

Catholic Church teaching on abortion dates from 1869

Church's current position not shared by its most elevated saints

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In a short letter to this newspaper on June 22nd last Dr James Sheehan wrote that “the Hippocratic Oath was written in the pre-Christian era, more than 400 years before Christ’s time on earth. Hippocrates stated, ‘I will show the utmost respect for every human life from fertilisation to natural death and reject abortion that deliberately take a unique human life’.”



He continued: “As medical practitioners, on qualifying we all subscribed to the beliefs contained in the oath. The Catholic Church for over 2,000 years has upheld the Hippocratic Principles. I commend it for doing so. – Yours, etc,”

He signed himself as “Director Blackrock and Galway Clinics”. Dr Sheehan is also a patron of the conservative Catholic think tank the Iona Institute.

Whatever may have been the case with Hippocrates, Dr Sheehan is wrong when he asserts that “the Catholic Church for over 2,000 years has upheld the Hippocratic Principles”.

In fact he is out by more than 1,856 years.

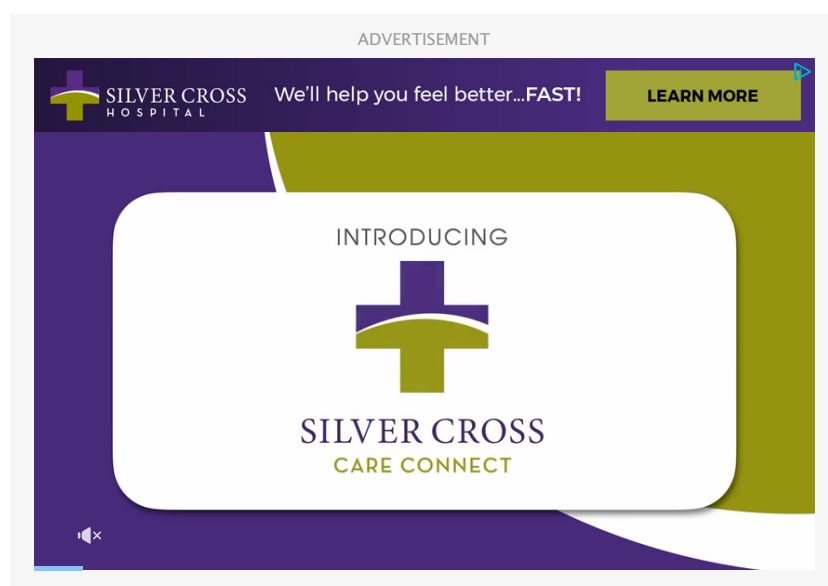
The Catholic Church’s current position on abortion is 144 years old. In the 1869 document *Apostolicae Sedis*, Pope Pius IX declared the penalty of excommunication for abortions at any stage of pregnancy. Up to then Catholic teaching was that no homicide was involved if abortion took place before the foetus was infused with a soul, known as “ensoulment”.

Separate consciousness

This was believed to occur at “quickening”, when the mother detected the child move for the first time in her womb. It indicated a separate consciousness.

In 1591, Pope Gregory XIV determined it took place at 166 days of pregnancy, almost 24 weeks. That is the current legal limit for abortion in the UK. It was Catholic Church teaching until 1869.

Among those who held a different view on abortion to that of the Catholic Church now are some of its most eminent thinkers.



These include at least three of the 33 Catholic Church “super saints” – Jerome, Augustine and Aquinas – all of them “Doctors of the Church”. Were one to follow the logic of some in the church today, the

It has been argued by apologists that those saints did not have the benefit of being that of the ovum in 1827 and the human fertilisation process in the 1830s. Then, known that human life began at conception. That is to miss the point.

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Those saints never doubted that what they were dealing with from the moment of conception was human life. What preoccupied them was when that life became a person. They did not accept that a collection of biochemical elements with potential was a person. They sought evidence of emerging consciousness. In those pre-scientific days they settled on quickening as the great indicator of that – when the child began to kick in the womb.

Were they around today they too might query whether those who assert so really believe that a person exists from the moment of conception. Surely, were that the case, those 55 per cent of “people” who are miscarried soon after conception would be afforded baptisms and funeral rites.

They are not.

Apologists also argue that their belief is based on the “potential/process” of such fertilised ovums. Looking forward, where that “process” argument is concerned, if such a collection of biochemical elements is to be afforded the status of personhood, should this not also apply to limbs and organs removed through surgery, etc? Why no funeral rites for those either?

Looking backwards where that “potential/process” argument is concerned, surely it should also mean that every sperm and every ovum ought to be preserved due to its potential personhood given the right circumstances? It doesn’t happen. What about all those potential “people” denied existence?

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In truth the Catholic Church’s current position on abortion appears to owe more to theology than to science. In 1854 the same Pope Pius IX declared the Immaculate Conception a dogma of the church. It teaches that Mary, mother of Jesus, was conceived without original sin, thus solving an age-old conundrum – how could the Son of God be born of a woman with original sin on her soul? It was decided she was born without original sin on her soul.

And when in 1854 Pius IX proclaimed the Immaculate Conception a dogma of the church, he stated that Mary had been free from sin “in the first instant of her conception”.

Fifteen years later, in 1869, he was being consistent with that teaching when he announced the penalty of excommunication for abortion at any stage of pregnancy.

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