

# Saints once did abortions – it was a lesser sin than oral sex

Those who support legal and safe abortion might better reflect a ‘medieval’ Irish Catholic attitude than those who oppose it

© Thu, Apr 19, 2018, 09:56 | Updated: Thu, Apr 19, 2018, 10:14

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- People on all sides of the abortion debate tend to share an assumption, regardless of their personal views on the issue: Catholicism allows only one attitude toward abortion, that it is among the worst sins, an unconscionable evil. Proponents of women’s rights over their own bodies often criticise anti-abortion legislation as “medieval”, with the Irish Constitution’s Eighth Amendment regularly characterised as such. And yet medieval biographies of multiple Irish Catholic saints, including beloved Brigid of Kildare, reverently record abortions among their miracles, and medieval Irish Catholic penitentialists, priestly authorities who prescribed penances for sins and were often celebrated as saints themselves, treated abortion as a relatively minor offence.

Ireland’s abortionist saints cannot be considered champions of choice, however. The only choice they seem to consider is their own (and implicitly God’s). The most detailed account is told of Ciarán of Saigir, after he rescued a nun named Bruinnech who had been abducted by a local king. “When the man of God returned to the monastery with the girl, she confessed that she was pregnant. Then the man of God, led by the zeal of justice, not wishing the serpent’s seed to quicken, pressed down on her womb with the sign of the cross and forced her womb to be emptied.” Bruinnech’s feelings about her rape, pregnancy, or abortion are not addressed, apart from her “confession”.

When another nun, pregnant after “fornicating secretly”, had Cainnech of Aghaboe bless her belly, “at once the baby (infans) in her womb vanished without a trace”. While this may well have answered her most desperate prayers, the sort of blessing she sought isn’t specified. The recipients of Áed mac Brice’s and Brigid’s abortion miracles don’t even speak before the saints purge their wombs. Brigid’s devotee, however, afterwards “gave thanks to God” – the only one of these women whose response gets recorded in the texts. And of the four only Bruinnech gets a name.



If a cleric has sex only once and covertly, he is to fast a full year on bread and water and two years without wine and meat; if it’s habitual, three years on bread and water

Saints were not the only Catholics performing abortions in medieval Ireland. The sixth-century Penitential of Vinnian, the seventh-century Irish Canons, and the eighth-century Old Irish Penitential include abortion among the many sins to be repented. Comparatively speaking, it’s a lesser one. In the Irish Canons, the penance of a woman who has had an abortion amounts to a quarter or half the time of the penance of a man who has committed fornication. In the Old Irish Penitential, the penance depends on the stage of pregnancy, divided into three, like trimesters: in the first, three and a half years of penance; in the second, seven years; in the third, 14 years. The Old Irish Penitential also stipulates that oral sex merits four or five years’ penance the first time, seven years if it is repeated.

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The Penitential of Vinnian (often attributed to Finnian of Clonard) takes an even more permissive attitude to abortion. His female reproductive penances seem aimed at nuns, though he refers simply to “a woman” (mulier). If she has an abortion, she is to fast on bread and water for six months and refrain from wine and meat for two years. “But if she bears a child and her sin is manifest, (she shall do penance) for six years, as is the judgement in the case of a cleric, and in the seventh year she shall be joined to the altar, and then we say her crown can be restored and she may don a white robe and be pronounced a virgin.” Presumably this restored virginity after six years of penance for childbirth applied specifically to nuns, not laywomen.