



Session 2: Frequently Asking Questions

What is presented here are answers to some questions that people frequently have on the Church's teaching on abortion. People also have questions about the current situation with regards to abortion in Ireland. This resource is to help you answer these questions for yourself and in conversations with others. An excellent additional resource is the submission from the Irish Bishops' Conference to the Citizens Assembly, "Two Lives, One Love".

Question 1: Isn't abortion first and foremost about a woman's right to choose what is best for her, and not what society imposes?

A: Some people argue that the right to life of the unborn should be a matter of personal choice on the part of the mother. Others argue that, while they are opposed to abortion as a general principle, they believe that there are some children to whom the right to life does not apply either because they have been diagnosed with a serious medical condition or because they have been conceived as a result of rape. As Catholics we believe that there is no such thing as a human life without value. We accept, of course, that death is part of our human condition but we reject the suggestion that any person can decide when it is time for another person to die.

There are many situations in life where our choices are limited if that choice could harm the life of another person, for example, I can't choose to drink and then drive home. These limitations are of course, understandable because they show us as a society that we value life. This general principle of the value of life is something people of all faith and no faith can, and do, share.

Specifically, for us as Christians, faith allows us to see each person as having his or her origins in the intention of God and his or her fulfilment in eternal life. This belief, expressed in various ways in the Bible, and through Church teaching is presented very beautifully by Pope Francis in his 2016 publication *The Joy of Love*. He says:

"So great is the value of a human life, and so inalienable the right to life of an innocent child growing in the mother's womb, that no alleged right to one's own body can justify a decision to terminate that life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the "property" of another human being."¹

Question 2: Do you believe life begins at conception?

A: Yes. But this is not a question of belief - it is a scientific fact. Each one of us started life as an embryo. When the father's sperm fuses with the mother's egg, a human life begins. At the moment of conception a new, unique and genetically complete and different human being comes into existence. From that moment

¹ Pope Francis. *Amoris Laetitia*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016. Paragraphs 83 and 166

on the new human being develops and grows. Steve Jobs, Andrea Bocelli, Jamie Foxx, Nelson Mandela are just some of the people that would not have existed if their mothers had chosen abortion over adoption. Their lives – all lives – begin at that moment of conception. Although very tiny, this new human being is not just a potential life; it is already a human being - with potential. All of the marvelous developments that happen from conception on show how this new human life then develops. For years people were misled into thinking that the unborn baby was just a ‘clump of cells’. The amazing advances in ultrasound technology illuminate the truth that the unborn child is a human being. In 1967, when the abortion law was introduced in Britain, politicians could have pleaded ignorance to the humanity of the unborn. Today, we don’t have this excuse.

Question 3: So if a woman is raped, you still think she shouldn’t have an abortion?

A: Rape is an unimaginable and horrendous crime. A woman who has been raped needs compassionate care and support. Under such circumstances one can scarcely begin to imagine the physical and emotional stress facing the expectant mother. Where pregnancy occurs as a result of rape, both the mother and child are victims, and both deserve our compassion and support. Abortion is presented, even taken for granted, as a ‘solution’ to the most difficult situations, but this ignores the fact that it involves the taking of an innocent unborn life and the exposure of the women to emotional hurt and possible psychological harm. Ryan Bomberger is a human rights campaigner based in the US. He was born following rape and publicly thanked his birth mum for giving him life. Ryan has movingly said: “We’re all wanted by someone.” The child is absolutely innocent of their father’s crime. They are not a part of their mother’s body, or responsible for their father’s character.

Question 4: What about the case where the baby has a life-limiting condition and may not survive outside the womb?

A: It is very distressing for a mother to discover that the baby in her womb is seriously ill and, in all probability will not live. Her dreams and hopes are dashed. She grieves for the child that she will never have. She struggles to tell others of the loss that faces her. The grief of the father is no less real.

The use of words like “fatal” or “lethal” to describe these conditions implies that there is something definite about the outcome and that death is imminent and inevitable. The reality is that every case is different and that, while some babies will die before birth, and some will live for just a few hours, others will live for significantly longer. We must really ask ourselves what is the truly compassionate response in this situation. It is an unimaginable situation that is doubtless filled with grief and pain – how will any choice mitigate this suffering?

Parents from groups like www.onedaymore.ie and www.everylifecounts.ie whose children have been born with life-limiting conditions speak about the support they needed to deal with this very difficult situation. They have emphasised how important it was for them to have the memory of doing the best they could for their sick child. They have spoken about how helpful it has been to them to have had the possibility of holding and caring for their child for a few hours or even for a few minutes, until death naturally occurred. Others have told us about their joy in discovering after birth that, while their child did have serious health issues, the prognosis was actually far better than they had originally been given to understand.

Even taking the worst case scenarios, the situation of an unborn child with a life-limiting condition is comparable to that of a born child or adult at an advanced stage of terminal illness. One of the particular challenges facing parents of unborn children with life-limiting conditions is the lack of coordinated support for them. A lot more needs to be done to provide appropriate perinatal hospice services, which offer

warmth, tenderness, nutrition and hydration and, in that way, support parents in caring for their sick children until natural death. This should be the focus of government policy and it is something towards which we can and should all work.

A woman recently told her story about her child who lived for 17 minutes. In that time she named her baby boy who was loved for every minute of his life. She held him, kissed his face, baptised him and later she buried him and grieved for him. She said those 17 minutes were some of the most precious she had ever had and she would remember her son and could now grieve properly.

Once we concede that a child with a terminal illness can have their life ended prematurely, this premise will soon open the door as it has in other countries to aborting babies with varying degrees of disability. In Britain if parents receive a poor pre-natal diagnosis they are handed an NHS booklet which details what is involved in the abortion procedure. 92% of babies diagnosed with Downs Syndrome in the UK are aborted.²

Question 5: But doesn't the Catholic Church give more importance to the life of an unborn child than to the mother?

A: The Catholic Church's teaching on the right to life is often presented inaccurately. The Catholic Church has never taught that the life of a child in the womb should be preferred to that of a mother. By virtue of their common humanity a mother and her unborn baby have an equal right to life.

Where a seriously ill pregnant woman needs medical treatment which may, as a secondary effect, put the life of her baby at risk, such treatments are always ethically permissible provided every effort has been made to save the life of both the mother and her baby. Abortion, by contrast, is the direct and intentional destruction of an unborn baby and is gravely immoral in all circumstances. It is not a medical treatment.

When, sadly, a baby dies naturally in the womb before birth, there is no question of the mother being obliged to proceed with the pregnancy. There is now only one "patient", the mother. The mother becomes the sole focus of any medical care that is required. Along with the father, the mother is entitled to the best pastoral care that we can offer, as they grieve the loss of their child.

Question 6: In rare cases doesn't a suicidal woman need abortion to save her life?

A: No, actually, this is not the case. Where a woman has an underlying mental health illness, abortion is not the answer and could well have negative consequences for a woman's mental health. Abortion is not recognised medically as a treatment for suicidal feelings.

When abortion is made available on 'mental health' or 'suicide' grounds, psychiatrists just happen to be the ones asked to certify a woman's eligibility for abortion. They can ask questions to determine how suicidal the woman is, they can suggest alternatives, but they have no way of knowing whether the woman will or will not commit suicide or whether the abortion will or will not affect the decision.

Question 7: 4,000 women travel from Ireland to Britain every year for abortion – are we not just exporting the problem?

A: First, what's at stake in any debate or conversation about abortion is the value of life, and the sad experience is that once laws permitting abortion are introduced, it could be argued that they diminish

² Parliamentary Inquiry into Abortion on the Grounds of Disability, UK, 2013

society's respect for the inherent value of every human life, born or unborn. Every country has to honestly address issues related to the right to life. There is an unceasing challenge for Government and society at large to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for expectant mothers and their unborn children. But equally, we cannot shy away from the implications of what legal abortion would involve and the brutal reality of abortion, legal up to birth, in countries like Britain and elsewhere.

Simply because something is legal in another country does not mean that we should blindly follow suit. In Britain, abortion is legal up to birth where the child has a disability such as Down syndrome. It is up to us here in Ireland to decide our own laws. We can learn from the mistakes of a pro-abortion culture like Britain.

Question 8: So what can I do about all of this? Is it not just about the person making the choice for themselves?

There are lots of things you can do to get involved in this question. It's about bringing your faith to the picture; allowing it to shed light on these difficult questions for you and for others. The first thing to do is to enter in to conversations with people about these questions – people who agree with you and people who don't agree with you. And whatever position the person you're talking to has, don't rush to judgment. Equally, don't be afraid of saying calmly, clearly and with compassion what you believe yourself and why you believe. You might not change anyone's mind, but it is still important to have these conversations.

Another thing you can do is reach out to help those who are struggling for lots of reasons in our society; men and women, young and old. An argument the 'pro-choice' side of the debate frequently makes is that we live in a very unfair society, that it is therefore unfair to 'make a woman carry an unwanted pregnancy' and that our constitution 'punishes' women in poverty in particular who can't afford to travel to another country for an abortion. We have to look seriously at the many ways in which society is unfair while holding firm to our belief that abortion doesn't right that wrong; it takes away the life of another human person – and that is, of course, a very profound injustice.

Another thing you can do is be compassionate in your engagements particularly any engagement or interaction you might have with someone facing a difficult pregnancy. Reach out in love and care. Help them in their situation as best you can. Offer assurances that that help will continue. This reaching out in care might be particularly helpful to new mothers who are feeling isolated and lonely in your community. Think about ways in which your parish might support mothers and fathers in very practical ways. Being 'prolife' is not just something we are called to be in terms of the issue of abortion.

A final and very important thing you can do is get involved and active in the campaign around the 8th Amendment. Join a group, offer financial support to organisations advocating for the protection of life of the unborn, offer to do leaflet drops, organize a talk in your parish. Don't be afraid to contact your local politicians to let them know where you, as a member of their constituency stand on this very important issue. And of course, we should always bring our concerns about this issue and all issues to our God who is compassion and mercy.