

ABORTION AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING – Pamphlet Version

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When the 2004 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* first fell into my hands some months before its promulgation, one pleasant surprise was the text's specific treatment and forthright condemnation of abortion in the context of human rights. The disconcerting fact is that, more commonly, the topic of abortion is seen as falling outside the discipline of Catholic Social Doctrine as it is taught in most seminaries and universities.

In part, this silence stems from the relatively recent advent of abortion as a large-scale ethical problem. The number of abortions has risen alarmingly in the past four decades. Therefore the first mention of abortion in a social encyclical appears only in 1971, in Pope Paul VI's *Octogesima Adveniens*. Here Paul mentions abortion in the context of Malthusian solutions to the unemployment problem (no. 18).

It was Pope John Paul II who effectively turned the tide, forcefully introducing abortion into the realm of Catholic social teaching. In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* he addressed the issue at great length, placing it in the context of social justice.

WHY ABORTION DESERVES SPECIAL ATTENTION IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Pope John Paul saw that abortion is an emblematic and singular socio-ethical problem, deserving central attention in Catholic social thought. To illustrate the uniqueness of abortion as a matter of social justice, here are six characteristics distinguishing it from related social phenomena:

1. Abortion deals specifically with the destruction of *innocent* life. This differentiates discussion of abortion from other related topics. This is why then- Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in June 2004 wrote: "There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war

and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia." Though all life is precious, moral theology has always differentiated the destruction of "innocent life" as particularly heinous and always and everywhere worthy of condemnation.

2. Another factor distinguishing abortion as a social phenomenon is the sheer *magnitude of the problem*: an estimated 46 million abortions performed worldwide each year, a figure that alone makes abortion a social problem of staggering proportions. The volume of abortions underscores the social nature of the problem, and makes abortion one of the most serious social justice issues of all time.

3. A third factor separating abortion from other justice issues is its legal status. Unlike other instances of massive killing of human life, like terrorism or serial killing, which stand clearly outside the law in advanced nations, abortion enjoys *legal sanction*. Pope John Paul wrote of the novelty of such "*scientifically and systematically programmed threats*" (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 17).

4. A fourth distinguishing aspect of abortion is its arbitrary division of human beings into those worthy of life and those unworthy. Abortion deals not with the random killing of unrelated individuals, but with the *circumscription of an entire class* of human beings (the unborn) as non-persons, excluded from the basic rights and protections accorded to all other human beings.

If human dignity depends on anything other than simple membership in the human race—be it intelligence, athletic ability, social status, race, age, or health—we immediately find ourselves having to distinguish between persons who count and those who don't.

5. Abortion even distinguishes itself from related questions of medical ethics, such as euthanasia

and assisted suicide, by the absence of any possibility of *informed consent*. The status of the unborn as voiceless and most vulnerable adds a further dimension to discussions of the morality and gravity of abortion. Here the bioethical category of “autonomy” cannot be applied, since unborn children have no way of speaking for themselves.

6. Finally, abortion differs from other major social ills such as unemployment and divorce because of its relative *invisibility*. Abortion takes place behind closed doors, and is hushed in public. As in the case of slavery, ending the social injustice of abortion relies mainly on the courage and willingness of persons and institutions not directly involved in abortion to speak out.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT’S SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION TO THE ABORTION QUESTION

Catholic social thought offers two distinctive elements to the abortion debate. First, it lays a bridge between moral theology and public discourse. Catholic Social Teaching often employs a natural-law vocabulary directed to all persons of good will, and frames its arguments using accessible concepts and constructions that can be brought to bear on moral discourse in a non-confessional environment.

Second, perhaps more than any institution in the world, the Church in its social teaching has developed a series of *principles* to address the complex moral questions in the social order. As new situations have arisen from the rapidly changing socio-political landscape, the Church has shown admirable elasticity in accommodating new states of affairs while ever defending the essential dignity of the person and the family. Just as a mother or father dedicates a disproportionate amount of time and energy to a child who is sick, without for that reason loving their other children any less, Christians are called to focus their efforts preferentially toward the most needy and defenseless among us. Applying this principle to contemporary society, the social injustice that most cries out to Christian conscience, for the reasons we saw earlier, is the deliberate and massive attack on the most vulnerable members of society, the unborn.

In its venerable tradition of standing up for society’s most defenseless members, the Catholic Church is uniquely qualified to speak out authoritatively on the abortion issue. This, as John Paul the Great so clearly taught, is the number one priority for Catholic social thought today—which must inevitably be expressed not only as social *thought*, but as social *action*.

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The full-length version of this article is posted at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp.williams.pdf>.

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