

The Linacre Quarterly

Volume 60 | Number 2

Article 8

May 1993

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Recommended Citation

Riga, Peter J. (1993) "Abortion as Heresy," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 60 : No. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol60/iss2/8>

Abortion as Heresy

by

Peter J. Riga

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When Sir Thomas More's future son-in-law objected to Thomas' naming Martin Luther a heretic, the latter responded simply, "It's not a likeable thing, it's not a likeable word." In an ecumenical era, that word is doubly ugly. But truth is more important than "likeableness."

The abortion issue, I believe, has evolved from a serious moral issue for Catholics to one of dogmatic considerations, that is, to a question of revelation whose denial would constitute heresy. Heresy, as all know, is a conscious denial of some revealed, divine truth which is mystery and which must be adhered to with one's whole heart and mind because God has revealed this (partial) truth to us. And for no other reason. Such truth is meant for our salvation and is not simply a matter of speculation or the conclusions of theologians. This revelation is contained explicitly or impliedly in the sources of Revelation (Scripture, Tradition). Revelation is authentically contained in Sacred Scripture and in oral tradition; and it is authentically proposed for our belief by the authentic teachers in the Church who were appointed for this purpose by Christ Himself while He was on Earth (Bishops, as Successors of the Apostles and the Successors of Peter in the See of Rome).

This teaching on Revelation as well as its authentic interpretation can be given and held by a universal consensus of the faithful and the bishops in union with the Bishop of Rome, by an ecumenical Council presided over, guided and confirmed by the Bishop of Rome or by the Bishop of Rome alone as successor of Peter who teaches authentically and, at times, infallibly as representing the whole Church.

This small precis on Church authority is necessary to situate the abortion controversy *within* the Church. But since we must hold that God's truth as revealed is valid for all men and women, the practice of the ugly and widespread vice of abortion in our time will have universal ramifications even on those who do not believe in the divine origin of the human person and its denial through abortion. This latter question, however, will have to await another day for fuller development.

It will be the object of this paper to hold that the time has come to confront the spirit of the world, and for the authority in the Church to seriously consider a formal dogmatic declaration concerning the theological origin of the human person. That

is, that a person (or persons) comes into being each with an immortal soul at the moment of conception. This would be the Church's direct response to the widespread practice and acceptance of the evil of abortion. I believe (for the reasons to be developed in a moment) that this teaching is already held by the universal Ordinary Magisterium of the Church (the universal episcopate united with the Bishop of Rome) but because of the extraordinary danger to that teaching (even to Catholics who have been greatly influenced by the universal infection) by the widespread practice and acceptance of abortion (even by a sizeable number of Catholics), it is now time for the Church to speak with the clear voice of divine Revelation itself since she and she alone has been entrusted with the deposit of Revelation, whether written or oral. Such inquiry can only be initiated at the highest level of authority through the Church in Rome; but, I believe, such inquiry must begin soon because of the universal danger to the whole flock of the faithful. Already great numbers of Catholics in Latin America, Europe and in North America have been led astray in this matter, so that the teaching of the Church on unborn human life has become greatly confused.

After all, truths of faith have never been defined for purely speculative reasons or purposes. Each definition of a truth of faith — outside of the Original Creed — was usually done in function of some grave crisis which threatened some basic mystery of the Incarnation or of the Church's self-understanding of herself as continuation of the Incarnation in space and time.

I believe the crisis of abortion to be such a case which now threatens the correct understanding of the Incarnation and of the created origin of the human person as well as of the very authority of the Church itself. It is now time to face that danger forthrightly. Such a clarification will obviously create a "schism" in the Church — as has every definition of some truth of faith in the history of the Church before. Such a "split" (schism) is in the very nature of Christian faith and goes back to Jesus Himself: "Will you too go away? And they no longer walked with Him" (*Jn* 6:61). We should expect to find no difference with any definition about the creative origin of human life. Given the depth of this infection among many Catholics, we should expect an exodus of some.

The history of heresy in the first 2,000 years of the Church's history is illuminating for our purposes here. As we shall see, the abortion controversy *within* the Church touches directly on three dogmatic areas of authentic Church teaching and concern:

- The Incarnation which is the fundamental mystery of Christianity itself (what I shall call "Incarnation I");
- The existence and the authority of the Church itself as the mystical body of Christ in space and time (what I shall call "Incarnation II");
- And finally the doctrine, teaching and mystery of creation itself, particularly in the act of human creation whereby the human person is endowed with certain rights and dignity.

The history of heresy has to do with each of these dimensions mentioned above. What usually happened was the following. A prominent person or group of persons

begins making statements about some aspect of doctrine which disturbs many of the faithful and their pastors. There begins a series of attacks/counterattacks on the position of each group, each claiming to be orthodox while the other side is branded as heretical (Arius, the Gnostics, Nestorius, Apollonarius, Photius, Cerularius, the Cathors, Wycliff, Luther, Jansenius, Calvin, etc.). There is confusion in the Church and a general council of the Church is called (Nicea I, II, Constantinople I, II, Ephesus, Calcedon, Orange, Latern I-IV, Florence, Trent, Vatican I, II, etc.) and correct doctrine defined. The exception to all this was Vatican II which was mostly a pastoral council. Inevitably, a dissatisfied group would leave the Church and establish its own communion. The very first heresy was that of Gnosticism or Docetism which probably goes back as far as the New Testament itself (Gospel of John, Joannine Epistles) and had continued in various forms through the ages.

Gnosticism and/or Docetism was and is an error both about creation and about the Incarnation. Since the material world is essentially evil and the product of the forces of darkness, liberation by the sons of light must take place by knowledge of the mysteries. And since Christ had become man in and through the Incarnation it had to be denied by claiming that Christ "appeared" (*doceo*) as man but the reality was that the Incarnation was not so. What we saw was an "appearance" not a reality.

This view was forthrightly rejected by the early Church: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we saw His Glory." (*Jn*, 1:14). No matter what the scandal of the suffering and death of Christ, the Church faithfully held on to the basic truth that Christ was true man and true God, two natures in one divine person (*Calcedon*, 451). Matter is now part of God and so is elevated, sanctified, resurrected and glorified in the glorified and resurrected Lord. All human nature, indeed all matter is now elevated and sanctified in Christ. All takes place through, by and for Christ through creation and the resurrection. The Incarnation was real from the beginning of Christ's conception. The totality of Christ was present from the first instant of His conception. All the early creeds without exception hold to this: "He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary and became man." From the moment of Christ's conception, the Incarnation came to be in the womb of the Sacred Virgin. Christ as God-man came into existence by the power of the spirit at the very moment of conception and at no other historical point and time, just as Mary was *conceived* without sin from the first moment of her conception. She was then and then only, person.

Indirectly and, I believe clearly, this basic teaching (while remaining mystery) has a direct analogy to the creation of the human person who comes to be at the very moment of conception, just as did the Blessed Virgin Mary. Of course, being mystery, we do not and cannot know how this comes to be except through faith. In other words, the authentic and revealed teaching on the Incarnation and the defined doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, have a direct implication for every other person born of woman: from the moment of conception, a human person comes into being; to directly and intentionally attack it is, in the words of Vatican II, "an abominable crime" (par. 52, *Gaudium et Spes*). It is a grave crime not because we thereby attack a "potential" human being or an "incipient" human being, but a human being *simpliciter*. And just as the Incarnation came to be

at the moment of conception and is thereby a mystery; so too, by analogy and contained within that teaching on Christ is yet another divine teaching: every person comes into being at his/her conception and at no other time. To deny this is to deny a divinely implied teaching and so, to hold heresy. Christ was not a potential person at the moment of His conception but full person; just as Mary was not potential person at the moment of her conception (how could she at that moment be without sin were she not person?) Thus, Christ was "conceived by the Holy Spirit." At that precise moment Christ, the God-Man, came into being and at no other point. It was at that point that human nature was joined to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity and became man. The human nature was assumed into the divine person without mixture or confusion. Just as at our conception our body and soul are assumed into the one person whom God created *eo ipso*. There is no other moment when we become person: only at conception. Everything will develop from that unique and instantaneous creation. We cannot develop what we are not already so that from the first moment of conception we are who we are. Only the potential of who we already are will develop, just as Christ grew in "stature and wisdom before God and men" (Lk. 4:15), but both Christ and we, existed as persons from the first moment of conception (as a rational aside, there can be no other point scientifically or rationally).

Of course, since this doctrine is a matter of faith, we cannot "prove" it to be so. But as we mentioned above, those outside the Church who deny this teaching, must of necessity suffer the consequences of such a denial of reality in their own lives. Outside of the mother's life, there is no compromise possible on abortion doctrinally. What they can do in a pluralist society is a question for another day. We here are discussing the properly doctrinal dimension of person-conception and the evil of abortion.

What we are saying here is simply this: It is erroneous doctrine for a Catholic to claim that no human person exists from the moment of conception or that such a statement is doubtful; and that therefore there is some leeway for Catholics to act on abortion during the early stages of pregnancy because there is some doubt about the existence of a human person at conception. In the mind of the Church, there is no doubt.

This is the position of "Catholics For a Free Choice," namely, that there is an alternate position which Catholics may hold on abortion than the one taught by the Church authority, namely that from the beginning of conception, a human person is present. This position of CFC is not only a rejection of Church authority; more importantly, it is clearly erroneous doctrine and a denial of a divine Revelation through the Incarnation and the Immaculate Conception which impliedly teach us of the origin of the human person.

But the rejection of the Church's authority should not be lightly considered as if what she proposed in her teaching on abortion can be changed as was the teaching on war and peace or capital punishment or usury or celibacy, none of which were ever seen as part of the divine deposit of Revelation but of moral reasoning from theological principles.

This teaching of the Church on abortion is not new; it goes back to origins, namely to the *Didache* in the year 90 A.D. This condemnation of all abortion has

been consistently held by the faithful, the pastors, bishops and popes with no exceptions whatever, up until the last part of the 20th Century. While there was some question about the evolution of the human soul (the three stages of the development of the soul of St. Thomas) the Church steadfastly held that human life was sacred from conception because she realized that her doctrine on the Incarnation (and later, on the Immaculate Conception) demanded this. It is of no consequence to say that in her history, the Church was not always able to clearly articulate this teaching. For almost the same period of time, for example, the divine teaching authority of the Successor of Peter was articulated differently. There were disputes as to its extent in relation to other divine teaching but it was never denied. Even the Orthodox Church admitted as much up to and including the Council of Florence in 1438. Only when this teaching was directly denied was it formulated and defined at Vatican I (1871). (But it was held by the whole Church before in the "Ordinary Magisterium" and so its solemn definition did not change its divine origin). Even then there was no need for definition since its truth was accepted by the overwhelming number of Catholics as *divine revelation*. But its solemnity was needed at a point of history where it was questioned, causing great danger to the faith of the Catholic flock.

So too with abortion. It was always held by the community and its teaching authority, that abortion was a grave crime *because of the Incarnation* which taught her about the origin of the human person. This was denied by no one for almost 2,000 years as the ordinary and universal teaching authority of the whole Church as a matter of faith and morals. But why was the pagan practice of abortion — as widespread in the early history of the Church as it is today — rejected line and sinker by the Church from the beginning of her history? Because she impliedly knew through her doctrine on the Incarnation, that the human person and his/her immortal soul comes into being at conception. This teaching could be defined tomorrow with no change in a Catholic's obligation to give that teaching his/her firm adherence of heart and mind as the whole Church had done for 2,000 years. While formulated differently through the ages, the reality of that teaching was never denied and has not changed. It is now perhaps time to dogmatically formulate the Church's teaching on abortion so that the widespread practice of abortion in world culture will create no doubt in the hearts and minds of the faithful as to where the divine truth lies.

Secondly, the doctrine of Creation also reveals that abortion is rejected by divine revelation. We know that as the Creed puts it, "We believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth and of all things, visible and invisible. And in Jesus Christ His only Begotten Son . . . through whom all things were made." This teaching in Scripture is that man was created specially by God to dominate the earth and to serve God on earth as God's lieutenant. Man was created special from and above all the rest of creation. He was created in the "image and likeness of God" (*Gen 1:27*). The act of creation, directly, gives birth to the rights of man as they have been formulated in various Church documents (e.g., *Pacem in Terris, Gaudium et Spes*). But these rights of the person are implied in the doctrine of creation in Revelation and can be deduced by and through theological reasoning. They are authentic teachings of the Church but can reach the level of direct divine

Revelation because they are impliedly contained therein. If defined, they are *de fide Catholica definita* ("Catholic faith") because they are part of the deposit of divine revelation. Whoever man is, in other words, is created specifically and intentionally by God at the one moment of conception.

Therefore in the question of abortion whereby some feminists and others hold that it is part and parcel of woman's self-determination, is a direct denial of the person made in the image and likeness of God. The right to kill another innocent human being impliedly in the nature of each woman would mean that God has created woman this way. This is a direct denial of the person created in the image and likeness of God who is creative, life giving and loving. We may certainly hold that we may not always be capable of living up to this creative image; but it is quite another thing to say that we have a *right by the creation of our nature itself* to destroy this image in another innocent human person just because he or she is unborn. This is theologically absurd and as an act of creation, it is more than absurd; it is a denial of the doctrine of creation as taught in the Holy Scripture. It is therefore impossible to believe in the God of our Catholic creed and in abortion as a fundamental right of each woman as expression of her self-determination. This is a direct contradiction of the doctrine of creation.

What it comes down to in the important area of abortion which is so hotly and universally contested in our day — for Catholics at least — is the authority of the Church as the authentic teaching of Jesus Christ in space and time. Scandalous as was the Incarnation with its passion, humiliation and death in Christ Jesus; even more scandalous is it that the sinful Church, the Catholic Church, is the Incarnation or fullness of Christ in space and time. This is even greater scandal that is this Church which speaks for Christ in history. This teaching of the Church on abortion, as we have seen, is from origins, was universally taught and authentically held by all the proper teaching organs of authority in the Church. This authority does not simply refer to itself for its authenticity (this would be contradictory) but to the Divine Deposit of Revelation itself, namely, the Act and Mystery of Creation and of the Incarnation. *Abortion as a right inherent in a woman as her self-understanding and self-determination, is a denial of both of these divine doctrines* and as such, constitutes erroneous doctrine. It is therefore heresy in the basic meaning of that word.

The pastors in the Church have a serious obligation therefore to so inform the faithful of the seriousness of this issue and not have them believe that they can disagree with the Church on this issue or that someday the Church will change its view. She cannot because her teaching on abortion rests on divine revelation. They certainly can disagree with the Catholic Church on abortion, but not as Catholics.

This is a hard doctrine, says Scripture, and who can abide it? (*Jn. 6:61*). "And they no longer walked with Him" (*Jn 6:66*). In an age like ours where Catholics are hounded and branded as right wing fundamentalists, as ignoramuses and as paternalistic and anti-woman for holding to a completely pro-life position on abortion; where the whole culture has become profoundly abortionist with little or no defense of the humanity of the unborn; where Catholics have to pay dearly for holding fast to this teaching (they can only with difficulty, be members of the Democratic Party or the ABA or NOW or even be elected to public office); then

each Catholic must make up his/her mind where she will stand on this crucial doctrinal and moral question of our time: with the world or with Christ in his Church? It would be easy and comfortable to simply be "pro-choice." No real sacrifice need be made since we thereby skirt the whole issue of the humanity of the unborn.

But this is not an option a Catholic may hold as a matter of doctrine and moral teaching: Her position is counter-cultural which is painful, costly, uncomfortable and contradictory of American culture. On the matter of abortion, will Catholic men and women choose to walk with Christ or with the cultural world we live in? Each generation of Catholics is called upon by the Gospel to be counter-cultural, to face down the hatred and death of the world. Past Catholic history shows that many Catholics did not live up to their faith when it was greatly and publicly tested (e.g., during the early bloody persecutions) because it was much more easy — and less dangerous — to go along with the culture in which they lived: a pinch of incense, a pro-choice position. The few who were faithful had to suffer much for their beliefs. This is particularly true of Catholic women today who are called upon, more than men, to be faithful to Christ and to the Holy Church by rejecting the pernicious practice of abortion, root and branch. Has the Gospel ever been easy? Has it ever been lived without great cost and suffering and in contradiction to the world? I know of no such era.
