned pregnancies.

None of that advocacy or service, however, would be worth a hill of beans if the Church weren’t first and foremost advocating for the right to life of the unborn. On that right—the right to life—every other right depends. To advocate for the just treatment of the vulnerable in society without advocating for the just treatment of society’s most vulnerable, most defenseless, most innocent members would be rank hypocrisy.

In other words, the Church recognizes we can’t say with integrity that women should be protected from misogynistic violence, if we ignore the violence done to women, born and unborn, by abortion. She also recognizes we can’t speak out coherently against the scourge of racism, if we turn a blind eye to the rabid racist practices in the abortion industry, which preys upon Black woman. And she recognizes we can’t say the human person is the image of God and deserves a just wage, if we don’t

first recognize that the human person is the image of God and deserves to live. No other rights, no other privileges matter if you're not alive to receive them.

John Paul II explains:

It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop. A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized (Evangelium Vitae, 101).

A society which thinks it has the right to kill its tiniest members in their mothers' wombs, is a society that cannot be trusted to care for anyone else who is vulnerable. Its disregard for human life and dignity will spill over into every other facet of life. And it has.

Likewise, a people taught that it has no responsibility to care and sacrifice for human persons inside the womb, will not care and sacrifice for human persons outside the womb. It will be a breeding ground for selfish individualism, callous dehumanization, and violence towards the weak and the different. And it is.

We are living in the culture *Roe* built.

The Catholic Church understands that instituting universal health care or raising the minimum wage will never be enough to change this type of culture. Change cannot happen without people accepting the saving love of Jesus Christ and recognizing that their life and the life of every single human being, born and unborn, is sacred—deserving of love, deserving of protection, deserving of life. That's where all effective social justice advocacy starts.

19. Why does the Church have anything to say about the Dobbs case? Should it ever weigh in on politics?

The Church does not make abortion policy for individual countries, nor is it interested in making abortion policy for individual countries. But it does have the responsibility to teach the Faith and form the moral consciences of believers, who in turn have the responsibility as citizens to enact just laws. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explains, in its doctrinal note on *The Participation of Catholics in Political Life*:

“[T]he Church’s Magisterium does not wish to exercise political power or eliminate the freedom of opinion of Catholics regarding contingent questions. Instead, it intends—as is its proper function—to instruct and illuminate the consciences of the faithful, particularly those involved in political life, so that their actions may always serve the integral promotion of the human person and the common good (6).

Faith, the document goes on to explain, isn’t something Christians only practice in Church on Sundays. It’s something we live twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five days a year. We live it by how we pray in the morning. We live it by how we put our children to bed at night. We live it by how we drive, talk to the clerk in the grocery store, treat our employees at work, love our spouse in our bedroom, vote at the polls on Election Day, and care for our unborn children in the womb.

Likewise, faith is much more than a theology of the Trinity or an articulation of Transubstantiation. It’s a vision of God and man and how we are supposed to live in the world. This vision should shape every moment of our life and every part of who we are. It especially should

shape how we treat the weakest and the most vulnerable—those who are easiest to mistreat because we are stronger and they are weaker.

How we treat those who can't reward us or thank us is the measure of how seriously we take Christ's commands to "Love your neighbor as yourself" and "Love one another as I have loved you," (Matthew 19:19; John 15:12). If the Church doesn't help people recognize that, if the Church doesn't help people understand how to apply those words in every culture and age, the Church is not doing her job.

20. Is it a sin to vote for someone who is pro-abortion?

It depends. If you vote for someone who is pro-abortion *because* they are pro-abortion, yes, it is a sin. The U.S. Catholic Bishops explain:

A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to sub-human living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, if the voter's intent is to support that position. In such cases, a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship—Part 1, 34).

On the other hand, if both candidates are pro-abortion, and you vote for the candidate who seems best on other issues, that is not a sin. Your vote wouldn't have made any difference in abortion policy, so other aspects of a candidate's platform can become the deciding factor. Alternately, if the prospect of voting for either candidate violates your conscience, you can make the decision to not vote for either.

If, however, one candidate is pro-abortion and one candidate is pro-life, it gets more complicated.

In general, under most circumstances, the Church teaches that Catholics should not vote for a politician who supports abortion if they have a pro-life option. But if the candidate who is against abortion is for other policies that are grave moral evils—say, launching a pogrom against the Jewish people or reinstating Jim Crowe laws—Catholic voters who prudently and prayerfully weigh the moral evils supported by both candidates can decide the pro-abortion candidate is the less horrible option and vote that way in good conscience. They also can take into consideration whether they believe the anti-abortion candidate is sincere

in his commitment to oppose abortion and capable of doing anything to effect change in that area. Again, from the U.S. Catholic Bishops:

There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship—Part 1, 35).

Note: Your reasons for choosing a pro-abortion candidate over an anti-abortion candidate must be rooted in the anti-abortion candidate's support for other truly grave moral evils that together equal or outweigh the evil of abortion. Not liking a candidate's personality, not liking the candidate's proposed changes to Medicare or student loan financing, not wanting to be associated with a certain candidate or party—none of that is sufficient. Grave moral evil on the level of the slaughter of the innocent in the womb is the measuring stick.

Ultimately, though, unless you're supporting a pro-abortion candidate for their views on abortion, the Church trusts you to form your conscience in accord with Church teaching and make the best decision you can, given the knowledge you have. If you think you decided poorly, for the wrong reasons, with insufficient thought, or with disregard for Church teaching, Confession is the quickest way to rectify your situation.

21. Won't outlawing abortion limit women's educational opportunities and professional success?

I understand why you're asking this question. The culture has been telling women this on repeat for years: that we need abortion to succeed in our careers, that it levels the playing field, allowing us the same freedom and opportunities as men. For many women, the idea of not having access to abortion seems like not having access to a good and meaningful life, where they get to use their gifts and make a difference in the world.

There are so many problems with this way of thinking, though. First, it is sexist. It assumes women aren't strong enough or smart enough or capable enough to succeed at both professional work and motherhood. Contrary to all the evidence before our eyes, contrary to all the women we see getting their education and working in the world while caring for their families, it causes women to doubt ourselves and our ability do the work God made us to do, while also welcoming the children He has given us to love.

Second, this way of thinking wrongly assumes women should be like men—not just any men, but men who devote themselves to their work at the expense of their family and other relationships. It also establishes a continuous, linear, predictable career path as the ideal, one which never pauses to tend to more important things or redirects to do better things. In that, it is mechanistic, leaving little room for creativity, humanity, or providence.

Third, this approach prioritizes material success over all else. It tells us that what we do is more important than who we are, that how much we accomplish is more important than how much we love, and that the service we provide to strangers is more important than the care we give to our children, in our homes.

Women do not need abortions to succeed or find meaning. Rather, as abortions become more difficult to obtain, what women facing un-planned pregnancies need is more support. It will be a society-wide challenge to figure out the best ways to provide that support, both systemically and personally. It won't be simple. Not nearly as simple as abortion. Telling a woman to abort her child requires far less work and creativity than actually supporting her. For society, in the short term, it seems the easy way out. But not for the women. Not for the babies. Not for any of us in the long run.

The same holds true for how we expect women to work and pursue their careers. The Church tells us that women have something unique to contribute to every area of life and work, that we are needed in the world as well as the home. It also teaches that an economy run solely by men is not a fully human economy. It's missing something fundamental: the feminine genius, women's God-given gift for seeing the personal, not just the abstract, and attending to the particular needs of each individual before us.^[17]

Women don't need abortion to make that contribution to the professional world. We need a work culture that is structured in a more human way. More flexibility and accommodation in the workplace, more training and on-boarding for women returning to the workforce after their children are older, more support for women pursuing degrees while also caring for their children—all these actually address the challenges women face. Abortion doesn't. It just does an end run around them, by removing the baby from the equation.

Lastly, as a society, we need to remember where we are going. At the end of our life, money, awards, and the applause of men won't occupy our thoughts. Nor, on those things, will we be judged. What will matter are people—the people we've loved, the people we've hurt, the people we served, the people who made our lives worth living. Those memories will be the source of our deepest joys and deepest regrets. And they are what

we will see as we stand before Christ. Every decision we make now, needs to be made in light of that truth, not in light of what looks good on a resume.

The world tells women that if we want to build the life of our dreams, we need abortion. But that is a lie straight from the pit of hell. Some women might need more support than others. Our careers and lives might take unexpected turns or unfold in surprising ways as we welcome babies. With age, success might come to mean something different to us than it did when we were young. But all that just makes our lives richer and fuller. A life that requires us to practice and receive generosity, that teaches us patience, creativity, and flexibility, that calls us to love sacrificially, is a life worth living. That is the life of our dreams. Not one built on the bodies of our dead children.

22. Why does the Church care more about the rights of the baby than the rights of the mother?

The Church cares deeply about both the mother and the baby. She cares about the child's right to life, and she cares about the mother's right to bodily autonomy. She also cares about the mother's right to know her child, fulfill her vocation as a mother, and be protected from abusive and predatory men, who treat her as a sexual object, refuse to take responsibility for their actions, and use abortion to cover up their own bad behavior. All those rights matter.

In the wake of *Dobbs v. Jackson*, there has been much talk about the need to balance the rights of the child against the rights of the mother. But for fifty years, there has been no balance. All legally recognized rights belonged entirely to the mother—to continue in her pregnancy or end it, to acknowledge the humanity of her child or deny it. The baby had no say, no protection, no ability to make its case or defend itself in any way.

Under current U.S. law, some babies in some states now have some rights. Some have the right to be born unless a doctor deems their mother's health or life is in danger. In other states, those rights are limited even further by the circumstances of the child's conception or their overall health prognosis. Elsewhere, the unborn continue to have no rights—not to life or even to medical care if they survive an attempted abortion.

In all states, the mother maintains her right to bodily autonomy, a right which the Church recognizes. She may do what she wants with her body. But the Church also recognizes those rights don't extend to the body of the child, who is a unique human being, not an extension of the mother or a parasite in the mother. Furthermore, the Church teaches that the mother's right to bodily autonomy does not trump the child's right to life nor the mother's responsibility to care for her child growing

in her womb. Not all rights are equal and not all rights are greater than our responsibilities.

As John Paul II explained in *Christifideles Laici*:

The inviolability of the person which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God, finds its primary and fundamental expression in the inviolability of human life. Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights—for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture—is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination (38).

23. Why is the Church always talking about women and abortion? Doesn't it think abortion affects men or that they have some responsibility for it?

It's true that much of the conversation in both the Church and culture centers on women. Many reasons exist for this. Abortion is often understood as a women's rights issue. Women ultimately make the choice to have an abortion. Women endure the physical pain of abortion. Women experience the physical side effects of abortion. And women most often carry with them the guilt, shame, and grief of abortion. Some men never even know they lost a child to abortion. No woman who has suffered an abortion can say that.

The Church, however, has not been silent about men's role in abortion. John Paul II's landmark encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* calls out men for their responsibility in their child's death, writing:

As well as the mother, there are often other people too who decide upon the death of the child in the womb. In the first place, the father of the child may be to blame, not only when he directly pressures the woman to have an abortion, but also when he indirectly encourages such a decision on her part by leaving her alone to face the problems of pregnancy: in this way the family is thus mortally wounded and profaned in its nature as a community of love and in its vocation to be the "sanctuary of life," (59).

For men who are grieving the loss of their aborted child or struggling with guilt over their role in the abortion, Rachel's Vineyard¹, a post-abortive healing ministry, offers programs for men. Also, an increasing number of U.S. Catholic dioceses sponsor the Project Joseph program,

1. <https://www.rachelsvineyard.org/>

which offers support to post-abortive men. The Catholic men's organization, the Knights of Columbus, has likewise put together a book for post-abortive fathers: "Men and Abortion: Finding Healing, Finding Hope."²

2. <https://www.kofc.org/en/resources/cis/cis334.pdf>

24. If the Church ever got its way, who would take care of all these unwanted babies?

Hopefully, in as many cases as possible, the babies' mothers and fathers will take care of them. Adoption can be a wonderful option when parenting isn't a possible or desired option for some women, but whenever parenting is possible, that is the best option. It's also what many mothers want. Most babies whose lives end in abortion aren't unwanted. Often, they're very much wanted. But the mothers don't know how they can bring the baby into the world. Their economic or social circumstances make it seem impossible. The Church wants to help them see that it is possible, then walk with these women to make it possible.

For this reason, the Church encourages all nations to build a just society where no woman feels she needs to abort her child for economic reasons. The Vatican doesn't make legislative proposals. The Church knows that people of good will can have different opinions about the best and right way to craft legislation, enact policies, and structure resources. But she does ask us to strive to create a culture and economy where everyone has easy access to the basic necessities of life—food, housing, healthcare, etc.—where women do not face pregnancy discrimination in the work-place, and where mothers aren't forced by economic necessity to leave their babies in the first weeks or months of life (or to work outside the home at all).

More fundamentally, the Church asks each of us as individuals to respond to the needs of women and children around us: in our families, neighborhoods, parishes, and communities. Legislation is often beyond our control. Helping the single mother across the street is not. Giving our time, our resources, and our energy to helping those in need is a demand of the Gospel and not one that can go unanswered if we wish to see Christ face to face. Our age, health, vocation, and state in life will de-

termine what each of us can do in any one season. But we must do something. Voting is good. But it's never enough.

John Paul II writes:

What is urgently called for is a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort to activate a great campaign in support of life. All together, we must build a new culture of life: new, because it will be able to confront and solve today's unprecedented problems affecting human life; new, because it will be adopted with deeper and more dynamic conviction by all Christians; new, because it will be capable of bringing about a serious and courageous cultural dialogue among all parties (Evangelium Vitae, 95).

25. I would never have an abortion, but isn't it wrong to force my opinion on others by legislating morality?

There are two points that need to be addressed here. First, all law is one group of people forcing their opinion on others. All law legislates morality. That's what law is and does. Every law that exists, exists because one person or group decided their belief about the common good (or their own good) was the right one or moral one and should become the law of the land. This is true about penal laws. This is true about corporate laws. This is true about education laws, healthcare laws, traffic laws, and every other kind of law, including existing pro-abortion laws.

Laws that allow for abortion already legislate morality. They declare that it is moral for a woman to have the right to choose abortion. They teach that it is moral to deny a human person the right to be born. For almost fifty years, people who believe abortion is a moral option have forced their opinion on people who believe it immoral.

But those of us who believe abortion is wrong don't have to get an abortion, right? That's the usual response to this argument. "If you don't want an abortion, don't get one. But don't tell others who think differently that they can't have one."

That would be a sufficient answer if we were talking about tattoos. Or pixie cuts. But we're not talking about personal grooming choices. We're talking about human life.

This has been said before by others, but it bears repeating: No one today would ever think it morally acceptable to say, "If you think slavery is wrong, don't own one." Or "If you think wife beating is bad, don't beat your wife." We recognize that more than a personal choice is involved. Another life is involved. Another human being is involved, a human being with rights that the whole of society is responsible for protecting.

The same holds true for abortion. It is not just the woman's body. It is the baby's body. It is the baby's life. And those of us who believe abortion is wrong, that abortion is the taking of an innocent human life, have a responsibility to defend that life. We have a responsibility to protect those who cannot protect themselves. We can do that by enacting just laws and by helping people recognize the dignity of the unborn. If we're not doing that, we are abdicating our responsibility to build a just society.

This is what everything comes down to—every debate, every question, every possible exception. Do we believe the child in the womb is a human being with human rights? Not because it's our child. Not because it's wanted. Not because it's healthy. Not because it was conceived under ideal circumstances and can be carried under ideal circumstances. But just because it is. Because it exists. Because it has an objective value and an objective innocence and objective rights that are not contingent upon anyone's opinion.

One baby can't be a human being just because her mother wants to give birth to her, while another baby is just a clump of cells because his mother doesn't want to give birth to him. Our feelings, which might change from one day or circumstance to the next, can't be the arbiter of who is and who is not a human being. If that's the case, then none of us are safe. There must be an objective reality apart from our feelings. And on that objective reality we need to act.

Doing the right thing is often not easy. There is a cost. This is true across the board, not just with abortion. It can be difficult to not lie. It can be difficult to not steal. It can be difficult to give generously, love sacrificially, and fight bravely. Just because we recognize protecting the innocent unborn is the right thing to do, does not mean it will be easy either. We may find ourselves in circumstances where it feels not simply challenging, but impossible.

But if it's right, it's right. And it won't be impossible. Our choice to do the right thing will not go unrewarded. Grace will be given. Fruit

will be born. Good will come about. Not always in the neat and obvious way we would prefer, but it will come.

If God is real and good, if there is meaning and purpose behind His plans, good will follow from trusting those plans. God promised it would. And our God is a God who keeps His promises.

Further Reading

R ecent Church Documents

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11. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html

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[3] For additional quotes from Church Fathers on abortion, see “What the Early Church Believed: Abortion,”²¹ published by Catholic Answers (2004).

[4] See John Christopoulos, “Abortion in the Confessional in Counter-Reformation Italy,”²² *Renaissance Quarterly*

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[7] National Cancer Institute, “Treating Cancer During Pregnancy: New Drug, Old Questions,”²⁵ May 25, 2022; Greg Daly, “Cancer Specialist Rejects No Chemo for Pregnant Women Claims,”²⁶ *Irish Times* (April 26, 2018).

[8] “Maternal Mortality in Ireland: 1985-2017,”²⁷ World Health Organization. Both before and after Ireland legalized abortions for the mother’s life, Ireland’s maternal mortality rate was 6 deaths per every 100,000 live births. In 2020, the maternal mortality rate in the U.S., was 23.8 deaths per 100,000 live births. The country of Malta, which to this day does not allow exceptions to save the mother’s life, also has a maternal mortality rate of 6 deaths per 100,000.

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[10] See Stuart Derbyshire and John Bockmann, "Reconsidering Fetal Pain,"³⁰ *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Volume 46, Issue 1 (2020).

[11] See Ron Hamel, "Early Pregnancy Complications and the Ethical and Religious Directives,"³¹ *Health Progress* (May-June 2014).

[12] For more information on molar and partial molar pregnancies visit Catholic Miscarriage Support³².

[13] National Catholic Bioethics Center, "Management of Ectopic Pregnancy,"³³ (February 2013).

[14] For a more thorough discussion of the Church's teachings on contraception see Pope Paul V's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968), my corresponding study guide on *Humanae Vitae*, published by Endow (2018), and Janet Smith's *Why Humanae Vitae is Still Right* (Ignatius Press, 2018).

[15] Planned Parenthood frequently states that in the 1950s and 1960's between 200,000 and 2 million abortions took place. This number has no actual basis in fact and does not hold up to even the most basic scrutiny. For a discussion of that see Ramesh Ponnuru, "How Common Was Abortion in the Past?"³⁴ *National Review* (December 6, 2021). Better numbers, based on anonymous surveys of women at the time, can be found in *Aborted Woman: Silent No More* by David Reardon (Eliot Institute, 2002), pp. 87-90.

[16] "U.S. Abortion Statistics by Year: 1973-Current,"³⁵ Christian Life Resources (data last verified August 30, 2021).

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