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What About the Life and Dignity of the Woman?

57% of American Catholics agree that abortion should be legal. Despite that fact, abortion remains a contentious issue around the world, but especially in the United States, where it has become a crucial topic in politics, the health care system, and religion. In fact, religion often influences the former two spheres, when hospitals, doctors, and politicians decide to follow the stance of a religious institution, even if it differs from the interests of their patients or constituents. The Catholic Church holds the most famously (or infamously) rigid policy of any religious institution on the issue of abortion, supported by Catholic biblical and theological rhetoric, with one of the most central influences being Catholic Social Teaching. And yet, the Church's position on abortion is not the only Catholic one. Many Catholics use their faith in God as well as a dedication to social justice and Catholic Social Teaching to support a pro-choice stance in opposition to the Church's. The Church's pro-life stance contradicts the pro-choice stance of many practicing Catholics. The first tenet of Catholic Social Teaching, the life and dignity of the human person, has been misapplied in support of the Church's pro-life stance on abortion. Disregarding the dignity of the woman, this stance results from a religious institution's mission to dictate people's voting decisions.

The assertion that Catholicism is pro-life isn't strictly true. A more accurate statement would be that the mainstream Church, or more specifically Church doctrine and many prominent Catholic leaders, retain a pro-life stance. But where does that pro-life policy come from? Catholic Social Teaching, primarily. Catholic Social Teaching (CST), the rock on which much of Catholic moral thought is founded, finds its beginnings in the 19th century with Pope Leo XIII

who authored *Rerum Novarum*: a treatise on the rights and duties of capital and labor. The seven tenets grew out of a recognition of changing times during the industrial revolution, and a need to cement the importance of the rights and protections of certain marginalized groups. Since then CST has grown “to encompass issues such as war and peace, international trade and diplomacy, access to education, human rights, and the dignity of family life.” (“Catholic Social Teaching” [Marian University]). According to foundational documents from Papal and Vatican writings, the Life and Dignity of the Human Person has come to mean that “whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self-destruction... [is] a supreme dishonor to the Creator.” (Pope John Paul II). Although abortion is just one of the acts commonly condemned by the infamous first tenet of CST, it is often singled out as the most relevant breach of such moral rules, as the Second Vatican Council wrote, “from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care.” (Pope Paul VI). Catholic Social Teaching has come far from a 19th century papal writing about workers rights, but it continues to be used as one of the prime supporting reasons for the Church’s hard-line position on abortion.

In addition to the Church’s surface level objection to abortion that many are familiar with, the Catholic Church’s stance on abortion goes much deeper than most are aware. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, a summary of the principles of Catholicism, asserts that, “since the first century, the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable.” (Monk). Abortion is listed as an ‘intrinsic evil’ along with other condemnable acts by Catholic Social Teaching, most notably stem cell cloning, the death penalty, and war/terror/genocide. “But terror and genocide can never be justified. They are as intrinsically evil as abortion precisely because they involve the taking of innocent human life,” says the California Catholic Conference, not only illustrating the gravity of

the Church's feelings on abortion, but due to the structure of their sentencing even implying that abortion is the ultimate evil, by which all other evil acts must be measured. ("The Right to Life,"). One might perhaps view the Church's position on abortion in a slightly different light, after learning that abortion, which can often be a life-saving (in more ways than one) procedure for a pregnant person, is put on par with the evil of genocide, the literal slaughtering of thousands.

However, despite the Church's assertion that it has always thought abortion to be wrong, historically it has not always stuck to that narrative. "While it's fair to say that the Catholic Church has always leaned anti-abortion, history does not support that its position has been 'unchangeable' throughout the past two millennia," claims Monk, a Catholic scholar and theologian, in an article outlining the history of the Church's views on abortion (Monk). In fact due to abortion historically being, "a widespread, and largely socially accepted practice," it was often supported by Church leaders, and those who were against it were still unclear as to the question of when life actually begins (Monk). The most consistent Catholic thought believed that life began at 'ensoulment' which Thomas Aquinas claimed was forty to eighty days after conception, however more commonly ensoulment was believed to happen at the 'quickening' or the first time a fetus was felt moving in utero (Monk). Then, "in 1591 the new Pope Gregory XIV," asserted that life began "166 days into a pregnancy, or well over halfway through the second trimester," illustrating the fluidity of the Church's views on life and abortion (Monk). It wasn't until 1869 that Pope Pius IX "made abortion after conception a sin that automatically excommunicated those involved in its procurement from the Catholic Church," officially hardening its stance on abortion to the one we know today (Monk). Supporting earlier more accepting Catholic views on abortion, multiple Catholic saints list abortion as one of their

miracles, especially in cases of rape, like Brigid of Kildare, Ciarán of Saigir, Cainnech of Aghaboe, and Áed mac Bricc (Monk). Monk goes on to argue, “saying that being pro-choice is incompatible with being Catholic reflects a very narrow understanding of Catholic history and theology.” (Monk). A broader understanding of Catholicism’s history supports the viewpoints of a prominent portion of Catholics who identify as pro-choice, often because of their Catholic faith

An overlooked demographic in the abortion debate is the sizable number of pro-choice Catholics who disagree with the Church’s teaching on the subject. “68 percent of US Catholics don’t want to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned. And Catholic Americans get abortions at the same rate as other Americans,” explains Jaime Mansen, the founder of Catholics for Choice, a premiere nonprofit organization of pro-choice Catholics. Contradictory statements like that of the California Catholic Conference stating, “86 percent of Americans think abortion should be illegal in the third trimester,” are often misleading, as they apply specifically to third trimester abortions and not abortion in general (Mansen; “The Right to Life,”). Mansen’s main argument comes down to the concept that “women... are reduced to vessels, one in which the potential, theoretical life that might be is privileged over the living, breathing person at risk,” demonstrating the discrepancy between a held belief of the Life and Dignity of the Human Person and a pro-life stance in which the life and dignity of that woman is often not even considered (Mansen). Mansen represents an alternate interpretation of Catholic teaching and faith put forth by many Catholics. In a pamphlet from Catholics for Choice for Catholic women considering abortions, a key element of the pro-choice argument is illuminated: the concept that, “the Catholic tradition is more than the teachings written down by popes and theologians. Catholicism is based on a deep respect for the conscience, which each person must follow above

all else when making a moral decision.” (Catholics for Choice). The Catholic pro-choice argument is often primarily rooted in the aforementioned primacy of conscience, the aspect of Catholic faith that trusts an individual to follow their heart on moral matters. In this context meaning, as CFC puts it, “each woman’s circumstances are unique, which means she is the one best placed to decide about her pregnancy. No matter what her reasoning, her decision should be respected.” (“You Are Not Alone,”).

What makes abortion such an important social justice topic is its impact on women, and more frankly, the harm pro-life legislation and rhetoric have on any individual with the capability to become pregnant, as well as women everywhere. In a book about ‘pregnancy and power’ Solinger lays out “the reproductive justice framework,” and its three principles: “the right of all individuals not to have a child; the right to have a child; and the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments” (Solinger). The first principle obviously supports a pro-choice view of reproductive rights, however the third principle vitally illustrates an important argument against a shallow pro-life argument only in regards to abortion. With the problems of a foster care system, and the rampant poverty in the US, if a pro-life conviction is one that a person insists on holding, they must then be completely dedicated to protecting the lives of all people: the children put in a flawed foster care system, the elderly without a place to go, those living on the streets, and not just interested in protecting a fetus who, after their birth, they are content to abandon to the whims of an imperfect world. Ultimately, a pro-life argument must be supported in its entirety. If the Life and Dignity of the Human Person is what you want to protect, then the life and dignity of a woman faced with an incredibly difficult decision should be *just as important* as the ‘lives of the unborn.’

When pro-life legislation seeks to take away a person's autonomy over their own body, their very right to choose, the negative physical and psychological impact on women is catastrophic. In addition to the immediate physical concerns of women dying because of lack of accessible reproductive care, it is important to acknowledge that "these laws do not result in fewer abortions. Instead, they compel women to risk their lives and health by seeking out unsafe abortion care." (Roeder). The legislation that pro-life individuals and religious institutions lobby so hard for doesn't even work to reduce the number of abortions, which supports the argument that "the Catholic Church's reproductive fight is about controlling women's freedom." (Mansen). This assertion is further evidenced by the fact that the Church has found no issue with male contraceptive means over the years, like vasectomies, proving that the "insidious papal teachings," of the Church are an "attempt to limit women's power and potential with theological gymnastics," as an attempt to retain control and power in an institution that already bars women from main forms of leadership (Mansen). "Even among those of us who boldly proclaim our dissent from Catholic teachings on abortion, the church still holds great power," voices Mansen, illustrating the psychological harm that the Catholic Church's hardline stance has on its members who passionately use their faith to support a woman's right to choose (Mansen).

The question of abortion remains particularly relevant today in light of recent legislative moves by many states in attempts to restrict and remove access to abortion and reproductive care around the US. In fact, "In 2021, the United States has already seen the highest number of abortion restrictions enacted in a single year," illustrating the urgency and unprecedentedness of such developments (Ellman, Spitzer). According to 2021 data, "561 ... abortion restrictions [have been] introduced this year as of early June 2021... [and] 1,327 [have been] enacted since *Roe v. Wade*." (Ellman, Spitzer). If this trend continues, it exacerbates the very real threat of

abortion becoming illegal throughout the United States, devastating thousands of women's lives, increasing the death toll of pregnancy, and setting a dangerous precedent for the government and religious institutions' power of women's bodies.

Similar to all social justice topics, abortion does not only impact one vulnerable group of people, and, in fact, laws restricting abortion access significantly and disproportionately impact people of color. With "the national Black maternal mortality rate [of] 44 deaths per 100,000 live births... compared to a rate of 17.9 white deaths," it becomes clearly evident how abortion laws like that of S.B. 8 in Texas will further entrench racist policies and discrepancies in health care quality and access (Blumenthal, Zephyrin). "Banning abortion in the U.S. would lead to a 21% increase in the number of pregnancy-related deaths overall and a 33% increase among Black women, simply because staying pregnant is more dangerous than having an abortion," says Roeder, illustrating an important point which many pro-life arguments miss. Legislating against choice nationally will result in a world where people who have already been harmed by the government and organized religion are further hurt by policies outside of their control and against their health interests.

Exploring the Catholic Church's attempts to influence policy making and voting decisions, begs the question of the influence of religion on law making in the general sense. Despite the importance that religion plays in the abortion debate, increasingly partisan politics plays a vital role in swaying the public's stances to that of pro-choice or pro-life. According to recent polls, "Political affiliation has become more significant over time, and many Americans have stopped taking moral cues from religious communities," says Dallas, indicating that despite the Church's attempts to sway voters, perhaps some are not listening (Dallas). However, in contrast to that argument, for some individuals, religion, in fact, is the only thing that *should* play

a role in lawmaking. Perhaps due to a belief that morality and Biblical interpretation are inextricable, “half of Americans say [the] Bible should influence US laws, including 18 percent who favor it over the will of the people.” (Lipka). Unsurprisingly, in the process of the creation of the United States, the question of the role of religion in lawmaking was addressed, most famously in the first amendment with the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion. “However, the Supreme Court has tolerated a certain degree of government involvement in religion,” illustrating the ways in which the humans participating in government can shape its impact on the people (“Religion and the Constitution”). Despite plenty of evidence displaying many young people’s turn away from organized religion, as well as a prominent population for whom religion should be the sole influencer of law and voting, the fact remains that public opinion is perhaps as split on the role of religion in politics as people think it is on abortion.

However, in comparison with the role of religion in general, the role of the Catholic Church is unique. The Catholic Church “has held the most absolute and extreme position against abortion taken by any religious group,” asserts Kissling, exemplifying why Catholicism is the first institution that comes to mind in terms of religions that preach against abortion (Kissling). “Religious observers wonder why the church is so adamantly against abortion in every circumstance, despite the beliefs of its members,” Kissling points out. Kissling theorizes this is because “the bishops,” with control over the Church’s official stance “express their own opinions, not the opinions of the 53 million US Catholics” (Kissling). Kissling additionally takes issue with the Church’s stance and influence on politics and public life by pointing out that “since women cannot become Catholic bishops, or even priests, they are excluded from the meetings of the USCCB [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops],” and that “Catholic lay

groups have expressed the view that there is more than one legitimate Catholic position regarding abortion.” (Kissling). Despite that, the Church maintains intent on a pro-life position that opposes the views of the people in their pews, and seeks to decide the fate of all Americans, even those who are in no way associated with the Church.

Due to a lack of recognition and acknowledgement of the equally valuable life and dignity of the person pregnant, the first tenet of Catholic Social Teaching has been wrongfully used to argue a pro-life stance, and represents the danger of a single religious institution’s influence on lawmaking, especially when its stance is not supported by the majority of Americans. Is it really fair for a select few individuals to require the entire diverse population of a country, or even a state, to adhere to their specific moral compass? Furthermore it is important to recognize that “many people of faith who support abortion rights still want to build a world where abortion is very rare,” an often overlooked aspect of the pro-choice argument (Dallas). No one wants abortion, which is why people identify as pro-choice and not pro-abortion, but the fact remains that we live in a world where it is sometimes necessary, but more importantly, we live in a world where it should *always, always* be up to the woman to choose. Unfortunately, the Church remains only one of the many obstacles to women in search of true reproductive freedom, and the urgency of current legislation in the works in this country only illustrates the need for the recognition of abortion as a real social justice issue, so that one day women might never have to fear losing autonomy over their own bodies.

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