

The Question of Human Conception



John 13:34 "(Jesus said) 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'"

Last week, the State of Louisiana debated legislation that would charge abortion as murder, as homicide, thereby granting constitutional rights to a person "from the moment of fertilization." But the declaration often made by Catholics and some Evangelicals that "life begins at conception" is a new idea. While it is theologically a very easy and clearly defined answer to the question of when life begins, it is ultimately arbitrary. It also isn't very practical, especially in the cases of rape or incest, or the life of the mother. More importantly, believing that life begins at conception also isn't the

historical tradition of the Christian Church, nor is it the biblical norm, facts which are surprising to many Christians. Suggesting that life begins at conception is something which I think we need to take a closer look at in a midst of a sometimes passionate debate that is sadly dividing this country, one side against the other.

Let's start with the Biblical history. For even though the ancient Assyrians had a law opposing abortion as far back as the 12th century before Christ, and even though abortion was known to be widely practiced during New Testament times in the Middle East, our Scriptures appears to be explicitly silent on the topic of abortion, and/or any concept that life begins at conception. This shouldn't be particularly surprising to us since our Biblical forebears generally didn't understand the basic biology of human conception. In Biblical times, man was thought to have simply planted his 'seed' in a woman's womb, which if fertile, would produce an heir. That's how the Bible imagined pregnancy. It wasn't until the invention of the microscope in the 19th century that scientists confirmed the woman's physical contribution to human conception, which in modern understanding now understands conception as when a man's sperm and a woman's egg come together, in a way that we simply didn't know or understand before. So, it is hard to argue Biblically that life begins at conception if our forebears

didn't have any basic understanding of the biology of conception.

Indeed Biblically speaking, the ancient Jews believed that human life begins, not at conception, but when the baby is born and takes its first breath. For Biblically speaking it's the breath of God that gives us life; as God gave life to Adam in the story of Creation in Genesis by breathing into the man he had formed from the dust of the earth, after which the Bible says "the man became a living being." Similarly, it was the breath of God that gave life to the gathered flesh and sinews in the story of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel. The breath of God in the Jewish tradition is when human life begins, or with its absence, it is when human life ends. The ancient Jewish Talmud declares that human life begins at birth, and this has the generally accepted view within Judaism today and for the last several millennia.

The ancient Greeks and Romans, however, had a different idea about when life begins. According to Aristotle, human life begins when the baby becomes 'animated' or begins to move about on its own within the womb, what traditionally has been called 'quickenings'. When the baby begins to move on its own in the womb, then, and only then, was it considered to be a human life in the Greco-Roman world. St. Augustine in the fourth century applied this Aristotelian concept to Christian doctrine arguing

that early in pregnancy, an abortion is not murder because no human life is destroyed, because no human life is present until quickening. Pope Innocent III, in the 13th century, famously wrote a letter which ruled on a case of a monk who had arranged for his female lover to have an abortion. The Pope decided simply that the monk was not guilty of murder if the fetus was not yet "*animated*." St. Thomas Aquinas argued that only the abortion of an "*animated*" fetus was murder, for human life as it was then understood began at 'quickening', and this, this was the general rule of the Christian Church until very recently.

Indeed, it was only in the second half of the 19th century that Pope Pius IX reversed the traditional stance of the Roman Catholic Church on when human life began. In 1869, the then Pope dropped the requirement of an 'animated' fetus in the canons about abortion and suddenly applied those rules to any fetus, whether animated or not. Thus, the tolerant approach to abortion which had prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church for 19 hundred years abruptly ended. Today the Catholic Church requires excommunication for parishioners who have abortions at any stage of pregnancy, and many conservative Evangelical Protestants now agree, boldly declaring now that life begins at conception, which we should admit, at least, is a new idea.

But why at conception? Why not at implantation? Or at quickening? Or at the point at which there is viability outside

the womb for the child, as the Supreme Court decided in Roe vs. Wade? Or at birth and first breathe as the Jews argue? How do we decide when life begins? And who decides this most important of questions? Indeed, if life really begins at conception, then God is the greatest abortionist of all times, because doctors tell us that one half of all conceptions naturally miscarry, which suggests that implantation might be a better standard. And what do we do when we disagree with one another on this most vital of questions? Do we honor Jewish interpretation of the Scriptures, or our historic Christian Tradition, or do we change our views as we learn more and more scientifically? And do we yet have even more to learn?

Nothing is more precious than human life, upon that perhaps we can all agree. But how do we define 'human life'? One Catholic Commentator I heard this week declared that "life begins in the womb, as all know," and perhaps we do, but who decides at exactly what point in the womb does it begin? Can we not admit that there are no easy or agreed answers to this question? Can we not acknowledge that just as an acorn is not an oak tree, a fetus may not be a human? Can we not admit that we are fallible human beings and there are simply mysteries in life that require our humility, our tolerances, and dare I say, our love for one another? For this, I believe, is where the trouble lies, whenever one side or another in this debate, as in so many

others, firmly declares on the political stage or in the pulpit that their views are divinely right and inspired, and thus that the views of their opponents are wrong, and contemptible, even damnable, to hell with them!

It is that element of self-righteousness that viciously divides the Church and our political spheres into this party or that. And our desire to claim righteousness for our side is so often far stronger than our desire to admit our human foibles and weaknesses and uncertainties, or to remain united as one Body in Christ.

What we need at this moment in the Church and in our national politics is a great deal more meekness, people following their best information and instincts, but still publicly acknowledging that we are all only human, that we can't be sure, that we might even be mistaken, that we are simply making the best-informed guesses that we can. Can we not also acknowledge that we are probably never completely right in what we say or think, or completely wrong, in any of our human choices and opinions, including the mysterious question of when human life begins, such that we always have something to learn and gain from opposing viewpoints, something without which we are not whole or complete?

Let us therefore, exercise care and concern for one and another as fellow Christians as we openly discuss our views and

opinions, and the consequences for others of our personal decisions. Let us approach these questions with compassion for one another, and respect for one another, and with a desire for reconciliation among us all, and not with a quick division between those who are right and those who are wrong. For as St. Paul so beautifully wrote: "now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known. For faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love," not our faith or beliefs. Or as Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." AMEN.