

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND ABORTION

by Fr. John Garvey

The Orthodox Church is opposed to the practice of abortion, a practice which is increasingly common in our society. How are we to respond—individually and as a Church—to a practice many of our fellow Americans regard as nothing more than a matter of choice? What are the Orthodox roots of opposition to abortion? How should Orthodox respond to the pressing moral issue of abortion?

EARLY CHRISTIAN OPPOSITION TO ABORTION

The World in which Christianity first appeared was familiar with abortion. Jews opposed it, which perplexed the ancient Romans; they found Jewish opposition to abortion irrational. (One example the Romans offered was the complication that new offspring caused if you had already drawn up a will. . . couldn't the Jews understand how inconvenient a new child was in a case like this?)

In ancient Roman law, children were considered the property of the father. After seeing his newborn children, a father could choose not to accept them, in which case they were “exposed”—literally left outside, to die or to be taken in by a compassionate stranger. If a stranger chose to, he or she could rescue and take in a child abandoned this way (the stoic philosopher Epictetus did this); but the choice of life or death lay with the father of the house. Female infants were the most frequent victims of this practice.

In contrast to this, children were usually important in the New Testament: they are brought forward to Jesus, for his blessing; and John the Forerunner “leaps” in Elizabeth’s womb at Mary’s greeting.

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians there is an interesting phrase that may be a New Testament condemnation of abortifacient medicine. (Scholars are not sure about this.) Galatians 5:20 speaks of the works of the flesh, which are opposed to the fruits of the spirit. Among the works of the flesh, one is frequently translated “sorcery”—a translator’s interpretation of the Greek work *pharmakeia*, literally “medicine.” This may refer to the occult use of drugs, but it may also refer to abortifacients.

There are other, more clear ancient Christian witnesses against abortion. The *Didache* is one of the earliest Christian works, contemporary with some of the New Testament writings; it was probably composed around the year 100 A.D. It condemns what it also calls *pharmakeia* and goes on to say, “You shall not slay the child by abortion. You shall not kill what is generated.”

The Epistle of Barnabas contains similar language, and Clement of Alexandria associates the destruction of the fetus with the destruction of love for humanity. Tertullian condemned abortion, and in the second century, a Christian answered anti-Christian allegations that Christians engaged in human sacrifice: “How can we kill a man when we are those who say that all who use abortifacients are homicides, and will account to God for their abortions as for the killing of men? For the fetus in the womb is not an animal.”

Some modern defenders of abortion argue, wrongly, that Christian opposition to abortion is relatively new. They point out that ancient and medieval Christian writers made distinctions between the “formed” and “unformed” fetus, the time before and after “quickenings” when some believed the soul entered the unborn child. Their assumption is that this distinction made early abortion—before “quickenings”—acceptable.

Although these distinctions can be found in the writings of Sts. Jerome and Augustine, and in the writings of such later Roman Catholic theologians as Thomas Aquinas, they were never understood as offering permission for early abortions. St. Basil explicitly rejected the distinction between the formed and unformed fetus as beside the essential point. St. John Chrysostom attacked married men who encouraged prostitutes and mistresses to abort. “You do not let a harlot remain only a harlot, but make her a murderess as well.”

Finally, it is important to realize the profound significance of the fact that we celebrate the feasts of the conception of the Theotokos and the conception of John the Forerunner—in addition to the Annunciation, which is the feast of Jesus’ conception.

WHAT ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN OPPOSITION TO ABORTION MEANS

As Christians, we believe that our lives are not accidents. We have been called into being from nothingness by God, and are meant for eternal life. God’s calling us into being is the sign of a love we can only begin to imagine, a love revealed most perfectly in Christ.

There is no doubt, scientifically, that a unique human life starts at conception. Because we believe that each of us is willed to be, by God, we cannot accept the belief that the humanity which starts at conception is accidental, or has no value because it is not yet capable of the decisions and emotions and independent actions we usually associate with

being a person. This life will become what we are—unless we end it. Even when an abortion is performed to save the life of a mother (and such abortions are extremely rare), something profoundly tragic has occurred.

Every life is valued infinitely by God. This includes the life of the unborn child, as well as the criminal, the enemy, the political oppressor, and the most annoying person we know. Although we fail in the task every day, we are called on, by our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, to reflect God's love for everyone who lives.

We cannot allow this obligation to be marginalized. It is not always easy—in fact it will often involve us in the most profound inner struggle—to love as we are called to love. As Dostoevsky wrote, “Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing.” Our model of love is not a sentimental pastel-colored greeting card, but Christ crucified. There are situations in which birth-giving is at least profoundly inconvenient, and others in which it may be absolutely terrifying. We should see something infinitely more terrifying, however, in a heart that is willing to kill life at its start, at its most vulnerable moment of being.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Complicated questions arise immediately, however. Granted that all of the above is true, what is the most effective way to bear witness to our belief that we exist because of God's love? This belief is at the root of the Orthodox opposition to abortion and to every other detail of the holiness of every human life.

Many of those who oppose abortion have worked against a legal climate that has made the choice of abortion a relatively simple thing. The United States has the most permissive abortion laws in the industrialized Western world; there are more restrictions even in the most secular nations of Western Europe. Working to change the legal climate makes good sense and is one valuable form of pro-life witness.

It is not enough, however. Harvard Law professor Mary Ann Glendon has pointed out that the United States not only has the most permissive abortion laws in the industrialized West; its social policy does less for women and children than any other industrialized nation. She sees a connection. A nation in which single women, or poor married women, are afraid to have children because they will be left alone if they do is one in which abortion will often be seen as a lesser evil. To see it that way is wrong, from a Christian point of view. But it is also wrong to condemn abortion, without trying to help those for whom bearing a child will involve real burdens.

Changes in law are part of this. Bearing a child should not mean the end of educational or work opportunities, and these possibilities weigh most heavily upon poor women in our society. In addition to working for changes in the law which might erode the permissive approach to obtaining abortions, it is important to work for positive justice, for a climate in which those women who bear children will not be penalized for having made that choice.

Many people volunteered to work for organizations which help unmarried pregnant women, or poor women who cannot afford appropriate pre-natal care. People have opened their homes to women who have chosen to bear a child rather than choose abortion, and there are many people eager to adopt such children.

MOVING BEYOND THE LAW

In many of these cases—both working against current permissive abortion law, and working for a social climate in which abortion will not seem desirable—the emphasis is on law. We have to move beyond law, however, to the most difficult areas of persuasion and example, which rest finally on our spiritual lives, on the ways in which we have taken prayer into our hearts and allowed it to transform us.

Example and persuasion are especially important because, if abortifacient drugs become widely available, the issue may be removed from the legal arena. It will remain a pressing moral issue, one to which we may not be indifferent. In the long run law must be based upon a general consensus within a society. When the issue is reduced to a “right to choose” all the most important issues are pushed aside. What should we choose? What is human life for? Is it something over which we have rights—or towards which we have an infinite obligation? Is life made valuable primarily by my attitude towards it? Does a life's value depend upon whether I find it convenient or burdensome? Or is human life the gift of a God who loves it and wills it to be?

All the verbal arguments in the world will not persuade people as much as the example of someone who manifests a genuine and compassionate respect for life. The ways in which we choose to do that will vary from person to person—but as Christians it is our calling not only to oppose the use of abortion, but to manifest a profound love of, and gratitude, for God's gift of life.

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