



**“The Catholic church and Reproductive Rights: the
Politics of Religion”**

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The Australian Reproductive Health Alliance recently took a group of Australian and Pacific Island parliamentarians to the Philippines on a study tour, to learn about the population and development challenges that country faces. We met with those working to improve public health, in particular reproductive health, from NGOs, government health facilities, private health providers and Senators and Congresspeople. They all told us the same thing: the main barrier in that country to introducing effective population and development programs and addressing the reproductive and sexual health needs of its people is the Catholic church.

Likhaan, a women's activist group we visited, estimates that there are 2.6 million pregnancies each year in the Philippines, 53 percent of which are "unintended, forced, and unwanted". About 4,000 of these end up in the death of the mothers from complications of pregnancy and childbirth, including abortion, which is illegal¹.

This paper is concerned with the politics of religious conservatism and reproductive rights. This is not a topic which can be adequately addressed in such a short time. However, I do feel it is important that these issues are raised at a forum such as this. Those of us who work in the field of sexual health and reproductive rights consistently come up against religious groups who seek to impose the perspective of their faith on reproductive health policies and services. Today I will outline the history of the Catholic church's position on reproductive rights takes on reproductive rights, to put the current position into perspective. I will also outline the good work being done by Catholics to challenge this.

Around 650 AD a monk named Cogitosus wrote a biography of St Brigit's life. Within this biography, Cogitosus tells the story of a miracle brought forth by St Brigit. The story goes that a woman, who had taken a vow of chastity, fell to youthful desire and became pregnant. Cogitosus wrote:

*"Brigit, exercising with the most strength of her ineffable faith, blessed her, caused the fetus to disappear without coming to birth, and without pain. She faithfully returned the woman to health and to penance."*²

¹ "Catholic Church steps up attack on reproductive health bill", Marites Sison, Inter Press Service, 5 September 2002, http://www.codewan.com.ph/CyberDyaryo/features/f2002_0906_03.htm

² Maas St Brigit Would Vote "no" if Faced with This Referendum p13

This account of St Brigit performing an abortion (or providing a woman with herbs to bring about abortion) appeared in Cogitosus' original writings, but has not been included in any contemporary translations of his text. This story of the 'disappearance' of a fetus has all but disappeared itself from Catholic and Celtic written histories³.

What is interesting about this story is not whether or not it really happened (recorded Celtic history from this time tends to be based on stories and myths), but when and how the story has been retold. When St Brigit was alive, abortion wasn't considered by the Catholic Church to be a grave sin. This only came about in the 19th century. When Cogitosus was writing in the 7th century, there was every reason to consider the act of making a fetus disappear to save a young woman a miracle, not an excommunicable sin. Why has interpretation of biblical texts changed when it comes to abortion and when did this occur?

A good starting point is perhaps to refresh your memory on the church's current position on sexuality and reproductive rights. The current position on family planning, as I am sure you are all aware, is that marriage and sex are for procreation only. Contraception interferes with the procreative aspect of sex and provides a barrier to the married couple giving themselves fully and totally to each other, and thus is considered a sin by the church. The current position on abortion is that life begins at the moment of conception, and therefore abortion at any stage of pregnancy, for any reason, is homicide.

In the fifth century, St Augustine provided the church with its first codified teaching on human sexuality. He stated that the primary purpose of human sexuality is procreation. Following on from this, he condemned family planning methods such as coitus interruptus and periodic abstinence when it was used to avoid conception (a practice now accepted by the church). In regard to abortion, St Augustine condemned it on the grounds that it broke the connection between sex and procreation, not because he saw it as the killing of an innocent life. Abortion was a

³ Ibid. p14

sin only if it was intended to conceal fornication and adultery⁴. Importantly, he and other theologians of his era did not believe that human life began at the moment of conception – the church’s current belief.

St Augustine’s teaching on abortion has been continued for most of the church’s two thousand year history. The key issue was one of covering up illicit sexual relations, not the current church teaching that abortion is the destruction of human life. For most of its history the church did not believe that the foetus was “ensouled” until some weeks or months after conception. The question of when ensoulment occurs – that is the point where the fetus becomes a full human with a soul – has been at the centre of Catholic debates around abortion. Until the late 1800s, the view was held by the Church that it was not a sin to abort a fetus before “quickening”, when the child first moved inside the womb. It believed that this was the point where a fetus attained personhood. Gregory XIV had asserted that quickening occurred 116 days into pregnancy – although others have placed it anywhere between 40 and 80 days⁵.

St Thomas Aquinas opposed abortion on the same grounds as St Augustine – as a form of contraception and a sin against marriage. He maintained that abortion was not an act of homicide unless the foetus was “ensouled”, and could thus be considered a human being. He came up with the theory of the “delayed hominisation” of the foetus, which outlined the various stages the foetus goes through, from first having a vegetative soul, then an animal soul, and then when its body is developed, a rational soul.

The formal authorities of the church did not always accept the teachings of either St Augustine or St Thomas Aquinas. Abortion and infanticide have been commonly practiced without comment at various times throughout history in Catholic countries. Abortion and contraception were banned by the Church for three years in the 16th century under Pope Sixtus V. Again, the reason for the ban – concern about prostitution in Rome – was tied up with issues of sexuality rather than human life. This ban was lifted immediately when Pope Gregory XIV took over in 1591, who pronounced that where abortion did not involve an “animated” foetus punishment

⁴ Hurst Abortion and Catholic Thought: The Little Told History

should be no stricter than as dictated by the sacred canons or civil legislation dictates⁶. This teaching lasted until 1869.

Although debate continued on when a foetus attained personhood, the idea of delayed hominisation was consistently taught until very recently in church history. It was Pope Pius IX who first taught that all abortion was homicide on the basis that the foetus gained personhood immediately – that is, at the time of conception. This marked a significant shift in church teaching. Pope Pius IX decreed that abortion at any stage of a pregnancy was a sin, and one that would result in excommunication, not on the grounds of illicit sex as had previously been taught, but as an act of homicide. This important change in church teaching occurred just 130 years ago, in 1869.

Pope Pius IX's teaching has been reaffirmed by subsequent popes, and is the view of the church today. Pope Pius XI went further, specifically outlawing abortion for therapeutic reasons in 1930. The Second Vatican Council, meeting in 1965, declared that "Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception; abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes", clearly stating that abortion was condemned on the basis of protecting life, not as a concealment of sexual sin.

The Second Vatican Council also marked an important turning point for the church on the issue of birth control. Successive popes had maintained that procreation was the primary end of sexuality. Since St Augustine, periodic abstinence and coitus interruptus, as means to avoid conception, were condemned. However, in his 1951 "Address to the midwives", Pope Pius XII condemned the use of artificial contraceptives, but affirmed the lawfulness of natural methods of contraception. This was the first time in the history of the Church when sex apart from an explicit procreative intention was condoned in a magisterial teaching.

The Second Vatican Council provided an opportunity to take this revised view forward further. A Birth Control Commission was established by Pope John XXIII to

⁵ Robinson, *Abortion: Ancient Christian Beliefs*

advise the Council's view on matters relating to marriage and sexuality, and in particular, birth control, and met from 1964 to 1966. The Council decided that the church's teachings on these matters were not infallible, and that Catholic couples should be given the liberty to decide for themselves matters of family planning⁷.

Although the Commission decided that there should be no minority report, such a report did appear, co-authored by then Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, now Pope John Paul II. In this report, the Cardinal pointed out that if the church changed its position on birth control by teaching it was now acceptable, it meant that previous popes had made an error – something that would destroy the principle of papal infallibility, which he saw as the fundamental principle of the church upon which all else rests⁸.

It should be noted that the concept of the infallibility of church teachings is just as recent as is the idea that life begins at conception. The idea of papal infallibility was introduced in 1870, most likely as a way to maintain political power at a time when the church had lost power due to the creation of Italy as a state.

Pope John XXIII's response to the Commission's report came in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, in 1968. In the encyclical he again reaffirmed previous teachings on sexuality as a procreative function, on the issue of artificial family planning, and on abortion. He maintained Pope Pius XII's support for natural family planning.

“The Church, nevertheless, in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life.” (Humanae Vitae)“

The direct interruption of the generative process already begun and, above all, all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children. Equally to be condemned, as the magisterium of the Church has affirmed on many

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Keely *Limits to Papal Power: Vatican Inaction After Humanae Vitae* p221

⁸ Hasler *How the Pope became Infallible: Pius IX and the Politics of Persuasion*

occasions, is direct sterilization, whether of the man or of the woman, whether permanent or temporary. Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation— whether as an end or as a means.” (Humanae Vitae)

“Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemns as always unlawful the use of means which directly prevent conception, even when the reasons given for the later practice may appear to be upright and serious.” (Humanae Vitae)

In short, the church’s views on sexuality and reproductive rights have shifted constantly over time, from a position of condemning any form of family planning to acceptance of natural family planning methods; from the view that abortion is a sin because it conceals sexual sin to the view that it is homicide; from believing a foetus became a human life some months after conception to the view that human life is the immediate product of conception.

As was stated earlier, the tragedy is it is not only the reproductive rights of Catholic women who are affected by the Catholic Church’s position. At international forums such as the UN conferences of the 1990s, the views of the Holy See have threatened the reproductive rights of non-Catholics through continuous pressure on government delegations, as well as national and local governments at home⁹.

Let us return to St Brigid. She is not the only example of Catholics – both among the laity and the church hierarchy – who has followed her conscience on issues of sexuality. When it comes to reproductive matters, the vast majority of Catholics around the world practice the church law that affirms both the right and the responsibility of a Catholic to follow his or her own conscience on moral matters, even when it conflicts with church teaching. There has been increasing open dissatisfaction with the church’s current approach. Many among the laity (and indeed, some very brave men and women within the religious orders) follow St

Brigid's example and follow their conscience. A survey of Catholic women in America found that 96 per cent of those who have ever had sex have used modern contraceptives at some point in their lives.² In a survey of 2,076 Brazilian adults in June, 88 per cent of respondents said they 'don't follow' church teachings on birth control and abortion. Among women from 25 to 44, the 'don't follow' group is 90 per cent. 1.4 million women undergo abortions every year. That represents about 30 percent of all pregnancies, studies show¹⁰.

And in the Philippines, health care providers, Mayors, Senators and NGOs are also taking this view as they grapple with the realities of high fertility. The Philippines Legislators Committee on Population and Development is currently working towards legislative recognition of reproductive rights as outlined in the Program of Action from the International Conference on Population and Development held in 1994. This includes the right to education and access to a full range of legal and medically-safe and effective family planning methods. The Catholic church in the Philippines is vehemently opposed to the current Reproductive Health bill, and is undermining support for the bill through a campaign of misinformation, claiming the bill will legalise abortion, despite the fact that the bill explicitly states that abortion is not considered a family planning method. The sponsors and supporters of the bill are called pro-abortionists, anti-Filipino, anti-family, murderers and anti-Christians¹¹. As Senator Biazon, former Armed Forces Chief of Staff and the sponsor of the bill has stated, "I am a Catholic but I am not just a senator for the Catholic Church. I am also the senator of the Aetas, Manobos, Muslims, Protestants and all Filipinos. As long as I am senator, I will do what is right."¹²

There are many other such examples of Catholics advocating a change in their church's teachings, and advocating a more Christian approach to reproductive rights. Those involved in such advocacy deserve our full support and admiration. In conclusion, we who are faced with the daily realities of the deaths of mothers and children due to the lack of access or refusal to use or allow access to modern

⁹ Kissling and Sippel *Women Under Oppressive Regimes: Women and Religious Fundamentalisms* p11

¹⁰ "Brazilian Women Use Contraceptives Despite Catholic Church", *New York Times*, 2/09/94

¹¹ "Biazon vs the bishops (I)", *Manila Times*, 13 October 2002

methods of family planning must take our work a step further by encouraging those who belong to such faiths to question the sources of their own beliefs, not to destroy their faith, but to clarify and understand the basis of it.

¹² “Biazon defies Church on reproductive health”, Frank Cimatú, Philippine Inquirer, 3 December 2002
< http://www.inq7.net/brk/2002/dec/03/brkpol_2-1.htm>

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