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Kevin L. Flannery

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Traditional Teaching on Abortion

by

Kevin L. Flannery, S.J.

The author was ordained in 1987. He received his Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of Oxford in 1992. Presently, he is Adjunct Professor of Ancient Philosophy at Gregorian University, Rome.

In the protracted conflict, which is the effort to preserve intact in society appreciation of the truth that abortion is evil, a new offensive has opened up of late, directed against the pro-life position. Indeed, it is more than that: it is a particularly audacious sortie against what appears to be the most secure of fronts — the traditional teaching of the Church.

One of those taking part in this attack is Garry Wills, self-proclaimed faithful Catholic in these respects, who argues in *Under God: Religion and American Politics* [Simon and Schuster] that strict opposition to abortion is a relatively recent invention of the Church — the product of a celibate hierarchy's fear that it is losing control of its flock. The traditional teaching, he says, is actually a "hodgepodge of considerations" (313); and he claims (amazingly) that "there are elements in [the Church's] theological history" which suggest that a person's humanity commences when he or she begins to interact with others (314). These elements are to be found in none other than St. Augustine and (to some extent) St. Thomas Aquinas.

It is probably best not to allow these claims to remain unanswered in the public forum; so, I would like here to demonstrate that Wills' claims about Thomas and Augustine are absolutely unfounded — indeed, that Wills grossly misinterprets the texts he rather inadequately cites. I would like also to give the rough outlines of an answer to a more plausible argument that might be made using the same texts that Wills uses. Since it is not possible in the present context to do a more thorough job than this, I will mention an article where a similar line of argument is pursued, although much more adequately.

Wills says that "St. Augustine thought of the beginning of life as the entry into the *social* nexus with history called original sin" (*italics his*). By way of evidence, he remarks that Augustine "argued in [*De trinitate*] that persons exist only in interaction with other persons, even in the divine trinity" (314). But that is as precise as his citation gets — which is quite to be expected since nowhere in that work does Augustine say what Wills claims he says. Indeed, Wills' phrase "even

in the divine trinity" gets Augustine's position precisely backwards. The phrase suggests that, according to Augustine, human personhood is fairly obviously rational — and, *what's more*, so is divine personhood. Actually, Augustine goes out of his way in *De trinitate* to make it clear that divine personhood is different from human personhood precisely because it consists wholly in its relational aspect whereas the latter does not (see especially *De trinitate* VII, 2-9).

A human person exclusively possesses and is uniquely defined by his substance, this substance being the embodiment of the essential properties of human personhood. When we come across an object in the world which is rational, mortal and animal (to employ the ancient definition of human), we quite naturally assume that *it* (i.e., that substance) is all there is to its being itself. A divine person, on the other hand, shares his substance with two other divine persons — so differentiation must occur some other way. By a sort of default, Augustine turns to the notion of relationship. What makes the Son the Son is not His substance (which again is *His* having the properties which constitute the Divine but with respect to which — mysteriously — He differs not at all from the Father or the Spirit) but His relationships within the Trinity. The Son is the Son insofar as He is begotten by the Father; the Spirit is the Spirit insofar as He proceeds from the Father and the Son, etc. There is thus a radical disparity in Augustine's thought between the way divine persons are individuated and the way human persons are: only the former "exist *only* in interaction with other persons" (that is, with divine persons).

Wills also mentions in this regard Augustine's hesitations concerning the theological issue of the "origins of the soul," connecting these with Augustine's hesitations about when we can say that a soul exists: "... it was precisely because of St. Augustine's theology of the soul that he confessed repeatedly, in his period of episcopal teaching, that he did not know when or how the soul was joined to the body" (312). And then Wills goes on to list a number of questions that occurred to Augustine in this connection, including the following: "If the soul is one with Adam, does that mean it descends from his soul as well as his body?" and "Did God create a kind of bank . . . of soul stuff, from which he could draw in supplying later bodies?"

There are indeed many passages in Augustine's corpus where he puzzles over such questions; but these are questions of quite a different order from the question of the beginnings of personhood. Into none of these questions does the issue of when the fetus (or embryo) becomes a person even enter. If we are going to take Wills' approach at all, then we would have to say that, if anything, Augustine was inclined to regard personhood as commencing even *earlier* than the Church today proposes, for he was throughout his life attracted to the idea that the soul pre-exists the body (see Robert O'Connell, *The Origins of the Soul in St. Augustine's Later Writings*, Fordham University Press, pp. 154-67). Actually, however, even to go down this path is a mistake. Questions about the "origins of the soul" are questions about God, about sin, and ultimately about redemption; the question of the beginnings of personhood is a question about how we pick out human beings. Although, obviously, the latter has theological ramifications, in the final analysis it is a question not about God's relationship with mankind but

about the essential properties of humans. It is a philosophical rather than a theological question.

Augustine on Beginnings of Personhood

Th one place where Augustine does deal directly with the biological beginnings of personhood is in his comments on the Septuagint (mis)translation of *Exodus* 21.2-3, which reads: "If two men fight and they strike a woman who is pregnant and her non-formed fetus is ejected, a penalty shall be charged . . . If, however, the fetus is formed, he will give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth," etc. Augustine's comments on this passage make it clear that, although he finds it impossible to say whether an unformed fetus has a human soul, he holds that a formed fetus certainly does have one (*Quaestionum libri septem*, 2,80). To terminate the life of the formed fetus is to kill, he says, for the formed fetus has a soul. For Augustine, therefore, we can say at least this: that the human soul is infused long before the possibility of social interaction.

There are other passages in Augustine which also point toward this position —and, indeed, beyond it. In *The City of God*, for instance, Augustine considers the issue of the resurrection of aborted fetuses — all aborted fetuses, that is — and comes down (somewhat hesitantly) on the side of resurrection (XXII,13). And in the *Enchiridion*, he acknowledges the difficulties involved in attributing a soul to the non-quickened embryo; but he concludes nonetheless that it would be most imprudent to hold that the fetus is not alive the entire time it is in the womb (86).

Augustine also gives some indication of when, according to his tenuous lights, formation might occur. In a passage in which the 46 years it took to build the temple are likened to Christ's gradual formation within the womb, Augustine sets out a rough sketch of the stages of fetal development (*De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus liber unus*, 56). During the first stage, he says, which lasts six days, it has the appearance of milk; during the next stage (nine days), it becomes blood; over the next 12 days it is solidified; and after another 18 days it is formed "to the extent that there are present the perfect lineaments of all the members." He adds another day to these 45 for good measure — which establishes the allegorical link with the temple's formation. This scheme, at least at first glance, appears incompatible with the idea that personhood commences at conception — since according to it the earlier stages of development would seem to involve nonliving matter. It is difficult to say, however, just how seriously Augustine took it. Certainly, however, this much is clear once again: Augustine did not conceive of personhood as commencing with social interaction.

Wills, as I said, also calls Thomas Aquinas as favorable witness. He writes: "The evidence of Church belief derivable from baptism shows a similar lack of certitude about when there is a soul to baptize. Thomas was against baptizing the fetus while it was still in the womb, where 'it cannot be subject to the operation of the ministers of the Church, or it is not known to men' (or, presumably, capable of knowing response)" (313). The reference (not given by Wills) is certainly to *in Libros IV sententiarum* 4, 6, 1, 1. There Thomas's point is not that it is uncertain whether a soul is present but simply that, while the child (the Latin word is

puer) is in the womb, it is not yet subject to the usual ministrations of the Church — indeed, often it can't even be found. The curious phrase “or it is not known to man” [*nec est hominibus notus*] does seem to provide some support for Wills' position, until we turn back to 4, 1, 2, 6 of the same work where Thomas also speaks of the inaccessibility of the fetus to human scrutiny. There he uses a similar phrase, “insofar as it is susceptible to human recognition” [*quantum ad humanam cognitionem pertinet*]; but the point of speaking about being “susceptible to human recognition” is to insist that, although some would require an external sign in order for there to be a sacrament, since none such is possible in the case of a child (again, *puer*), which cannot be recognized as distinct from its mother (although it is distinct), the sacrament is to be considered administered by divine dispensation. So: not only does Thomas not hold that involvement in the social nexus is a criterion of personhood but he rejects it as a necessary condition for the reception of a sacrament. Wills can use neither Thomas nor Augustine as evidence for his thesis that a person's humanity commences when he or she begins to interact with others.

An Unused Better Case

But what about the fetus (or embryo) *before* formation? Here, as I suggested above, there might be the makings of a better case. Augustine was at least occasionally reticent to speak definitively about the onset of personhood. On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas was not at all reticent to espouse the Aristotelian doctrine that that which eventually is endowed with a human soul begins existence possessed of only a vegetative soul (see *Summa theologiae*, I, 118, 2). Both these pillars of traditional Christian theology seem, therefore, to provide support for Wills' thesis that the Church has in recent years changed its position. For the Church now speaks of “the inviolability of the innocent human being's right to life ‘from the moment of conception until death’ ” (*Donum vitae*, 4, containing a quotation from John Paul II; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2270).

There are at least two things that might be said in reply to this turn of argument. The first is that it is a mistake to regard statements about the beginnings of personhood and fetal development as statements about the acceptability of early abortion. As John T. Noonan has shown (*Contraception*, Harvard University Press), the Church has never wavered from the teaching that contraception is wrong. And destruction of an embryo before formation is at least an act of contraception.

Secondly, the combined facts that (1) so much of traditional Church teaching depends upon the notion of formation and that (2) we are now capable of discerning structure at the earliest stage of embryo development — these two facts serve effectively to push back toward conception the Church's *traditional* understanding of when destruction of an embryo constitutes killing a human being. For if theologians such as Ss. Augustine and Thomas thought an identifiable structure the decisive factor in deciding when a soul is present, had they known what we know now, they would certainly have revised their

teaching in the same direction that the Church has in fact taken. Why must we always — indeed, ever — assume that the findings of science must go contrary to the teachings of the Church? These are complicated issues, however — too complicated to deal with adequately here —, so I refer the reader to Stephen Heaney's very good article "Aquinas and the presence of the human rational soul in the early embryo" (*Thomist* 56).

Wills' thesis, therefore, even under its most plausible construction, is untenable. Presuming that the Church's position on the beginnings of personhood is ascertainable by considering the writings of individual (albeit highly respected) Christian thinkers, there may be a sense in which it is a "hodgepodge of considerations." To be more precise, however, it is scientific understanding over the centuries which is the hodgepodge, the Church maintaining consistently against this shifting background that any attack on human life is immoral. The shifting of background has, as far as the Church is likely to be concerned, ceased; it is quite right that this should have a corresponding effect on her authoritative teaching.
