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# CATHOLIC CHURCH

# ABORTION

VERITAS

**CATHOLIC PRESS AND INFORMATION OFFICE, DUBLIN**

**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

**AND ABORTION**

**VERITAS**

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## FOREWORD

In the public debate on abortion within Ireland in recent years the teaching of the Catholic Church on abortion has frequently been discussed.

It is clear that some participants in this debate have an inadequate understanding of the Church's teaching. Some have simply been misinformed. Others have seriously misrepresented what the Church holds, or have attributed to it beliefs and attitudes which it has never held. As a result, there is some confusion in the public mind about what precisely the Church teaches and why.

All in all, therefore, there seems to be need for a clear, up-to-date presentation of the Church's teaching, situated specifically in the Irish context and accessible to the general reader. That is what is attempted in this booklet.

I am grateful to the many people – medical specialists, theologians, lawyers, social workers, counsellors, mothers, fathers, pastors and others – who have been generous with their advice, practical help and criticism. Their contributions have been invaluable.

Jim Cantwell  
Director  
Catholic Press and Information Office  
Dublin  
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Psychiatric social research has found that many nurses suffer anxiety related to the closeness of their involvement in abortion operations. To counter this one psychiatric social worker recommended that nurses be encouraged to direct their attention away from the foetus and towards the problems of the mother.<sup>1</sup>

Advice of this kind distracts the nurse from the real act taking place – the deliberate taking of human life at an early stage. It clouds it in terms such as 'the termination of pregnancy' or 'the removal of foetal tissue'. Attention is focussed on what is perceived to be the most compassionate thing to do – to care for the mother in a real moment of need – and the vital connection between abortion and the precepts of morality is diminished or ignored.

Procured abortion is the deliberate destruction of unborn human life; that is, any operation or procedure the direct purpose of which is to end a pregnancy before the foetus is viable.

### **The Beginning of Life**

The question of when life begins is a scientific one. The science of genetics has convincingly demonstrated the supreme significance of the moment of conception in programming and initiating the life history of the human being. In April 1981 a number of the world's leading geneticists gave evidence before a US Senate subcommittee on this precise question. Their testimonies were significant because of the unanimity which emerged on the question of when life begins. Two quotations give a flavour of the evidence:

Modern biology teaches us that ancestors are united to their progeny by a continuous material link, for it is from the fertilisation of the female cell (the ovum) by the male cell (the spermatozoon) that a new member of the species will emerge. Life has a very, very long history but each individual has a very neat beginning, the moment of its conception.... To accept the fact that after fertilisation has taken place a new human has come into being is no longer a matter of taste or of opinion. The human nature of the human being from conception to old age is not a metaphysical con-

attention, it is plain experimental evidence – *Dr Jerome Lejeune, professor of fundamental genetics at the University of Descartes, Paris.*<sup>2</sup>

...it is scientifically correct to say that an individual human life begins at conception, when the egg and sperm join to form the zygote, and that this developing human always is a member of our species in all stages of its life – *Dr Micheline Matthews-Roth, principal research associate of the Harvard University Medical School.*<sup>3</sup>

From the moment when the mother's egg and the father's sperm join the new life sets out on an astonishing odyssey of growth and development. The child is already equipped with the entire 'programme' of future physical characteristics, down to the tiniest details – including the unique and identifying fingerprints – as well as with basic mental capacity and personality traits. As Swedish-born Agneta Sutton, deputy director of the Linacre Centre for Health Care Ethics, London, says: '...the difference between the day-old or hour-old embryo and the human adult is one of degree of maturity only, not of essential nature; the adult is a mature member of the species, whereas the embryo is a human person whose characteristic human powers and potentialities have only just begun to be developed and actualised'.<sup>4</sup> Ian McDonald, one-time Religious Professor of Midwifery at Glasgow University, put it succinctly: 'This is more than a potential human being; it is already a human being with potential.'<sup>5</sup>

### Early Days

In the first week of its existence the new creature is an organised cluster of distinctively human cells. Three weeks later its nervous system starts to develop, there are the beginnings of a circulatory system and a rudimentary heart is beating. At six weeks hands and feet appear and the lenses of the eye have formed. At eleven weeks the baby has well-developed features though it is still only two inches long and weighs less than an ounce. Nailbeds are forming on the fingertips, the brain is in place and the hair makes its debut. From then on development remains rapid.

From the moment of conception life is a continuously developing process. 'From the time the ovum is fertilised, a life has begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with its own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already'.<sup>6</sup>

Three Swedes – photographer Lennart Nilsson and two leading physicians – produced a remarkable colour pictorial record of the development of a child from its earliest beginnings. They called it *The Everyday Miracle*. In it the doctors wrote:

How could one single cell, until then stored quietly in the body, suddenly give rise to a new human being with every feature that human beings have in common but still not exactly like any other living individual? The child doesn't wonder...it has been one and the same individual all this time.<sup>7</sup>

### A Right to Life

The unborn baby has a right to life. This must be emphasised because that right is denied by the act of abortion. Some Irish commentators and opinion formers have in recent years tended to dismiss the unambiguous assertion of this right as a 'fundamentalist' or 'extremist' position. However, the Catholic Church, in common with many Christians of other Churches and many of the great religious and moral traditions of humanity, teaches that the direct and intentional killing of innocent human life, at any stage from conception to natural death, is gravely wrong. 'This should not be labelled an "extremist" or "fundamentalist" view held only by some Catholics; it is the universal teaching of the Catholic Church', the Irish Bishops have said.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, many people with no religious beliefs hold the same position. To quote one example, Nat Hentoff, columnist with the *Village Voice*, New York, who describes himself as a Jewish, left-wing atheist: 'Being without theology isn't the slightest hindrance to being pro-life. As any obstetrics manual – *Williams' Obstetrics*, for example – points out, there are two patients involved and the one not yet born "should be given the same meticulous care by

the physician that we long have given to pregnant women".... Once implantation has taken place, this being has all the genetic information within that makes each human being unique.<sup>9</sup>

It is strongly advocated by some that the central issue of abortion is a woman's right to control her fertility and that she has the right to an abortion if she so chooses. But the rights of the individual within society are not absolute; they are conditioned by the rights of others. Women certainly do have rights over their bodies, as men do over theirs. But so, also, do children, including unborn children enclosed in and sustained by their mothers' bodies. From the moment of conception a new life exists, genetically different from its mother.

The unborn baby's right to life is one of the inalienable rights of each individual. The case against abortion is profoundly positive: Innocent human life has an intrinsic value and nobody has the right to take it away. This is so because the unborn child is a member of the human community, thoroughly dependent but already a human being with potential for further growth and development. The preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in 1989, declares that 'the child, because of its physical and mental immaturity, needs special care and safeguards, including legal safeguards, before as well as after birth'. Article 6 of the Convention recognises the State's duty 'to ensure to the maximum extent possible the *survival* and development of the child' (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> There is here clear recognition of the rights of the unborn in a solemn international treaty; over 150 countries, including Ireland, had become parties to the Convention by the end of 1993. Another important body, the US Department of Health and Human Services, said in a document entitled *The Status of Children*:

Life is a constantly evolving process that begins with conception and continues until death. Movement through time necessitates change and therefore is synonymous with life itself; the opposite state is stasis and death....With the passage of time, the human organism grows from a single cell to a fully developed adult... the early developmental years are short and serve as the foundation for the remainder of

one's life span. The needs of a child in the support of this growth and development begin before birth and continue throughout the growth years until maturity is reached.<sup>11</sup>

The defence of the right to life is grounded in the conviction that this right exists prior to any State's recognition of it, indeed that it must exist as soon as life itself comes into existence. The inability of unborn children to make the claim on their own behalf does not nullify their right to life. To hold that the right to life rests on official legal recognition by the State or that it exists only on arrival at some particular stage or condition of life which the State is willing to regard as socially valuable or 'meaningful', is to deny that there is such a thing as an inherent right to life at all. A human right is a claim made by a human being on the State and on every other human being; it is not a favour granted by the State or by anybody else.

The first right of the human person is to his or her life. He or she has other goods and some are more precious, but this one is fundamental – the condition of all others. Hence it must be protected above all others.<sup>12</sup>

The right to life of the innocent cannot be bestowed or removed by Government. But, Government does have a duty to protect that life through its laws because 'human life is at its most defenceless in the womb'.<sup>13</sup> In 1974 the Dutch Catholic Bishops were being more than a little prophetic when they said:

...the abandonment of the protection extended by the law to unborn life would mean the end of a publicly recognised, social obligation towards a defenceless form of human life, an obligation anchored in the law. This would create a vacuum into which eventually even a contrary principle could be introduced, namely the obligation or at the least the right, for the common good and in certain circumstances, to bring a pregnancy to an end. In the end it is to be expected that the withdrawal of the protection of the law from unborn life will not remain without influence on the protection of human life in general.<sup>14</sup>

## Genuine Pluralism

It follows that this right to life cannot be abrogated in the interests of pluralism, for the dignity and worth of each individual human being at every stage of development must be at the very basis of genuine pluralism. The US Catholic Church has lived and grown for over 300 years in what is commonly regarded as the quintessential pluralistic society. In a submission to the Senate sub-committee hearings on abortion the US Catholic Bishops' Conference said:

If pluralism means anything in American society it means that we must defend the rights and freedoms of every class of human being, regardless of age, race, sex or condition. A law which allows the killing of any class of human beings is therefore fundamentally anti-pluralistic and 'anti-choice', for it allows those human beings to be deprived of any possibility of making their own choices and expressing their own opinions in the future. A pluralism which respects only those who are currently powerful and articulate enough to put their own beliefs into practice to the detriment of others is not in our opinion a genuine or complete pluralism.<sup>15</sup>

The US Bishops' clarification on pluralism is an important contribution to a fundamental debate concerning law and morality. The debate is complex and its details need not concern us here. But some US groups supporting legalised abortion have claimed that a law protecting the unborn child would be an imposition of a particular morality on a pluralistic society. To this claim, the US Bishops responded in evidence before a Senate sub-committee in 1974:

We wish to make it clear we are not seeking to impose the Catholic moral teaching regarding abortion on the country...We appear here today in fulfilment of our considered responsibility to speak on behalf of human rights. The right to life – which finds resonance in the moral and legal tradition – is a principle we share with society and the one that

impels us to take an active role in the democratic process directed towards its clear and unequivocal articulation.<sup>16</sup>

This view is shared by the Irish Bishops, who in the course of a statement on 'public morality' (1976), said:

Obviously, State laws which the common good demands may in certain cases coincide with the requirements which Catholic moral teaching makes on the individual.... The law of the State, for example, forbids murder and so also does Catholic moral teaching. Yet no one could seriously maintain that the State forbids murder simply because the Catholic Church's moral teaching forbids it also.<sup>17</sup>

## Abortion Widespread

Legalised abortion is now widespread throughout the world. It is estimated that there are over 45 million abortions each year. In Britain the number has risen from 54,819 in the first full year of operation under the 1967 Abortion Act to 172,063 in 1992. That is one abortion for every four births. The Act specified danger to the physical or mental health of the mother during pregnancy as a condition of legal abortion but the wording is loose enough to permit a very wide definition of what constitutes danger to health. In any case, a 1990 amendment to the 1967 Act expanded the boundaries enormously by adding 'risk of injury to physical or mental health of *existing* children' to the grounds under which abortion is allowed in England and Wales (emphasis added).

In the United States two decisions of the Supreme Court in January 1973 effectively gave constitutional licence for abortion on demand. About 1.5 million unborn children are currently killed each year. Indeed, it is a statistical fact that in the United States children are more at risk before rather than after birth; this fact is the source of the popular aphorism that the most dangerous place for a human being to be is in its mother's womb. The constitutional scholar and federal judge John T. Noonan has spoken of 'the terrible social fact that Americans are now killing their own offspring on a scale exceeding that of any war'.<sup>18</sup> A decision of the

US Supreme Court in June 1992 recognised that 'the woman's liberty (to have an abortion) is not so unlimited...that from the outset the State cannot show its concern for the life of the unborn'.<sup>19</sup> But abortion on demand remains the nation's legal policy because the 1973 Supreme Court decisions have not been overturned.

### The Irish Dimension

Although precise figures relating to Ireland are unknown, it is clear that there has been a steady rise in the number of Irish women having abortions in Britain. Official UK statistics reveal that 6,048 women giving addresses in the 32 counties were registered as having had abortions in England and Wales in 1992; 4,254 of these had addresses in the Republic and 1,794 in Northern Ireland, where the 1967 Abortion Act does not apply. The figures do not include Irish women who used accommodation addresses in Britain nor those normally resident there.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, there has been a notable increase in calls to CURA, the pro-life confidential service set up by the Irish Bishops in 1977. In 1992 there were 9,509 calls to its 15 centres, which means that the use of the service has almost doubled in the past decade.

The vast majority of calls concerned pregnant women in distress - CURA offers advice, information and counselling and a wide range of practical help to any woman with an unwanted pregnancy.

CURA's confidential telephone service is a point of first contact, but it can arrange free sheltered accommodation, medical care during confinement, temporary foster-care, short-term nursery care, adoption, help for those who decide to keep their babies, marriage counselling, and post-abortion counselling.

### Why Abortion?

The Church acknowledges that 'if the reasons given to justify an abortion were always manifestly evil and valueless the problem would not be so dramatic'. But she proclaims that no reason 'can ever objectively confer the right to dispose of another's life, even when that life is only beginning'.<sup>21</sup>

In countries where abortion has been legalised, its availability has become progressively easy to obtain. Legal restrictions have been removed. What goes unnoticed, however, is that the law is tolerating a private licence to kill. Pope John Paul has declared:

The Law of God is univocal and categorical with respect to human life. God commands: 'You shall not kill' (*Ex 20:13*). No human lawgiver can therefore assert: it is permissible for you to kill, you have the right to kill, or you should kill. Tragically, in the history of this century, this has actually occurred when certain political forces have come to power, even by democratic means, and have passed laws contrary to the right to life of every human being, in the name of eugenic, ethnic or other reasons, as unfounded as they are mistaken. A no less serious phenomenon, also because it meets with widespread acquiescence or consensus in public opinion, is that of laws which fail to respect the right to life from the moment of conception. How can one morally accept laws that permit the killing of a human being not yet born, but already alive in the mother's womb?<sup>22</sup>

With the lessening in many countries of insistence on some form of medical justification, abortion has come increasingly to be seen as the ultimate 'contraceptive', a last-stage solution to the distressing personal problem of unwanted pregnancy. But violence cannot be accepted as a solution to problems in this sphere any more than in other spheres of life. A survey on behalf of the Royal College of Gynaecologists, London, published in 1991, showed that the number of abortions on teenagers in England and Wales had quadrupled in 20 years. This was in spite of the widespread availability and public promotion of contraceptives for many years.<sup>23</sup>

An increasing number of abortions takes place because powerful emotional pressure is applied on the pregnant woman by another interested party. This can be the father of the unborn child or perhaps those from whom she may seek counselling or advice. However, in the case of an unmarried women such pressure is sometimes exercised by her parents to avoid embarrassment to the family. The single pregnant woman is often fearful of



the future. She may be abandoned by the father of the unborn child or rejected by her own family. Her decision to have an abortion is often taken in desperation and against her own conscientious beliefs. It is a decision which is often bitterly regretted later.

Given the rapid development in medical technology it is likely that within the next few years an effective self-administered abortifacient drug will become generally available. Indeed, there are pills now available which are designed to prevent implantation of a fertilised ovum and thus effect its expulsion – in effect early abortion. The Holy See anticipated such developments in 1974, when it wrote: ‘...the evolution of technology makes early abortion more and more easy, but the moral evaluation is in no way modified because of this’.<sup>24</sup>

### A Direct Challenge

Pope John Paul II has addressed himself movingly to the problems of the pregnant woman and her need for family and community support, particularly today when, he said, ‘*a great proof of moral consistency is often asked of the expectant mother*’. He continued:

Consequently, the mother who is about to give birth cannot be left alone with her doubts, difficulties and temptations. We must stand by her side, so that the fundamental bond of the person’s respect for another may not be destroyed. Such, in fact, is the bond that begins at the moment of conception, as a result of which we must all, in a certain way, be with every mother who is about to give birth; and we must offer her all the help possible.<sup>25</sup>

These words are a direct challenge to Christians, particularly to Catholics. While the Church rejects abortion, she also urges Christians to work to remedy those circumstances which move people to have recourse to abortion. The very existence of unborn life creates an obligation on all concerned to respect that life.

It must be emphasised that, for every unmarried mother, there

is a father who must accept his share of the responsibility and not leave the woman alone to face the difficulties. There are, certainly, many men who do accept this responsibility or who really want to, but there are many others who don’t. Pope John Paul has said: ‘A woman is left alone, exposed to public opinion with “her sin”, while behind “her” sin there lurks a man – a sinner, guilty “of the other’s sin”, indeed equally responsible for it.... How often is she abandoned in her pregnancy, when the man, the child’s father, is unwilling to accept responsibility for it?’<sup>26</sup>

Parents who cannot cope without society’s help have a *right* to adequate aid without having their human dignity impugned. If circumstances do not promise to newly-conceived children the quality of life to which their human dignity entitles them, then society has a strict duty to change the circumstances, not to extinguish the life. ‘Abortion must not only be shown to be wrong; it must also be shown to be unnecessary’, CURA’s former National Coordinator, Bishop Dermot O’Mahony, has said. ‘A girl or woman must be helped and supported from the first awful moment of discovering an unwanted pregnancy, right through that pregnancy and for as long afterwards as is necessary. Existing services must be continually reviewed to ensure that real alternatives do exist’.<sup>27</sup>

About the responsibility of individuals to help nurture a climate where the unborn child will be welcomed, the Irish Bishops were unambiguous in their pastoral letter *Human Life is Sacred*. Having said that for the Christian intercourse outside marriage could not be equated with ‘the sexual union sanctified by God’s grace in the Sacrament of Marriage’, they went on:

Our esteem for marriage must never lead us to adopt a harsh and rejecting attitude towards the unmarried mother. To the unmarried mother, Christians must always show the compassion, the kindness and the support which she and her child need. It is above all to her parents that she ought to be able to look for understanding and forgiveness. To show an unfeeling and unforgiving attitude in this situation is unchristian and can have tragic consequences.<sup>28</sup>

The demands made by the unborn child on the individual and the community in the formation of a genuinely pro-life commitment have been graphically illustrated by Joyce Evans, who was active in the pro-life movement in New York archdiocese for many years. In a critical reflection on her work she asked:

Are we willing to contribute something towards the \$2000 needed for the properly-safeguarded birth of any child in this country? Are we prepared to have our own lives interrupted for nine months while we help the mother? Will we share that child's future life? Are we really ready to open our doors and to let in untimely tenants? I wonder... When we live in the pain of those not as blessed as we are, when we feel their troubled heartbeats in our own breasts, then we become pro-life people.<sup>29</sup>

Her reflection ended: 'Let us begin by asking again God's blessing on our movement, on those directly concerned and also on all those who disagree with us. While we are at it, let us ask God's blessing also on those little guys out there who will be receiving their eviction notices today, tomorrow or next week. God help us all!'

### **Respect for all Life**

A pregnant woman may find it very difficult to accept her situation. She may perceive her unborn child as an encumbrance, perhaps even as a menace. She needs help and support. But the baby in her womb, silent and unseen, speaks by its presence. It has a claim in justice which calls for nothing less than the respect due to a living human being.

This includes all human beings, without exception. It is sometimes suggested that it would have been a mercy shown to people born with serious mental or physical handicaps had abortion eliminated them before birth.

There are three important points here:

Firstly, no one has the right to kill human beings, born or unborn, on the presumption that they would be better off dead. On such a premise one could easily justify euthanasia, the killing of the aged, the handicapped or the infirm on the grounds that they are a burden to themselves and to others. This would not be done as an act of cruelty, of course, but out of a sense of pity that is tragically misplaced. Cardinal Cahal B. Daly has written:

Scientific humanism is often held to be the ethic required by science, the only ethic for a scientific age. A widely-held ethic in Western culture, it recognises only one moral principle – the law of humanitarian compassion, the law of pity. But paradoxically it ends by justifying the putting to painless death of precisely those human beings who have always been in civilised societies the natural objects of compassion and pity... Pity for mothers leads to killing of their unborn babies and even to arguments in favour of parental mercy-killing of deformed or defective children. Pity for doctors leads to pleas for releasing them from the legal prohibition on killing patients. Pity for relatives leads to proposals for removing, by lethal injection, the burden of dependent invalids or mentally handicapped family members or senile grandparents or parents. Pity for those who cannot bear the sight of suffering leads to a 'humane overdose' of the sufferers. Pity for those with a misguided sense of pity leads to death for those who have most need of pity.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, no person has ever lived who has not been handicapped in some way, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, psychologically or physically. That is the human condition. There is no such specimen as a perfect human being. It so happens that some people's handicaps are more obvious and more profound than those of others. But, how marvellously human experience is enriched by the very many people who, by tremendous courage, tenacity and creativity, have overcome even the gravest of handicaps to reach levels of accomplishment that are a cause of wonder

to others. The names of Christy Brown or Christopher Nolan come immediately to mind. Very many handicapped people are themselves deeply opposed to abortion because they have experienced the richness of human life. It would be hard to find a more eloquent expression of this fact than words spoken by Christopher Nolan on the night he received the Whitbread Literary Award for autobiography for his book, *Under the Eye of the Clock*:

Tonight is the happiest night of my life. Imagine, if you will, what I would have missed if the doctors had not revived me on that September day long ago....Can freedom honestly be denied to handicapped man? Can yessing be so difficult; that, rather than give a baby a chance at life, man treads upon his brother and silences him before he can ever draw one breath of this world's fresh air?<sup>31</sup>

Thirdly, the notion that the elimination of the handicapped before birth is a good thing, stands in stark contrast to the devoted work among the seriously handicapped to which many people – most notably parents – dedicate themselves. Their devoted work of caring is a shining example of God's love in our society. The assumption that the only valid or meaningful understanding of the good, useful or productive life is that of the 'healthy' is not only arrogant but unsustainable.

### Hard Cases

The campaign which led to the 1967 Act legalising abortion in Britain deliberately used the tactic of exploiting 'hard cases' to the full. Two of the principal activists in that campaign subsequently wrote a book about it in which they say:

There was (and still is) so much latent public distaste for the very idea of abortion that it was obvious throughout the reform campaign that they would only be able to carry the country with them if they concentrated on the hard cases.<sup>32</sup>

Campaigns of this kind appeal constantly to moral values and emotions already deep-seated in the community, such as tolerance, compassion, sympathy, avoidance of sectarianism or discrimination, liberation of the victims from repressive or oppressive legislation, etc. As well as making the cause seem progressive and morally good, this has the effect of diverting attention from the fundamental issue, which is the right of the unborn human being to life.

Nevertheless, 'hard cases' do exist and they must be honestly faced. An obvious one concerns the victim of rape: should not abortion be permitted in such a case?

Rape is a horrendous crime. The Irish bishops have called it 'the most glaring example of the desecration of the mystery of sexuality'.<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to express adequately the deep feeling of shock and hurt experienced by the victims and their families; all decent people share the violated woman's sense of outrage. As the bishops said: 'Rape is infamous and is seen to be infamous, precisely because it is a brutal assault on the dignity of women and because it totally separates sex from love. Sex is a language which of its nature speaks of love. If instead it speaks of violence and humiliation, as it does in the case of rape, it becomes perverse'.<sup>34</sup>

Because it is an act of violence the victim has a right to seek medical help with a view to preventing conception. Immediate intervention to remove the semen and prevent fertilisation is morally right. They are part of a woman's legitimate resistance to the rapist's attack and the medical procedure used is not an abortion; conception has not yet taken place. It is only in extremely rare cases, in fact, that conception does result from rape. If it does, however, a new human being then exists whose right to life must be protected. This innocent human being cannot rightly be made to pay the penalty of death for a man's crime in violating a woman.

The situation of a woman violently placed in such a cruel dilemma demands great human and pastoral understanding; but it would be no service to her, nor to truth and justice, to destroy the new life within her on the plea of allaying her anguish. An act of violence is not appeased by a second act of violence.<sup>35</sup>

It is sometimes alleged that the Vatican has in the past sanc-

tioned abortion for missionary nuns who had been raped. A comment to this effect, attributed by the Italian newspaper, *Il Giorno*, to a Capuchin priest, Fr Aldo Bergamaschi, in March 1993, drew a categorical response from the Vatican Press Office: 'This comment is completely false. Never, in any case, has abortion be legitimated'.<sup>36</sup>

### Mother and Child

It is the responsibility of the medical team to monitor difficult situations in pregnancy, always alive to the fact that two lives have been entrusted to its care. There can be no question of 'preferring' the life of the unborn child to that of the mother, or that the mother's life should be 'sacrificed' to save the child. As the Irish bishops have said, 'the lives of both the child and the mother are sacred. The right to life of each of them is inviolable'.<sup>37</sup> Pope Pius XII stated in 1951:

Never and in no case has the Church taught that the life of a child must be preferred to that of the mother. It is erroneous to put the question with this alternative: either the life of the child or that of the mother. No, neither the life of the mother nor that of the child can be subjected to an act of direct suppression.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, to quote the Irish bishops, 'concern for the mother's life must always go hand in hand with concern for her unborn child. Anyone who claims to be pro-life must be emphatically pro-mother as well'.<sup>39</sup>

It is an established fact that maternal deaths in pregnancy are extremely rare in Ireland through modern improvements in medical techniques and pre-natal care. The evidence is readily available. In 1964 the Mortality Committee of the Irish Medical Association began recording details of every maternal death in the Republic. There were 42 deaths in the first year, but by 1981 the number had declined to eight. In that same year there were 72,355 births. According to Dr. Kieran O'Driscoll, then Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at University College, Dublin, the

material on maternal deaths recorded by the IMA 'stands unique the world over because it reflects the outcome of childbearing in a community in which induced abortion for medical reasons is not practised'.<sup>40</sup>

The National Maternity Hospital at Holles Street, Dublin, is the largest obstetric unit in Ireland or Britain; over 10 per cent of all births in the Republic of Ireland take place there. To it are referred difficult cases from a wide catchment area, resulting in some concentration of difficult maternal medical conditions which may give rise to serious problems.

In the decade 1970-79 there were 28 maternal deaths and 74,317 births at Holles Street. Two medical experts, Dr. John E. Murphy and Dr. Kieran O'Driscoll, analysed each case in which the mother died and published their findings in 1982. They summed up:

The final conclusion is that therapeutic abortion would have had no beneficial effect on maternal mortality in this hospital during the seventies and, by analogy, that women do not die in childbirth because therapeutic abortion is not practised in Ireland today.... And with regard to the future, given continuous improvement in public health and medical practice, further advances can be expected, suggesting that, whatever grounds for argument there may have been in the past, therapeutic abortion has long since been overtaken by events, and is simply not a live issue in the eighties.<sup>41</sup>

More recently, a report on a seven-year review at the Coombe Women's Hospital, Dublin, showed that 51,343 babies were delivered there between 1985 and 1991. No maternal death could be attributed to the withholding of medical treatment for any reason. During that period 134 cardiac cases and 937 cases of essential hypertension were successfully delivered at the hospital without any maternal death.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, the continuing improvements predicted by Murphy and O'Driscoll in the early eighties were confirmed by a UNICEF report in December 1993 which recorded that Ireland is now the

safest place in the world for women giving birth. According to the report the Irish maternal mortality rate is now only two per 100,000, the lowest of the 145 countries surveyed. The report noted that the Irish performance is particularly significant when the Republic's relatively high birth rate and comparatively low standard of living (measured against developed industrialised countries) are taken into account.<sup>43</sup>

It is an established fact, therefore, that 'obstetrical practice in Ireland has an outstanding record of success in preserving the lives both of the mother and of the baby. This in itself indicates that recourse to abortion is not necessary to save the life of the mother and that the absence of abortion does not endanger the lives of women'.<sup>44</sup>

Two findings of the Murphy-O'Driscoll study are of particular relevance to the contemporary debate on abortion in Ireland: 1) there was no case of suicide; 2) of the mothers who died only one was unmarried. The authors wrote: 'One can but speculate as to the likelihood of finding no case of suicide in a representative sample of 74,317 women of similar age who are not pregnant, but there is surely no support here for the growing emphasis on emotional stress as an indication for termination of pregnancy. Nor do the facts support the contention that unmarried mothers are especially vulnerable'. The finding in regard to suicide is not peculiar to Ireland. A study in 1963 of 294 Swedish women who were refused abortion did not find a single case of suicide or attempted suicide, though one in ten had made a threat of suicide during the period their application for abortion was being considered.<sup>45</sup>

An expectant mother with a life-threatening illness 'must receive the urgent medical treatment which is truly indispensable for the saving of her life, even when that treatment puts the life of the child at risk'.<sup>46</sup> In the treatment of disease in the expectant mother the life of her unborn child may occasionally be at risk, though every effort will be made to minimise this; the child may sometimes even die. This is tragic but unintended – an unavoidable side-effect of treating a condition in the mother which endangers her life. Naturally, the death of a baby in these circumstances is a cause of pain and sadness to the parents and family.

## Excommunication

Since the first century the Church has taught the moral evil of procured abortion.<sup>47</sup> In order to bring home the seriousness of the issue, those who perform or obtain an abortion or who deliberately persuade others to do so, are excommunicated. It is important to remember, however, that the Church will not – indeed, may not – excommunicate anybody unless he or she is fully responsible for the action, realises it is seriously wrong and knows about the penalty attached to it.

Excommunication for the offence of abortion – subject strictly to the above conditions – was retained in the new Code of Canon Law, issued in 1983. To have removed it could have created the false impression that the Church was adopting a less serious view of abortion at a time when its legal availability worldwide was becoming increasingly widespread and unrestricted.

It must be stressed, however, that the purpose of any penalty is not to render forgiveness more difficult but to bring home to the penitent the serious nature of the sin. Confessors and preachers must never lead people to feel that the mercy of God is other than infinitely generous.

The Church emphasises that all involved in pastoral work in the area of abortion must reflect the mind of Christ who condemned the sin but received the sinner back with tender compassion. Among the many services offered to women through CURA is post-abortion counselling.

## The Gospel Truth

The defence of the right to life of the unborn child is a matter of fundamental human rights. 'The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from the same moment his rights as a person must be recognised, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life'.<sup>48</sup> God is the author of life: So teaches the tradition common to all Christians. This teaching is grounded in the conviction that the deliberate destruction of innocent human life violates God's commandment and consti-

tutes a usurpation by humans of divine authority over life and death. The Church proclaims that human life is sacred from conception, because God created us in His own image and likeness; that means that He is Lord of all lives and of all stages of life since He is intimately concerned with every human being from the beginning. 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I consecrated you'. (Jer 1:5)

## Notes

1. See article 'Professional Staff Reaction to Abortion Work', Marianne Such-Baer, in *Social Casework*, New York, vol. 55, no. 7, July 1974, pp. 435-441.
2. Quoted in *Abortion: the Silent Holocaust*, John Powell SJ, Argus Communications, Allen, Texas, 1981, pp. 70-71.
3. Ibid.
4. *Infertility and Assisted Conception*, Agneta Sutton, The Catholic Bishops' Joint Committee on Bio-Ethical Issues, London, 1993, p.22.
5. Quoted in a pamphlet published by the Order of Christian Unity, 1973.
6. *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1974, par.12. Text in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 5 December 1974.
7. *The Everyday Miracle*, Lennart Nilsson, Axel Ingleman-Sundberg and Claes Wirsen, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, London, p.11. The most recent book Lennart Nilsson, *A Child is Born*, revised edition, Dell, New York, 1989, updates and largely replaces the earlier work.
8. Statement 'The Maastricht Referendum and Some of its Implications', the Irish Bishops' Conference, 26 May 1992, par. 5. *Bulletin*, No.10, Catholic Press and Information Office, Dublin.
9. Article by Nat Hentoff in *The New Republic*, 30 November 1992, pp 21-25. See also Bernard N. Nathanson, *Aborting America*, Doubleday, New York, 1979, and Bernard N. Nathanson, *The Abortion Papers*, F. Fell Publishers, 1983. An atheist professor at Rice University, Baruch Brody has written two important books on this subject: *Abortion and the Sanctity of Life*, MIT Press, Boston, 1975 and *Life and Death in Decision-Making*, Oxford University Press, New York 1988.
10. *The Convention on the Rights of the Child*, UN Office of Public Information, 1989. Text in *The Rights of the Child: Irish Perspectives on the UN Convention*, Council for Social Welfare, Dublin, 1991.
11. *The Status of Children, Youth and Families*, 1979, US Department of Health and Human Services, DHHS Publication No. (OHDS) 80-30274, pp.29-30.
12. *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1974, par.11. Text in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 5 December 1974.
13. Statement by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 'The Maastricht Referendum and Some of its Implications', 26 May 1992, par.5. *Bulletin*, No. 10, Catholic Press and Information Office, Dublin.

14. Unpublished official English translation of Dutch original, Dutch Bishops' Conference, Utrecht, 1974.
15. Written testimony to the US Senate sub-committee on the Constitution, 5 November 1981. *Origins*, vol. 11, no. 23, 19 November 1981, p.369. See also Francis J. Beckwith, 'Pluralism, Tolerance and Abortion Rights', in *Life and Learning*, ed. J. Koterski, University Faculty for Life, Washington DC, 1993, pp.28-44.
16. *Documentation on the Right to Life and Abortion, vol. 1*, Testimony of the USCC before the Senate sub-committee on constitutional amendments, 7 March 1974, USCC, Washington DC, 1974, pp.2-3.
17. Statement by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 16 June 1976, Catholic Press and Information Office, Dublin, June 1976.
18. 'A Right Created Out of the Air', Testimony of John T. Noonan, Jr, before a sub-committee of the US Senate Judiciary Committee, 5 October 1981. Text in *Origins*, vol. 11, no.19, 22 October 1981, pp. 293-295.
19. *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania vs. Casey*, judgement of the US Supreme Court, 29 June 1992. Text in *Origins*, Vol.22: no.8, 9 July 1992.
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21. *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, par.14. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1974. Text in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 5 December 1974.
22. *Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II*, Vatican Press, Rome, 1994, par.21.
23. Report of the RCOG Working Party on Unplanned Pregnancy, RCOG, London, September 1991. Reported in *The Times*, London, 4 September 1991.
24. *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1974, par.17. Text in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 5 December 1974.
25. Address to general audience. Text in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 8 January 1979.
26. Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem (The Dignity of Women)*, Pope John Paul II, Veritas, Dublin, 1988, par.14.
27. Address to Limerick Pro-Life meeting, February 1981.
28. *Human Life is Sacred*, pastoral letter of the Irish Bishops, Veritas, Dublin, 1975, par. 41.
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30. Address, 'Why Suffering?' at Ballsbridge, Dublin, to Dublin Diocesan Committee for the Holy Year, 27 October, 1974.
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32. *Abortion Law Reformed*, Madeleine Simms and Keith Hindell, Peter Owen, London, 1971.
33. *Love is for Life*, pastoral letter of the Irish Bishops, Veritas, Dublin, 1985, par.118.
34. *Ibid.*
35. See 'Abortion and the Feminine Voice', Celia Wolfe-Devine, Ph.D., in *Life and Learning*, University Faculty for Life, Washington DC, 1993, pp. 45-83.
36. Reported in Vatican Information Service (VIS), OP/Abortion, VIS 930303 (70), 3 March 1993.
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42. Letter in *The Irish Times*, 16 November 1992.
43. *State of the World's Children*, annual report of UNICEF 1993, reported in *The Irish Times*, 21 December 1993.
44. Statement, 'The Maastricht Referendum and Some of its Implications', the Irish Bishops' Conference, 26 May 1992, par.6. *Bulletin*, No.10, Catholic Press and Information Office, Dublin.
45. Hook, *Acta Psychiat. Scandnav.* 39 Supp. 168 (1963). Quoted by John F. Murphy in *Ethical Issue in Reproductive Medicine*, ed. M. Reidy, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin 1982, Chapter 3.
46. *ibid.*
47. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Veritas, Dublin, 1994, chapter 2, art.3, no.2271.
48. *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origins and on the Dignity of Procreation*, no. 1, p.14, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Vatican Press, Rome, 1987. cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Veritas, Dublin, 1994, ch.2, art.5.1, no.2270.



## CURA CARES

Cura cares for any woman who is pregnant and in distress. CURA can arrange in total confidence: free sheltered accommodation, medical care, temporary foster-care, short-term nursery care, adoption, help for those who decide to keep their babies, marriage counselling and post-abortion counselling.

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Letterkenny:	074-23037
Limerick:	061-318207
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