

Canonical Misconception: Pope Pius IX and The Church's Teaching on Abortion

ISSUE: Has the Catholic Church always taught that abortion is a grave sin? If so, how do you respond to the charge that the Church only declared abortion to be murder in 1869 under Pope Pius IX?

RESPONSE: The Catholic Church has always taught that abortion is a grave sin and has always prohibited Catholics from cooperating in or procuring an abortion. This has been the clear and constant doctrine of the Catholic Church, as even the ancient *Didache*, a first-century document that conveys the teaching of the early Church, affirms: “You shall not procure abortion, nor destroy a new-born child”¹ (cf. Acts. 2:42, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2270-75). What became clearer over time, because of advances in biology, was the issue of ensoulment, i.e., when the soul is infused into the unborn.² In addition, the action of Pope Pius IX in 1869 was one of changeable **discipline**, not a change in doctrine. In this case, the Pope merely removed the distinction between the “unensouled” and “ensouled” fetus, making the canonical punishment the same for abortion at every stage because the soul is infused at conception (*Catechism*, no. 366).³ While the Church does not change her doctrine, she can modify the penalties for violating that doctrine as she deems appropriate.

Thus, while a complete description of all the ways in which abortion offends God has not always been completely understood, the fact that it *is* a grave offense against God has always been taught.

DISCUSSION: It is important to remember that the Church's understanding of an issue grows and deepens over time. This concept is known as development of doctrine, a process by which a basic doctrine is never contradicted but rather made clearer over time with new insights. For example, while followers of Christ have always understood that the bread and wine at Mass truly become the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, more than a millennium had passed before the Church provided an explanation of how this great miracle takes place, i.e., transubstantiation (*Catechism*, nos. 1373-77). In addition, Mary was known to be the Mother of God for four centuries before the Church provided a definitive explanation of how a creature could give birth to her Creator (*Catechism*, nos. 466, 495).

In other words, God's revelation or truth doesn't change, but our understanding and appreciation of it does (cf. *Catechism*, no. 66). Abortion was always understood to be a grave sin, but in the last two centuries the Church has gained a deeper understanding of how it destroys one's relationship with God.

Whenever the Church spoke about the “unanimated” or unensouled fetus, it did so speculatively, not definitively, based on the biological knowledge available at the time. The Church is infallible on faith and morals, not biology, and Church officials were simply attempting to shed light on the development of the unborn child, given contemporary biological knowledge.

Changes in the canonical penalty for a specific sin reflect how the Church works to wean us away from sin and towards heaven. They do not reflect a change in the Church's condemnation of the sin. No pope, council, saint or early Church Father has ever written or said anything that could be interpreted as support for abortion; rather, they have universally condemned it (*Catechism*, no. 2271).

For most of human history, essentially nothing was known about human life in the womb, for the simple reason that the child is very, very small at the beginning of life, and the unfertilized egg or sperm cell are themselves microscopic. Ancient theory held that the human body was formed out of a shapeless mass of fluid. According to this theory, ensoulment took place only after the fluid was sufficiently formed into some kind of body.

For the ancients, movement was a characteristic that allowed an observer to separate the living from the dead. For instance, a sleeping man could be distinguished from a dead man by his movement. Detectable movement in the womb, an event known as “quickenings” or “animation,” confirmed that God had already infused the soul into the body. As early as the fourth century, St. Gregory of Nyssa taught that the same life principle “quickens” the organ-

ism from the first moment of its individual existence until its death. It was understood that life does not result from an organism, but that a being's life principle—in the case of human beings a spiritual soul—is present from the beginning of one's existence and that this life principle builds up the body. (This is why we speak of human beings as body-soul composites.⁴)

If a body moved on its own—a process known as locomotion—an observer would rightly conclude that the soul, the principle of life and movement, was also present. Yet if no movement were detectable, an observer could not safely conclude that the soul was not present within the observed body. That is to say, it would be hasty for someone observing a stationary body to conclude that the body is dead, since the body could merely be sleeping. Therefore, lack of movement in and of itself cannot conclusively substantiate the presence or the absence of the soul. While neither St. Jerome nor St. Thomas were sure when ensoulment took place, **both recognized that this very uncertainty meant abortion was always a grievous sin, since it risked destroying a creation of God who might have a soul.**

St. Basil the Great, writing in the fourth century, puts the ensoulment issue in proper perspective: “The hairsplitting difference between formed and unformed [ensouled and unensouled fetus] makes no difference to us. Whoever deliberately commits abortion is subject to the penalty for homicide.”⁵

St. Jerome (420 A.D.) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1274 A.D.) were not unique in their condemnation of abortion. Beyond the Didache, the Church testimony against abortion includes the Epistle of Barnabas (130), Clement of Alexandria (215), Tertullian (d. 225), St. Cyprian (d. 258), the Council of Elvira (305), St. Augustine (d. 430), the Trullian Council (692), the first Council of Mainz (847), Pope Stephen V (d. 891), Pope Sixtus V (d. 1590), and Pope Innocent XI (d. 1689).⁶ All condemned abortion with great severity.

1869 is not the first time the Church modified canonical penalties regarding abortion. In 1588, for example, Pope Sixtus V even tried discouraging abortion by reserving confession and absolution to the Holy See alone, a restriction used for only the most heinous sins. But this arrangement proved to be too impractical, and he soon resumed allowing local bishops the permission to absolve this sin.

While the Church has consistently condemned all abortion, the Church for a period made a distinction between what it believed to be the unanimated and animated fetus. This does not mean that abortion of the presumed unanimated fetus was acceptable; it just recognized that a woman who killed the child she felt moving in her womb was acting in an even more wicked manner than someone who had not yet been taught about the sacred gift she carried by the movement of life inside her. With the invention of the microscope, it was realized that the fluids contained formed elements which investigators named “cells.”

The human ovum was finally identified in 1827,⁷ and the interaction between sperm and egg that created the fertilized egg wasn't fully explained by science until 1875.⁸ However, given the information available, the Church by then had already recognized the needless canonical distinction between an unanimated and animated fetus. Knowledge about the earliest stage of man's existence was already entering the mainstream of society.

Finally, one may wonder why the Church had to rely on biological developments to learn about man's ensoulment, when she always taught that Jesus Christ the God-man was both fully God and fully man from the moment of His Incarnation in the womb of the Blessed Mother. The simple answer was that Christ revealed the truth about His Incarnation and miraculous conception to the Church, yet he left us to utilize our God-given faculty of intelligence to understand human conception. Revelation is proper to God; scientific advancement is proper to man. Through our assimilation of the two, we raise our intellect to the noble heights for which it was given.

¹ William A. Jurgens, ed., *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 1. Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 1970; p. 2 (article no. 1a). See also Father Peter Stravinskias, Ph.D., S.T.L., *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1991, pp. 307-08.

² Arguing against ensoulment at “40 days,” which some, including Aristotle, had argued, Dr. Paul Zacchia, Physician-General of the Vatican, posited in 1621 that ensoulment takes place at conception and that the unborn child's physical development is thereafter a continuum. More than two centuries later, scientific evidence affirmed his hypothesis with the discovery of the

fertilized ovum and later an explanation of the fertilization process. See Brian Clowes, *The Facts of Life*, Front Royal, Virg.: Human Life International, 1997, p. 207 and pp. 202-211 in general.

³ Cf. Pope John Paul, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), 1995, nos. 58-62.

⁴ Catechism, nos. 362-68.

⁵ As cited in Clowes, *The Facts of Life*, p. 207.

⁶ Clowes, *The Facts of Life*, pp. 205-08.

⁷ Alfred M. Elliott, *Biology* (2nd Edition). Meredith Publishing Co.: New York, 1965, p. 664.

⁸ *Encyclopedia Americana* (International Edition), vol. 10. Danbury, Conn.: Grolier, Inc. pp. 300-02.

AVAILABLE FROM CUF BOOKS AND TAPES BY MAIL:

Catechism of the Catholic Church; \$29.95 • CUF Member . . . \$22.00 (Hardcover).

Catechism of the Catholic Church; \$19.95 • CUF Member . . . \$12.00 (Paperback).

Précis of Official Catholic Teaching on The Church; CUF Member . . . \$5.50.

Life-Giving Love, Scott and Kimberly Hahn (tape set); \$19.95 CUF Member . . . \$17.96.

Why Humanae Vitae Was Right, Janet Smith, ed.; CUF Member . . . \$22.00.

Last edited: 11/97

**Catholics United for the Faith
827 North Fourth St.
Steubenville, OH 43952
(800) 693-2484
*Books and Tapes only: (888) 316-2640**

© 1997 Catholics United for the Faith, Inc.