

Standing for the Unborn:

A Statement of
the Society of Jesus
in the United States
on Abortion

March 2003



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On this feast of the Annunciation of Our Lord, we, the leadership of the Jesuits in the United States, fervently renew our opposition to abortion and our support for the unborn.

In treating this delicate and controversial topic, we hope to provide our brother Jesuits, colleagues, parishioners and students with the spiritual leadership and ethical guidance they expect from us. As an international Society, we take with utmost seriousness the task of bringing the Gospel to the world, sharing the fruits of our spiritual heritage and engaging in dialogue with all the cultures and persons we encounter.

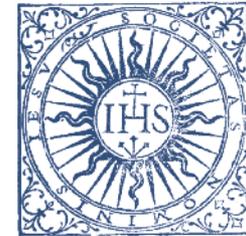
In this statement we wish to underscore the correctness of Catholic Church teaching regarding abortion, joining with many other people of conscience who are working to protect life in the womb, and who are seeking an end to abortion so as to restore our country's respect for the core human value of the right to life. We wish to add further insights to support this teaching, drawing upon the heritage of our Jesuit history and the treasure of Ignatian spirituality.

In 1995, representative Jesuits from around the world met in Rome for the 34th General

Congregation of the Society of Jesus. In their completed document "Our Mission and Justice," they noted that "Human life, a gift of God, has to be respected from its beginning to its natural end" (n. 57). The most fundamental building block of a just social order is respect for human life. Until men and women individually and collectively make a profound commitment to the value and dignity of all human life, we will never find the true peace, justice and reconciliation God desires for us.

When we, the leadership of the Society of Jesus in the U.S., survey the developments unfolding in our culture, we are deeply distressed at the massive injustices. A spirit of callous disregard for life shows itself in direct assaults on human life such as abortion and capital punishment, as well as in senseless violence, escalating militarism, racism, xenophobia, and the skewed accumulation of wealth and life-sustaining resources. These realities compel us to speak out against what Pope John Paul II has called "the culture of death."

This is the 30th anniversary year of the Supreme Court decision that made abortion legal throughout the United States. Since the January 22, 1973 Supreme Court decisions in *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*¹, more than 39 million American lives



have been ended by abortion.² Among all the justice issues we as a society should view with grave concern, abortion is a key social evil.

Jesuits draw upon a long and rich tradition of reflection, professional study, experience and spirituality that brings many resources to the complexities of the abortion issue.

We offer the following insights for shaping future public dialogue about abortion:

First, abortion is a human rights issue. It is also a social issue, and not simply a personal decision made in artificial isolation from wider social reality. Attempts to frame the issue as merely a question of personal preference or private choice ignore important features of abortion as a public policy. Because the state and society as a whole have an intense interest in promoting respect for life, we may not with a clear conscience relegate such life-and-death issues to the private realm, no matter how appealing and convenient such arguments may appear on the surface. Abortion policy contains embedded cultural assumptions, values and attitudes that have wide repercussions for the way we collectively treat all human life. The whole array of potential threats to life and human dignity is interrelated, and the Christian imperative to oppose it calls forth from us a consistent ethic of life.

Second, when we as religious leaders speak out against abortion, we are in no way endangering important Constitutional principles. While we invoke

faith-based claims for opposing legalized abortion, Jesuits are only one part of a broader coalition that finds many reasons to protect unborn life. In recent years, new evidence about prenatal biology has persuaded numerous people, often without explicit religious commitments, that the fetus is indeed a living, unique human being, worthy of the respect and protection we give to all human beings. When abortion laws are changed, it will not be the imposition of a narrowly-confined religious position upon an unwilling majority, but rather the consequence of a new broad-based consensus grounded upon persuasive and reasonable arguments accessible to people of all faith traditions and people of none.

Third, beyond the actual content of “what” we say in making a case against abortion, it is critical to pay attention to “how” our defense of the unborn proceeds. As St. Paul reminds us, we must “speak the truth with love.” The dialogue should never devolve into a shrill clash of shouts, much less threats of violence. We should remain confident that adjudication on the grounds of what is reasonable and consistent with human well-being is possible.

As Jesuits we now offer some observations: first, what our Catholic faith tradition teaches regarding the sanctity of all human life; second, what our distinctive Jesuit approach, including the heritage of Ignatian spirituality, brings to bear on life issues; and third, some concluding reflections on the manner of public dialogue about abortion in a pluralistic society. We hope that each will help clarify the urgency of our renewed stance in defense of human life.

I. The Heritage of Catholic Moral Teaching

The social teachings of the Catholic Church place the dignity of the human person at the center of all concerns for justice. Every human being, no matter how small or young or dependent on others, possesses infinite value. The book of Genesis testifies how it pleased God to create human persons “in the image and likeness” of God (Genesis 1:26) as free and rational beings possessing innate and sacred dignity. The Hebrew Scriptures treat violations against the life and welfare of innocent people as offenses against the God who is the Author of Life. The Decalogue unambiguously declares: “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13).

Although the Scriptures have almost nothing to say specifically about the topic of abortion in the modern medical sense (i.e., as a surgical procedure or pharmaceutical intervention), the books of both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures paint a reality that clearly rules out disregard for innocent human life. We find in the Bible several passages that testify to the preciousness of the unborn child. The prophet Jeremiah describes God’s love for the unborn: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you” (Jeremiah 1:5). The book of Psalms offers this prayer of wonder: “You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb. My very self you knew; my bones were not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, fashioned as in the depths of the earth” (Psalm 139:13-15).

When early Christians began to reflect on their faith in Jesus of Nazareth as Christ and Lord, they concluded that abortion was a grave sin. To believe in the mystery of the Incarnation, in God’s wondrous decision to become human and take on the life of our natural existence of conception, birth, maturation and death, commits one to affirm the dignity and sacredness of human life from conception to death. One of the earliest teaching documents of the Christian community, the “Didache,” circa 1st century A.D., proclaims: “Do not murder a child by abortion or kill a newborn infant.” In addition, Christian reflection of subsequent eras provides an unbroken testament of an utter respect for unborn life. Though theologians of the patristic, medieval, scholastic and early modern eras offered diverse speculations on the origin and nature of the early stages of human life, Catholic tradition provides solid support and grounding for contemporary church teachings against abortion.

Church leaders in the past century have found it necessary to reiterate the importance of the respect for life and condemnation of any violation of the right to life, the most basic value upon which all other human rights depend. We live in an age when the lives of “inconvenient” people, including the unborn, are disregarded. Demands for legalized abortion have sprouted around the globe. All the popes of the 20th century have spoken out boldly against abortion as well as a



panoply of other threats to human life. The Second Vatican Council, in its 1965 social teaching document “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*), reminds us that “life must be safeguarded with extreme care from conception; abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes” (par. 51).

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you”

(Jeremiah 1:5)

Pope John Paul II has consistently provided strong leadership in the struggle against abortion. In speeches, homilies, and formal writings, the pontiff has challenged all women and men of good will to step up their efforts against abortion. Among his efforts to highlight the sacredness of life are his encyclicals, “The Splendor of Truth” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 1993) and “The Gospel of Life” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 1995), which provide compelling rationales for opposition to abortion. Here John Paul II explains the philosophical and theological grounding of the stance against abortion, invoking elements of the Catholic moral tradition such as natural law and the notion of a well-informed conscience. The Holy Father situates our reflection on the ethics of abortion within the context of broad themes such as the sanctity of family life, a personalist approach to morality, and a theology of the body. In the 1994 “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” we find a clear affirmation of the right to life: “from the first moment of [his or her] existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person, among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life” (n. 2270). The 1987 Vatican document “Instruction on Bioethics” (*Donum Vitae*) offers further recommendations regarding the sanctity of life amidst difficult decisions that have arisen in our age of sophisticated reproductive technologies. Documents of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops repeat the universal church’s condemnation of abortion and challenge the faithful in our country to advocate vigorously for the protection of unborn life.

“choice” devolve into codewords for utter freedom to terminate a pregnancy without limits or conditions.

To be pro-life is to be pro-woman. Because we support women, we oppose abortion. We realize that the prevalence of abortion on demand is a clear indication that women are not receiving the types of societal and personal support necessary to bring their pregnancies to term. As Mary Ann Glendon, the Harvard law professor who headed the Holy See’s delegation to the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing in 1995, stated: “All who are genuinely committed to the advancement of women can and must offer a woman or a girl who is pregnant, frightened and alone a better alternative than the destruction of her own unborn child.”

“Therefore, in firmly rejecting ‘pro-choice’ it is necessary to become courageously ‘pro-woman,’ promoting a choice that is truly in favor of women”

(Pope John Paul II)

Just as Jesus sought out opportunities to reach out to women who were downtrodden, challenging the social conventions of his day, so has the Society of Jesus worked with and for women since its founding. St. Ignatius worked with women of faith throughout his life, accepting their offerings when he was a destitute pilgrim and working for their advancement locally in his years in Rome and universally through the men he missioned around the world. In our day, the 34th General Congregation stated its firm resolve to oppose any social injustice based on gender, reflecting the best of this relationship between women and the Society of Jesus throughout the world in its Decree 14, “Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society.”

Some influential voices posit a zero-sum conflict between “women’s reproductive rights” and the right to life of unborn children. Jesuits ought to find their place among those who demonstrate the obvious confluence of women’s rights and respect for life in all its forms. Pope John Paul II summed this partnership up when he wrote: “Therefore, in firmly rejecting ‘pro-choice’ it is necessary to become courageously ‘pro-woman,’ promoting a choice that is truly in favor of women. It is precisely the woman, in fact, who pays the highest price, not only for her motherhood, but even more for its destruction, for the suppression of the life of the child who has been conceived. The only honest stance, in these cases, is that of radical solidarity with the woman. It is not right to leave her alone.”⁴

III. Public Dialogue about Abortion in a Pluralistic Society

The United States is blessed to be a pluralistic society with a vigorous tradition of free thought and speech. To be surrounded by such a kaleidoscope of cultures, customs and ideas is a privilege rare in human history. While enriching, this can also be a potential source of frustration and conflict. What binds the United States together is a tradition of tolerance and mutual respect for the opinions of others, as guaranteed by the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the United States.

As Catholics and Jesuits, we would naturally prefer to live in a country where every citizen, voter and court consistently favor legal recognition of and protection for the unborn. We are encouraged by recent evidence indicating a modest shift of public opinion away from the easy availability of abortion, and are heartened that recent polls now show that far fewer Americans are willing to call themselves “pro-choice.”⁵ In addition, we are also encouraged by the large influx of young Americans – those under 30, and therefore survivors of *Roe v. Wade* – who are active in pro-life efforts.⁶

We must acknowledge, however, that phrases such as “the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and “the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” in documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights, are phrases with contested meanings that others understand differently than we do. This awareness can lead us in two directions, only one of which will be constructive in the long run. The first is the sectarian option, something which has decidedly not been the dominant thread of the long Catholic tradition. It would lead us to seclude ourselves from this corrupt world, and have as little as possible to do with the workings of governments, courts and the whole “culture of death.” It might make us feel better for a time, perhaps savoring the illusion that we are at least preserving our moral purity within a corrupt world, but it would not be socially responsible.

The more attractive option seeks neither to flee nor to dominate situations of pluralism. It commits us rather to a process of engaging those who initially disagree with us on some issues, seeking to create an acceptable consensus wherever possible by building upon those truths on which we can reach agreement, while continuing to educate and persuade those who disagree with our convictions. This path of “proposing, rather than imposing,” was described by the great American Jesuit theologian of the past century, John Courtney Murray. While emphasizing the value of tolerance and mutual dialogue, he also advised against any sort of moral relativism that might lead one to despair of finding and pursuing fundamental truths about human existence.



Another way of describing this stance is to say that Jesuits are committed to narrowing the gap between the current civil law of our nation and the demands of the moral law as we understand it. Our long-term goal remains full legal recognition of and protection for the unborn child – from the moment of conception.

In the near future, we cannot realistically expect complete agreement among all participants in the abortion debate. We must listen respectfully to others' opinions, just as we expect a fair hearing of our own arguments against abortion. Our confidence in the persuasive power of well-articulated defenses of pro-life positions sustains us, even as we acknowledge the long struggle ahead. An acceptable outcome may be a long way off, although building a consensus against the

most egregious wrongs, such as partial-birth abortions, may be possible sooner than we expect. In the meantime, our common calling is to stand in solidarity with the unborn, the "least of our brothers and sisters" (Matthew 25:40), through prayer and political activism.

As we have throughout our nearly five hundred year history, Jesuits will continue to undertake a broad variety of works and play diverse roles in the Church and in the wider society. It is our desire that Jesuits, along with their colleagues, will continue to offer a consistent message of respect for life, especially for unborn children. All of God's daughters and sons, particularly the most vulnerable and those yet to be born, must be treated with respect and protected by the laws of our nation.

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Third printing.

¹ The United States Supreme Court, in a 7-2 decision, handed down two rulings legalizing abortion in America. The principle decision, *Roe v. Wade* repealed all state laws prohibiting abortion. The companion case, *Doe v. Bolton* extended the right to abortion to the entire nine months of pregnancy.

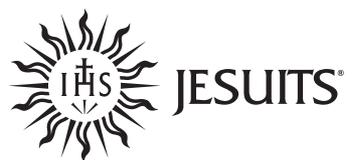
² The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Facts in Brief: Induced Abortion*, www.guttmacher.org.

³ *A Matter of the Heart*, A Statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 12, 2002.

⁴ *Crossing the Threshold Of Hope*, "The Defense of Every Life," www.catholic.net/RCC/POPE/HopeBook/Chap31.html.

⁵ The Gallup Organization, *Public Opinion About Abortion—An In-Depth review*, Lydia Saad, www.gallup.com.

⁶ *A Matter of the Heart*, A Statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 12, 2002.



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