

Church stance on abortion and soul of child has varied over time

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RITE & REASON:The moment of ensoulment has been the subject of debate throughout history

From the vehement assertions of some on the “pro-life” side of the abortion debate, it could be assumed their views have always been Catholic teaching. It is not so.

In fact some of the church’s greatest teachers and saints believed no homicide was involved if abortion took place before the foetus was infused with a soul, known as “ensoulment”. This was believed to occur at “quickening”, when the mother detected the child move for the first time in her womb. In 1591, Pope Gregory XIV determined it at 166 days of pregnancy almost 24 weeks.

The Catholic Church’s current position on abortion was established only 143 years ago, in 1869. Then Pope Pius IX outlawed abortion from the moment of conception.

This is said to have been influenced by science’s discovery of the ovum in 1827 and the human fertilisation process in the 1830s, neither of which gave any indication as to when ensoulment took place.

Among those who had a different view on the matter to that currently held by the church are some of its most eminent thinkers. These include at least three of the 33 “super saints” – Jerome, Augustine and Aquinas – all of them “Doctors of the Church”.

St Jerome (died 420) wrote, in his Epistle, “the seed gradually takes shape in the uterus, and it does not count as killing until the individual elements have acquired their external appearance and their limbs”.

St Augustine (died 430) wrote in On Exodus that early abortion should not be regarded “as homicide, for there cannot be a living soul in a body that lacks sensation due to its not yet being fully formed”.

St Thomas Aquinas (died 1274) held “the vegetative soul, which comes first, when the embryo lives the life of a plant, is corrupted, and is succeeded by a more perfect soul, which is both nutritive and sensitive, and then the embryo lives an animal life; and when this is corrupted, it is succeeded by the rational soul introduced from without (ie by God)”.

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This view of Aquinas was confirmed as Catholic dogma by the Council of Vienne in 1312, and has never been officially repudiated by Rome. Indeed, in 1974, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith acknowledged that the issue of ensoulment was still an open question.

It is not an impression given by many on the “pro-life” side of this debate. What both sides can agree on is that human life begins at conception. Where there is disagreement is on whether that collection of chemical elements constitutes a person. It has been estimated that up to 55 per cent of fertilised ovums miscarry soon after conception. If it is held that the fertilised ovum is a person why were/are none of these “people” afforded any funeral rites?

But to look at the issue from another perspective, in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (the Gospel of Life) Pope John Paul II wrote that “no one can renounce the right to self-defence” and that “legitimate defence can be not only a right but a grave duty . . .”

He continued “unfortunately it happens that the need to render the aggressor incapable of causing harm sometimes involves taking his life. In this case, the fatal outcome is attributable to the aggressor whose action brought it about, even though he may not be morally responsible because of a lack of the use of reason”.

He is referring there to someone who, because insane, is morally innocent.

A foetus is morally innocent and yet can be a direct threat to the life of its mother. Has she “not only a right but a grave duty” to protect herself?

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