

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Clarification on procured abortion

Recently a number of letters have been sent to the Holy See, some of them from prominent figures in political and ecclesial life, explaining the confusion that has been created in various countries, especially in Latin America, following the manipulation and exploitation of an article by His Excellency Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, on the sad affair of the “Brazilian girl.” In this article, which appeared in “L’Osservatore Romano” on March 15, 2009, the doctrine of the Church was presented, while still keeping in mind the dramatic situation of the aforementioned girl, who - as could be demonstrated afterward - had been accompanied with all pastoral delicacy, in particular by the Archbishop of Olinda and Recife at the time, His Excellency Archbishop José Cardoso Sobrinho. In this regard, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reiterates that the Church’s teaching on procured abortion has not changed, nor can it change. This teaching has been presented in numbers 2270-2273 in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in these terms:

«Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person - among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer. 1:5). “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth” (Psalm 139:15).

«Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law: “You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish” (Didaché, 2:2). “God, the Lord of life, has entrusted to men the noble mission of safeguarding life, and men must carry it out in a manner worthy of themselves. Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes” (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 51).

«Formal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offense. The Church attaches the canonical penalty of excommunication to this crime against human life. “A person who procures a completed abortion incurs excommunication latae sententiae,” (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 1398), “by the very commission of the offense” (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 1314) and subject to the conditions provided by Canon Law (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1323-1324). The Church does not thereby intend to restrict the scope of mercy. Rather, she makes clear the gravity of the crime committed, the irreparable harm done to the innocent who is put to death, as well as to the parents and the whole of society.

«The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation: “The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized and respected by civil society and the political authority. These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin. Among such fundamental rights one should mention in this regard every human being’s right to life and physical integrity from the moment of conception until death... The moment a positive law deprives a category of human beings of the protection which civil legislation ought to accord them, the state is denying the equality of all before the law. When the state does not place its power at the service of the rights of each citizen, and in particular of the more vulnerable, the very foundations of a state based on law are undermined... As a consequence of the respect and protection which must be ensured for the unborn child from the moment of conception, the law must provide appropriate penal sanctions for every deliberate violation of the child’s rights.” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction [Donum Vitae](#), III)».

In the encyclical [Evangelium Vitae](#), Pope John Paul II reaffirmed this teaching with his authority as Supreme Pastor of the Church: «By the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops—who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine—I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church’s Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church» (no. 62).

As for abortion procured in certain difficult and complex situations, the clear and precise teaching of Pope John Paul II applies: «It is true that the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being» (Encyclical [Evangelium Vitae](#), no. 58).

As for the problem of specific medical treatments intended to preserve the health of the mother, it is necessary to make a strong distinction between two different situations: on the one hand, a procedure that directly causes the death of the fetus, sometimes inappropriately called “therapeutic” abortion, which can never be licit in that it is the direct killing of an innocent human being; on the other hand, a procedure not abortive in

itself that can have, as a collateral consequence, the death of the child: «If, for example, saving the life of the future mother, independently of her condition of pregnancy, urgently required a surgical procedure or another therapeutic application, which would have as an accessory consequence, in no way desired or intended, but inevitable, the death of the fetus, such an action could not be called a direct attack on the innocent life. In these conditions, the operation can be considered licit, as can other similar medical procedures, always provided that a good of high value, like life, is at stake, and that it is not possible to postpone it until after the birth of the child, or to use any other effective remedy» (Pius XII, *Speech to the Fronte della Famiglia and the Associazione Famiglie numerose*, November 27, 1951).

As for the responsibility of medical workers, the words of Pope John Paul II must be recalled: «Their profession calls for them to be guardians and servants of human life. In today's cultural and social context, in which science and the practice of medicine risk losing sight of their inherent ethical dimension, health-care professionals can be strongly tempted at times to become manipulators of life, or even agents of death. In the face of this temptation their responsibility today is greatly increased. Its deepest inspiration and strongest support lie in the intrinsic and undeniable ethical dimension of the health-care profession, something already recognized by the ancient and still relevant Hippocratic Oath, which requires every doctor to commit himself to absolute respect for human life and its sacredness» (Encyclical [*Evangelium Vitae*](#), no. 89).

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