

Defining Life and Abortion

In light of the recent Supreme Court ruling on Roe vs Wade, I believe it is important to revisit the Orthodox view on this very controversial topic. The following is directed only at Orthodox Christians and therefore I as an Orthodox priest cannot and should not speak for other faith expressions.

Defining Life and Abortion

Unlike Orthodoxy, in both Judaism and Islam there is the concept of when a fetus acquires the status equal to an adult human being. In Judaism the newborn child is not considered fully viable until it has survived thirty days following a normal birth¹ (Numbers 18:16) which becomes difficult in cases of pre-term births. Similarly in Islam, abortions are allowed if pregnancies end before *ensoulment of the fetus*, described as occurring between 40, 90 or 120 days after conception, depending on the school of thought². Also, Judaism and Islam allow for extenuating circumstances in which an abortion can take place.

From a scientific perspective *life*, as defined in the Journal of Medical Embryology (1975), begins with fertilization, a process by which two highly specialized cells, from the male (sperm) and the female (ovum), unite to give rise to a new organism³, the zygote."

Within the scientific and philosophical community there is agreement that life begins at the moment of the formation of the zygote. What is controversial is *whether this genetically unique cell should be granted the status of a human person*.

Debate has centered around the time it takes for the sperm and egg to fuse and create the zygote forming this "new life." In the last few decades technology has allowed for a much more detailed observation of the first 24 hours of this process to determine exactly when life begins and each state can have radically different interpretations of defining "life." From 24 hours to even post-birth.

For Orthodox, discussion on when the fetus acquires "human" status is meaningless since none of these arguments has altered the Orthodox definition of when life begins which is "from the moment of conception."

Church's View on Abortion

The Church, throughout Her history has always held that all human life is sacred as it is the very image and likeness of God. This sacredness of life was present in the earliest instructional texts of the Church, the Didache, which condemned all acts that took a life, including children and the unborn; «...και οὐ φονεύσεις τέκνον ἐν φθορᾷ, οὐδὲ γεννηθὲν ἀποκτενεῖς...» (and do not murder children and do not kill those being born)⁴ A child's claim on our moral regard is absolute from that first moment [of conception] and Christians are forbidden from shedding innocent blood at every stage of human development.⁵

¹ Dr. Fred Rosner, Biomedical Ethics and Jewish Law

² Musallam BF., Sex and Society in Islam. Cambridge University Press, 1983.

³ An organism is defined as "(1) a complex structure of interdependent and subordinate elements whose relations and properties are largely determined by their function in the whole, and (2) an individual constituted to carry on the activities of life by means of organs separate in function but mutually dependent: a living being."

⁴ Chapter 2, Διδαχη των Δωδεκα Αποστολων (Instruction of the 12 Apostles)

⁵ For the Life of the World. Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church, Commission on the Social Doctrine of the Orthodox Church, Fr John Chryssavgis, Editor, Holy Cross Press, pages 32-34

Defining Life and Abortion

Thus, it is the responsibility of the Church to protect all life and must oppose any act which robs someone of their life whether it be the death penalty, murder, abuse, unwarranted euthanasia, and the unborn child. Therefore, under no circumstances can the Orthodox Church condone abortion nor enter into any discussion which attempts to negotiate extenuating circumstances.

However, this does not mean the Church turns away or condemns those who have had or are considering an abortion. The Church, as our Mother, clearly understands that abortion hurts. The Church understands that the trauma of the abortion results in endless long nights afterwards of emotional pain, suffering, despair, and guilt as she recalls the day the baby would have been born, the anniversary of the abortion, the first "wanted" pregnancy when she feels her baby move, and all the years to ahead.

The Unforeseen Consequences of Roe vs Wade

In her article [When Abortion Suddenly Stopped Making Sense](#), Presvytera Frederica Matthews-Green speaks about the dramatic difference between what the intent of RVW and the resulting unforeseen consequences.

"We also thought, back then, that few abortions would ever be done. It's a grim experience, going through an abortion, and we assumed a woman would choose one only as a last resort. We were fighting for that "last resort." We had no idea how common the procedure would become; today, one in every five pregnancies ends in abortion.

Nor could we have imagined how high abortion numbers would climb. In the 43 years since Roe v. Wade, there have been 59 million abortions... We expected that abortion would be rare. What we didn't realize was that, once abortion becomes available, it becomes the most attractive option for everyone around the pregnant woman. If she has an abortion, it's like the pregnancy never existed. No one is inconvenienced. It doesn't cause trouble for the father of the baby, or her boss, or the person in charge of her college scholarship. It won't embarrass her mom and dad. Abortion is like a funnel; it promises to solve all the problems at once. So there is significant pressure on a woman to choose abortion, rather than adoption or parenting."

My Legal Right Concerning My Body

Often the discussion on abortion will include the idea that "It is my right to control my body." In her article, Presvytera Green speaks to the fallacies of such an argument which denies the anguish felt by all parties involved when abortion becomes the choice stating,

*"When a woman realizes she is pregnant and doesn't want to be, she may feel understandably panicked. It can feel like her body has been taken over against her will, and she can block out any thought except the desire to get rid of it. However, it's not truly the woman's body that's at risk here. The Church recognizes not only the rights of the unborn child to have life, but also recognizes that the father also has rights **and responsibilities**.*

This argument creates the false notion that abortion concerns a conflict between the rights of a woman and a fetus. This creates the fallacy that a woman and her unborn child are enemies. If continuing a pregnancy has become that unbearable, the problem is

Defining Life and Abortion

not inside the woman's body, but in a culture that is placing overwhelming burdens on her. The love between mother and baby is the icon of human connectedness, and when we complacently assume that one may want to kill the other, something has gone seriously wrong."

The Church's Responsibility to Those Considering Abortion

Historically and up to the present time, the Church's responsibility on the issue of abortion is two-fold.

1. To continue to defend and uphold the right of every person to live and to oppose any efforts which seek to deny that right.
2. To demonstrate the fullness of the love of Christ.

Responsibility of the Priest

In the case where the woman is considering abortion, the priest holds the primary responsibility to offer the spiritual guidance and support they need so that they know they are not alone. The priest can help guide their decision by providing real options available to them.

In the case where the woman has had the abortion, the priest, through the sacrament of confession, must again be there to offer spiritual guidance and support so that they know they are not alone. In the same way that Christ did not condemn or judge the adulteress woman presented to her by the Pharisees, the priest, with the same Christ-like compassion, recognizing that she is regretful of the painful decision she has made, offers the same words as our Lord, "Go and sin no more."

Responsibility of the People

Unfortunately, many times the church, through Her people, has been lacking in proper and meaningful support for those women who find themselves in situations where they feel alone and abortion becomes a choice.

In the same article, Presvytera Green made the point that "A woman who had had an abortion told me, "Everyone around me was saying they would 'be there for me' if I had the abortion, but no one said they'd 'be there for me' if I had the baby."

It is not enough to be Anti-Abortion. We must be Pro-Life. We share in the crime of abortion when we condemn abortion and then fail to protect the sacred position of motherhood.

Orthodox are famous for referring to the Church as a hospital for the sick. If this is true, then we must create conditions that help those for whom bearing a child will involve very real burdens both during and after the pregnancy. That someone will help and support them if they decide to keep their child or will work with them to provide for adoption of the child. We must be prepared to

- build a community that provides women and their babies with love, care, and support (whether financial or otherwise) after the birth of the child.
- Be prepared to open our homes to women who have chosen to bear a child rather than choose abortion, and there are many people eager to adopt such children.
- Consider volunteering with organizations that help unmarried pregnant women, or poor women who cannot afford appropriate prenatal care.