Before I Formed You in the Womb I Knew You

Questions Answered

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Why this Pastoral Letter, and why now?

Abortion and the issues surrounding it have been with us for very many years, and will continue to be with us. I have long felt the need to make a clear statement about the moral gravity of abortion and the basic principles that should guide Catholics, both private citizens and those who have a role in public life. I have been working on this Pastoral Letter for a long time, but did not want to publish it during the election year, precisely to avoid further confusion among those who would misperceive this as “politicizing” the issue. Regardless of which political party is in power at a given moment, we all need to review some basic truths and moral principles.

In the wake of the recent election advocates of abortion have advanced their cause.

Is this Letter directed to any individuals in particular?

I have taken great care to limit my Letter to stating general truths and moral principles. My hope is that this Letter will be helpful to all people in public life, especially Catholics, in understanding how best to advance justice for all.

Abortion is a complex and controverted issue, both here and around the world. What help can this short Pastoral Letter provide?

The issue of abortion in and of itself is simple: it is the ending of an innocent human life. Certainly, in any particular case the circumstances surrounding it are often indeed many and complex. The Catholic Church has been dealing with the human condition for 2,000 years, and so has great wisdom in helping people discern God’s will for them in concrete situations. But the fundamental truth that abortion involves the taking of an innocent human life must never be lost sight of. Any options being considered must never for a moment lose sight of that reality.

But isn’t the question of whether this is a human life itself a matter of debate?

It is not a matter of debate; it is the subject of much obfuscation. Pro-abortion proponents speak of “the product of conception,” or “a potential human being.” I don’t know precisely
what they mean, so I do not know if they have entered the world of ethics, metaphysics, or psychology. But they have left the world of science. A living, growing, developing organism with the DNA, cellular makeup, and bodily structure of a human being is a human being. Misleading slogans also muddy the issue: “A woman’s right to choose…” never completes the sentence. If the rest of the sentence is “…to take the life of an innocent human being,” the answer must be, “No, she does not.”

Some politicians affirm that as Catholics they are “personally opposed” to abortion, but do not feel they should impose their religious beliefs on others. How do you respond?

One sometimes hears prominent Catholics state that they personally believe that human life begins at conception, and they accept that this is a “de fide” teaching of the Catholic Church. It is not. The Church defines matters of religious doctrine, but the fact that human life begins at conception is not a religious doctrine. As indicated above, it is what the science of biology demonstrates. We oppose the taking of innocent human life not solely because we are Catholic, but because reason itself proclaims that this is a fundamental—perhaps the fundamental—moral value that all people should uphold. It is true that as believers we have additional motivations, the same motivations that make the Catholic Church the largest single provider of social services throughout the world. And many of our Catholic politicians draw light and strength from this religious vision as they seek to combat many social injustices. We can take pride in their heroic efforts. But it is at the very least inconsistent to seek to alleviate these other moral evils while supporting the killing of innocent human beings.

Why so much attention to this one issue and other issues considered causes of social conservatives, such as family and religious freedom? Shouldn’t the bishops be focusing on more immediately urgent needs, such as helping the poor?

Absolutely the Church should be focusing on helping the poor, as the Church has from day one down to the present. In reality, the Church invests far more resources into programs designed immediately to help the poor than these other important causes. Every diocese has an agency
of Catholic Charities to carry this out, and the U.S. bishops sponsor Catholic Relief Services to provide this same sort of extraordinary service abroad, just to give two examples. And then there is the incalculable generosity of individual Catholics, parishes, and organizations in sharing their time, talent, and treasure to serve the neediest among them. Catholic orders like the Franciscans, the Missionaries of Charity, the Order of Malta, and others give of themselves every day to serve the poor. Catholic parishes organize fundraising and service for the needy. Countless individual Catholics generously volunteer to serve their neighbors in schools, hospices, dining halls, clinics, and on the streets. It is typical that far more resources are invested in these worthy agencies and efforts than in programs for marriage and family life or respect for human life. This is certainly true here in San Francisco.

But there is another reason why the bishops insist on not losing sight of issues that politics would deem “conservative.” That already is a problem: a Catholic does not view these issues politically, for they are intimately interconnected. Indeed, for decades social science studies have demonstrated the link between poverty and family breakdown, and especially fatherlessness (not to mention a whole host of other social ills such as youth violence, high rates of incarceration, school drop-out rates, addiction, etc.). The social scientists point to the “sequence of success”: graduate from school, secure a stable job, marry, and then have children. The poverty rate of people who follow this sequence in their lives is around 3%.

This underscores how critically important it is for a society to instill in its citizens a sense of living according to virtuous habits. The founders of our country understood this, which is why they recognized that this experiment in democracy would only work with a virtuous citizenry and therefore embraced robust religious freedom, as sound religious values help to form virtuous citizens. So we should avoid making false dichotomies, and instead address the root causes of our social problems while at the same time providing relief to those who find themselves in poverty or any other kind of distress.

But what about other issues that are much timelier and which the bishops have also identified as life issues, such as racism and capital punishment?

Racism is certainly a very ugly scar that has marred our nation all throughout its history. But as I mentioned in the Letter, racism is an attitude that can manifest itself in a whole myriad of ways, from uttering a racial slur to public lynchings. It is still hard for us to accept that lynchings were accepted behavior for quite some time during our history. No one now questions the evil of lynching, but if anyone were to do so, similar corrective action would need to be taken.
As for capital punishment, I am in agreement with all of our recent Popes as well as bishops in our country and around the world that it is reprehensible and should be done away with. However, capital punishment does not constitute what in moral philosophy is called an “intrinsic evil,” that is, something that is always wrong in and of itself, at least in theory (“at least” because, one of the most serious problems with capital punishment is the irretrievability of the mistake of executing an innocent person). The Church recognizes that in our time this most extreme resort is not necessary for our society to protect itself from those who would take the lives of innocent people. But to take the life of an innocent person is always and everywhere wrong.

**Your description of the moral evil of abortion is clear and direct. Why the rather complex presentation of the degrees of cooperation in moral evil?**

From twenty centuries of spiritual guidance the Catholic Church has developed careful distinctions to aid in understanding human culpability in wrongdoing. A moral principle itself can be simple (e.g., killing an innocent human being is gravely wrong), but the degree of personal guilt is affected by many factors, above all the knowledge that something is wrong and the free decision to do the wrong. These factors do not change the objective reality, but they do mitigate subjective blame. This is why spiritual guidance and confession play such an important role in our moral tradition.

The basic distinction between formal and material cooperation touches on the importance of the *will*: if I know something to be wrong and still freely choose to do it, I both intend and commit a moral evil. This is formal cooperation. Material cooperation, on the other hand, can be altered by the seriousness of the act and the proximity of what I do in connection with that act. If I believe abortion to be wrong but help perform abortions, this is immediate material cooperation. Very clearly: *formal cooperation and immediate material cooperation in an evil act can never be condoned*. But, given the interconnectedness of the world in which we live, it is very difficult to avoid at least some very remote cooperation in moral evils (for example, purchasing goods from businesses that employ underpaid workers laboring in inhumane conditions). This nuanced approach can be helpful to Catholics in public life in determining where and how to stand up in defense of human moral values.
How does this understanding of cooperation in moral evil apply to the question of the reception of the Holy Eucharist?

The starting point, of course, is that none of us is ever truly worthy to receive the Eucharist, which is the very Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Christ has given us this precious Sacrament precisely so that we can make progress on the path to holiness and grow ever more deeply in our union with Him. However, receiving the Eucharist is a public act by which the recipient affirms that he or she believes what the Church teaches in matters of faith and morals, and is regulating his or her life accordingly. In the case of a public figure who is Catholic and actively promotes abortion, there is a fundamental disconnect: to affirm Catholic faith and at the same time actively to oppose one of the Church’s most fundamental moral teachings (the sanctity of human life) is a contradiction. This is not a matter of one’s subjective spiritual state, but of persistent, obdurate, and public rejection of Catholic teaching.

Should such a person be refused Holy Communion?

Again, I want to stress that the purpose of my Pastoral Letter is to lay down certain general principles, not to deal with specific individuals. To take the step your question proposes should come at the end of a process, when all other avenues have failed, and it involves weighing a very complex set of considerations. It should be done both for the sake of the erring individual, because we are dealing with nothing less than the eternal destiny of that individual, and for the sake of the faithful, many of whom are confused and scandalized by prominent Catholics who publicly profess their faith and yet act against one of the most basic Catholic moral norms. Serious consideration also has to be given to what will truly move the individual in the direction of conversion, and the effect such a decision may have on the unity, or disruption thereof, of the Church. Certainly there is ample precedent in the history of the Church for this, even recent history, and while the moral principle is very clear, the decision at the pastoral level is a very complex one that must weigh a broad spectrum of factors. Our goal must always be the salvation of souls, both that of the erring person and of the broader Catholic community.
What is the bishop’s authority in this matter?

The Eucharist and the bishop are intimately united, because from the time of the New Testament to our own day the communion of the Church has found its fullest expression in the community of believers sharing in the Eucharist with its bishop, who is the successor of the Apostles. Already at the beginning of the second century St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Church at Smyrna: “Nobody must do anything that has to do with the Church without the bishop’s approval. You should regard that Eucharist as valid which is celebrated either by the bishop or by someone he authorizes. Where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.” If a bishop has members of his flock who are erring and causing others to wander from the truth, he has a moral obligation to call them to account. This should be done privately at first, and with great patience. However, if every other medicine fails, it may be necessary for them to refrain from receiving the Holy Eucharist until they repent.

So, are such Catholic officials excommunicated?

Excommunication, in its canonical meaning, is truly the last resort, and a step that should be taken only when all else fails. A Catholic whose public actions contradict Church teaching should voluntarily refrain from receiving the Holy Eucharist until he or she accepts the teaching of the Church. And it has happened that pastors of Catholics in this situation have publicly stated that he or she should not receive Holy Communion. This, though, is not a canonical sanction, which involves its own set of legal motivations and procedures in the Church’s law. It is rather a declaration of fact: the person is obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin, and a bishop determines that he must instruct the Communion ministers in his diocese not to allow the person to receive the Eucharist. This is not a decision that any bishop would take lightly nor find easy to do, but we are dealing with the most fundamental of human rights, the right to life itself.

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1https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/listen-up-millenials-theres-sequence-to-success/2017/07/05/5a4a8350-6011-11e7-a4f7-af34fc1d9d39_story.html