

REPRODUCTIVE CHOICES:
*A Roman Catholic
Perspective*

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The Maine Interfaith Council
for Reproductive Choices

OCCASIONAL PAPERS NO. 3



church-going Catholic woman who enters a family planning clinic may well arrive with confusion or guilt. The contemporary institutional Church's approach to sexual ethics tends to rely on absolute prohibitions. As a woman is likely to experience her concrete situation from the point of view of multiple obligations and multiple relationships, such simplified rules may not seem helpful or relevant. But there are spiritual resources in the Catholic tradition that can provide ethical guidance to such a woman, and some of these are mentioned below.

1. Your conscience rules. The Roman Catholic Church offers moral advice to individuals and governments on many issues. But Church teaching makes it absolutely clear that the individual has the ultimate responsibility to make moral decisions in his or her own life. That is why God gave us intellect and a conscience. The Vatican II document "The Church in the Modern World" declares that "[human] dignity demands that we act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor mere external pressure" (17). Notice the wording. God gave us dignity, and that dignity demands that we act according to our own free choice, not from external pressure.

Needless to say, this is not a license to do wrong. Rather, it is a challenge to live a reflective and prayerful life so that in a moment of crisis, we can achieve, in the words of the Vatican II document, "a spontaneous choice of what is good." In fact, this is a much higher and more difficult ethical standard than simply blindly following a set of rules. To train one's intellect and will to spontaneously choose the good takes a lifetime of prayer and reflection. But that is what the Catholic Church teaches that we are called to do by God. Even in matters of birth, adoption, contraception, and abortion, our moral duty is to make a knowing and free choice.

2. Life has value. In the last century millions of human beings died terrible deaths in wars, concentration camps, prisons, and famines. Most of these deaths could have been avoided by enlightened human action. Thus the contemporary Roman Catholic Church has very good reason to emphasize the value of life in all of its proclamations.

If you are pregnant, you have another life within you, separate from yourself. Is that life human? Can it be considered a person? For centuries these questions have been debated. Saint Thomas Aquinas, for example, thought that the fetus gained its soul - and thus its personhood

- at around three months (Commentary on the Sentences). Today the institutional Catholic Church says that personhood begins at conception. Other theologians and philosophers disagree. What all would agree is that, at a minimum, what is within you is an independent life, with at least the *potential* of becoming a human life. All life deserves respect, even plants and animals, and thus so does the life within you.

3. The value of physical life must be weighed against other values. According to the Catholic tradition, mere physical existence is not the ultimate value in human life. Catholics honor as saints the early Christian martyrs who chose truth over their own physical life. The Church honors as saints the kings and warriors who chose their country's welfare over the lives of soldiers. The Church honors as saints the missionaries who chose to care for lepers rather than to guard their own health. Physical life is a great gift of God, but it is by no means an absolute good.

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In your own life, there are also important values beyond mere physical life. You have moral obligations to your family, to your friends, to the people you work with, to yourself, and to God. Only you know and understand what all of these obligations entail. No outside advisor, not even a priest or a counselor or family member, can tell you how to weigh all these in the balance. That's what your conscience must do.

4. Study, reflect, pray. Following your conscience is not a mystical or obscure process. It has many practical aspects. Vatican II says that you must make a "knowing" choice. That means you need to study and learn things. You need to learn the medical facts. You need to learn the practical implications of the alternative choices you face. You need to talk to people who have been in the same place you are now, to counselors and to spiritual advisors. You need to reflect on what the best thinkers in your own religious tradition have said. Then you reflect. Then you pray. Then you make a free decision, you follow your conscience, and you hope that what results is a "spontaneous choice of what is good."

If you are interested in learning more about the progressive Catholic viewpoint on ethics, the reform organization Call to Action is a good starting point (on the web at www.cta-usa.org).

Also, contact Catholics for A Free Choice (1436 U Street, NE, Suite 301, Washington DC 20009). www.cath4choice.org

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