

February 1985

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Recommended Citation

Berkes, Kenneth J. (1985) "A Child Is Born," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 52 : No. 1 , Article 20.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol52/iss1/20>

A Child Is Born

Kenneth J. Berkes, M.D.

Doctor Berkes, a new member of the Catholic Physicians Guild, sent his "witness" which appeared in Vol. 1, No. 2 of The Anawim Witness. The article is reprinted herewith with permission of The Anawim Witness, Box 147, 36 Elizabeth Street, Dansville, NY 14437. A corresponding letter from Doctor Berkes appears on page 34 of this issue of Linacre.

I recall vividly the first childbirth I ever saw. I was in my second year of medical school, and our obstetrician kindly let me observe the birth of our first child, Kyle. I was overwhelmed by the miracle of birth, new life and the fruitfulness of our love. What a joy to be present at this sacred moment, to be a part of Willa's labor and delivery, and to realize in a deeper way the responsibility I had as a husband and now as a father.

I was not actively practicing my faith as a Catholic at the time. My studies and subsequent surgical training left little time for God and religion. Besides, medical science seemed to have all the answers. Like so many other physicians, I saw artificial birth control as a solution to our own "fertility problem" and prescribed it for my patients. I certainly didn't have the self-control necessary to make natural family planning practical. The Church warned that the liberal use of artificial birth control would lead to abortion and abortion would lead to infanticide and euthanasia. My "enlightened" fellow physicians and I agreed that these pronouncements were hysterical poppycock. Sadly, they have all come true.

To my dismay, the noble profession of medicine, my fellow physicians, are intimately involved in the killing. Perhaps, because we know the truth, we bear the biggest burden of guilt. In spite of the Supreme Court decision of 1973 (*Roe v. Wade*), physicians know that at the moment of conception a unique, human life begins. It is life from life. It is human. It is a child.

As physicians, we are sworn to protect life. Yet, in abortion, we destroy life, human life, the life of an unborn child. Somehow, I repressed those facts when in 1970 I terminated the pregnancy of an unwed high school senior with a promising college career ahead of her. Another Catholic doctor, also at odds with the Church's teaching,

prevailed on my human compassion. Fearful of losing his respect, I acceded to his wishes and aborted the life within her. It was a distasteful business; I vowed I'd never do another. The full horror of what I had done didn't impact my consciousness, however, until many years later.

'The Product of Conception'

Most physicians, even those doing abortions, know that they are destroying a human life. To protect their sensitivities and those of their patients, however, the baby is referred to as the "product of conception" or at best a "fetus." We participate in the deception by allowing the procedure to be listed on the operating room schedule as a "D&C" rather than as an elective abortion. Those in favor keep telling us of the compassionate need for the procedure in cases of rape or incest or where the baby is severely defective or the mother's health is threatened by the pregnancy. Those cases constitute only one percent of the four thousand abortions done daily in America, and a human life is still taken.

Not long ago, a friend called her obstetrician to report that she was pregnant. The secretary responded, "I'm sorry to have to ask you this, but are you *having* your baby? Is your child to be born?" The very physicians who deliver babies are also the ones who do hospital abortions. While most abortions are done in abortion "clinics," many are done in the same hospitals we go to when our lives are threatened by serious illness. We put our faith in doctors who may either be performing abortions, referring women for abortions or at least not speaking out against the taking of innocent unborn lives.

In spite of their knowledge and training, physicians are intimidated by the fear of losing the respect of their colleagues. They worry about losing patients and referrals from other physicians if they become vocal on such controversial issues. Like some Catholic politicians, they think they can separate personal morality from public policy and hide behind the fear of imposing their beliefs on others. At the same time, doctors wonder why their public esteem as a professional has fallen so badly in the last few decades. As a practicing surgeon, I was caught up in all of these concerns. Having made the decision not to perform any more abortions, I continued for thirteen years to practice with another surgeon who did abortions whenever he was asked to do so. I thought to myself, "I'm not doing them; what he does is his business." Even though I was not directly involved, abortion was part of the practice we shared.

Then in 1980, I read an excerpt of John Powell's *The Silent Holocaust*. That convinced me of the horror of abortion. I knew that I had to speak to my partner about the abortions he was doing but I just

didn't have the courage. I ignored the pleading of my conscience.

But God had a plan, a plan for my life and a plan to use me for life. His plan was for me to speak out for unborn life, that a child might be born. He also planned that, in the process, a child of his might begin to grow into manhood. In my search for direction, He led me to the Anawim Community and it was there that my conscience was formed in His truth. As I became more aware of my own sinfulness and God's mercy, I became more compassionate toward those physicians still caught in the lie of abortion. I knew that I could no longer postpone confronting my partner with the truth. I realized that if he didn't give up doing abortions, I could no longer be a part of our surgical practice. That would mean major upheaval in my personal and professional life. At the time, I was only partly aware of the deep ramifications of my decision.

I approached my partner in humility. I asked his forgiveness for the ways that I had failed him in our partnership, and asked him to stop doing abortions. Ultimately, neither he nor the hospital board would give up the practice of aborting life. In December of 1983 I left the hospital in Penn Yan, my partnership of fourteen years and the private practice of surgery.

As a child conceived in love is carried with expectancy and delivered with the painful contractions of labor to be brought forth with joy, so too the last year of my life has been marked by waiting, pain and my gradual emergence into manhood. The impact of being sidelined from my active practice was greatest in the area of my self-esteem. My sense of worth was tied to production and doing for others. Almost daily, I have fought with feelings of shame and worthlessness. Through it all, God is revealing who I really am. Gradually, He has also let me see the underlying moral disorder which led to abortion on demand in this country.

On reading the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (Of Human Life), I was stunned to find God's beautiful plan for married love, in which sexual pleasure shared by husband and wife was unifying and at the same time, open to the creation of new life. In it I saw the high calling of the married vocation, one which only could be supported by prayerful commitment and communication. The document speaks of the inseparable nature of the two purposes of sexual love (unity and procreation) established by God to bring married couples to responsible parenthood. Pope Paul VI subsequently warned us not to reduce our love to "physical desire and genital activity."

It was Bishop Fulton J. Sheen who described sexual love as the icing on the cake of matrimony. Like children, we have been deceived into thinking we can have the icing without eating the cake. The world ponders a philosophy of sex without responsibility. The attitude of recreational sex denies the procreative and even the unitive aspects of sexual relationships. Even in marriage, sex has become our compensa-

tion for feelings of frustration, self-pity and loneliness. We want love; all too often, we settle for sex. It's easier than communicating, especially if its availability is guaranteed by artificial birth control.

Once we accept the idea that we are entitled to recreational sex protected by contraception, it follows that abortion is the necessary back-up for contraceptive failure. No longer is pregnancy considered the normal consequence of conjugal love, but it is thought of as an unwanted complication of sexual pleasure. Even physicians have come to consider pregnancy as an abnormal state. Operations are designed to help us from a state of disease to one of health. Abortion, on the other hand, is the surgical treatment of a normal condition. It is the surgical evacuation of the pregnant uterus, regardless of the innocent unborn destroyed in the process. Our society has a contraceptive mentality. We are anti-birth, anti-child and anti-life. Unlike Mary who said yes to God and was fruitful, we say yes only to ourselves and are sterile.

The reason we have had so little success in our fight against abortion is that we have not been dealing with the underlying cause. The truth about abortion that nobody wants to hear is the widespread deception that sex is only for pleasure. Even in many "good Christian marriages" there is confusion about the unitive and procreative purposes of conjugal love and their inseparable nature. If we deny the right to abortion, we threaten the freedom to enjoy sex without the responsibility of parenthood. Many who oppose abortion in principle resort to it in the hard situation of an unplanned pregnancy, particularly if they are not committed to God's plan for married love.

My own prayerful struggle this past year has brought me to a better understanding of my own tendency to self-pity and sexual compensation. God has also brought me to a heartfelt appreciation of the truth of *Humanae Vitae*. I confess that in my own fearful nature, I am easily overcome by my own weakness and intimidated by the fear of losing the respect of others. Knowing better the depth of my own poverty, I stand in Jesus Who is my strength. He has called me to stand in the truth of His Church about sexual morality and abortion. I must constantly repent of my own sinfulness so that I can proclaim His truth with His compassion. In hesitatingly responding to His call to speak on these difficult issues, I am beginning to discover my manhood. It lies in the humble admission that in myself I can do nothing, but "I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

His call to me as Anawim, desiring only His love and His grace, is to stand in His truth in compassionate love. In this, I rely on His mercy for I fail daily. Like Mary, I must abide in the response to His call, my "yes" which began this journey . . . waiting to bring forth new life in a way as yet to be revealed. While I wait for the child to be born, this child of God is receiving the ever unfolding gift of his own manhood.