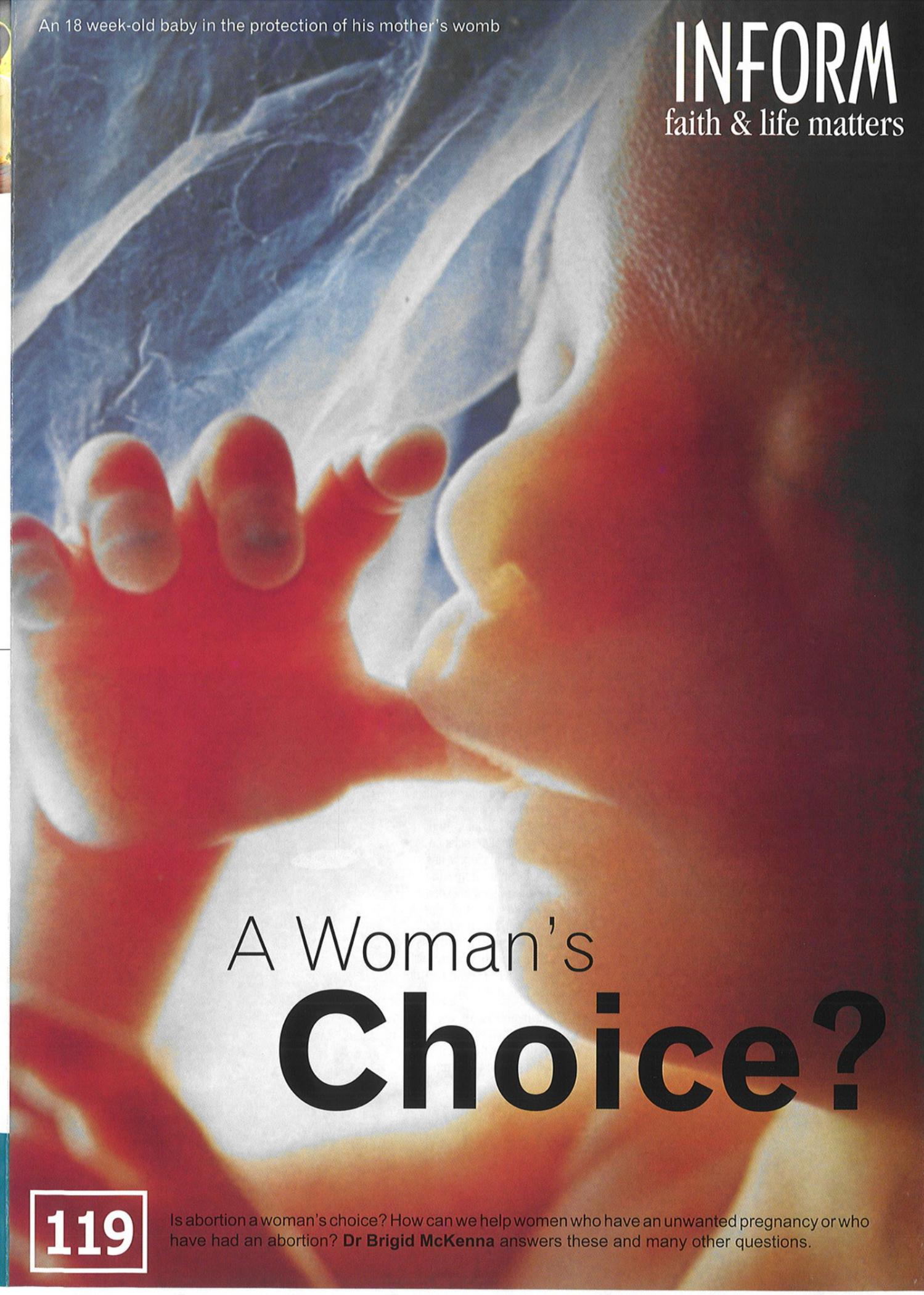


An 18 week-old baby in the protection of his mother's womb



A Woman's Choice?

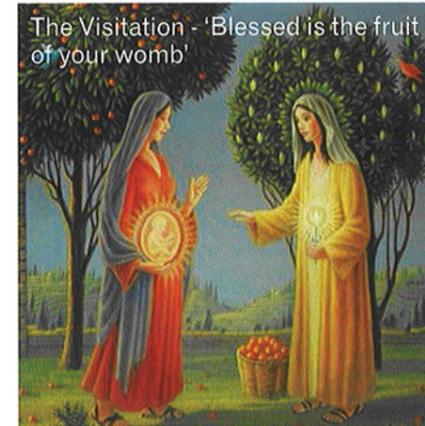
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Is abortion a woman's choice? How can we help women who have an unwanted pregnancy or who have had an abortion? **Dr Brigid McKenna** answers these and many other questions.

Healing and reconciliation after abortion

One particularly important way Christians are called to respond to the tragedy of abortion is by extending hope and healing to women and men who have been involved in abortion. This involves spreading and living out the Church's message of forgiveness and reconciliation, as Pope John Paul II writes with so much compassion to women who have had abortions:

'The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains wrong but do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child.' (*The Gospel of Life*, 99)



The Visitation - 'Blessed is the fruit of your womb'

Pope Benedict XVI recently reaffirmed this message of God's love and mercy: 'I make my own the exhortation in *The Gospel of Life* addressed to women who have had an abortion...' Pope Benedict also expressed 'deep appreciation for all those social and pastoral initiatives being taken for the reconciliation and treatment of people injured by the drama of abortion', describing them as an essential element for building the 'civilisation of love that humanity needs today more than ever.' (Benedict XVI, Address, 5 April 2008.)

Research has shown that although most Australians believe that abortion is immoral, they put these beliefs aside for the sake of respecting a 'woman's right to choose' or to improve women's lives. But as we can see, many women don't freely choose abortion and abortion doesn't help women – or men,



or families, or society. Abortion only results in death and despair.

As followers of Christ we must engage in honest, compassionate and constructive personal and public discussion about abortion. We need to face up to the moral reality of abortion and understand more about its tragic consequences. We need to examine ways by which we can help women and men to pursue life-giving alternatives to abortion. And aware of God's mercy and forgiveness, we need to share the good news of hope and healing for women and men who have been involved in abortion.

Protecting human life, strengthening family life and reaching out to the broken-hearted are not optional extras for Christians. They are part of being a disciple of Jesus.

Sometimes this involves tremendous sacrifices of time, energy, money and emotion. Often it only involves a listening ear and a few honest and compassionate words. But if it is to be truly effective, it always requires prayer. We can all do something to put an end to the tragedy of abortion.

Dr Brigid McKenna is the Life Issues Policy Officer for the Life, Marriage and Family Centre of the Archdiocese of Sydney.

Questions for discussion

1. What struck you most in this article?
2. Why do you think the rate of abortion is so high in this country?
3. After reading this article, what do you think of a bumper sticker which reads: 'Abortion – one dead, one wounded'?
4. How would you answer the argument that a woman has a 'right to choose' to have an abortion?

For more information on a healing ministry within the Church which helps women and men suffering after abortion to receive God's forgiveness and healing, go to www.rachelsvineyard.org.au

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Arguably, in the unique context of pregnancy, 'rights talk' overlooks the fact that pregnant women and their unborn children have *shared* rather than *rival* interests. To harm one is always to harm the other; to care for one always requires caring for them both. As such, abortion is wrong because it is an attack against the life of an unborn child and an attack against the physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of a woman.

Even where pregnancy poses grave difficulties and evokes tremendous uncertainty and fear, there is always a better alternative to abortion. There is always another way forward – but no woman should have to take this path alone. This is why the Church emphasises the importance of supporting mothers and fathers in the choice to continue with an unplanned or difficult pregnancy. A number of organisations already generously respond to this challenge by providing counselling and emotional and material assistance to women who are vulnerable to abortion. But we all need to be ready to offer love and support to pregnant women in our families, friendship groups and communities. A listening ear, honest information and practical assistance can make all the difference in the world to a lonely or fearful pregnant woman. Sometimes it can be the difference between life and death!

The Gospel of Life explains how moral responsibility for abortion also falls upon other persons: legislators who promote and approve abortion laws; health-care administrators and professionals who provide abortions; public educators or officials who encourage attitudes of sexual permissiveness and a lack of esteem for motherhood, or who oppose social policies in support of families; and international institutions which systematically campaign for the legalisation and spread of abortion. In this way abortion goes beyond even 'the responsibility of individuals and beyond the harm done to them, and takes on a distinctly social dimension.' (*The Gospel of Life*, 59)

As well as directly supporting women and men who are vulnerable to abortion, Christians must also confront these 'anti-life' elements of our culture. This involves the promotion of good laws that protect the value of every human life, the provision of honest information about the reality and effects of abortion, and the development of educational and workplace practices, tax structures and other social policies which are much more family friendly. It requires us to move beyond tried and failed 'harm minimisation' strategies such as value-free sex education and the promotion of contraception. These sorts of interventions have only led to higher and earlier rates of sexual activity, higher rates of pregnancy and higher rates of abortion. They are no substitute for helping men and women to understand that the proper place of sex is within committed and loving marriages.

Published six times a year, **INFORM** is available from:

Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney
 Locked Bag 888 Silverwater DC NSW 1811
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INFORM - 50c per copy (minimum order: 10 copies per issue) Single subscription \$10 per year within Australia, 6 issues annually. Single copy of every back issue of INFORM still in print - \$40 per set.

No one likes talking about abortion. Politicians who speak against abortion are either told to 'butt out' if they are men or accused of 'betraying the sisterhood' if they are women. Many medical professionals try to talk about abortion as though it is 'just another medical procedure'. Women who have had abortions are encouraged to keep their 'secret' to themselves, especially if they are suffering from the effects of the abortion.

Yet abortion is undoubtedly one of our greatest personal and social tragedies. Silence doesn't change the facts that there are approximately 90 000 abortions in Australia each year; one abortion for every 2.8 live births; and that one in three Australian women will have an abortion. These figures would be even higher if they included abortions caused by 'morning-after' pills and some forms of the oral contraceptive pill.

Australia has one of the highest abortion rates in the developed world. Beneath the silence we should not be surprised to discover that someone we know and love has been involved in abortion.

A deadly silence

If abortion is so common, why is it shrouded in silence?

One reason is that today the majority of people recognise that abortion involves the killing of a very young and vulnerable human being, and know that this is wrong. Very few people can look at an ultrasound image or listen to a beating heart of a foetus and dismiss him or her as a 'blob of tissue.' Our minds and our hearts move us to recognise this living growing human being as 'one of us' – a fellow human being worthy of protection, nurture and love. Christians also see these young human beings as a wondrous gift from God.

Deep down, most people know that abortion involves the abandonment of our unborn brothers and sisters, and very often, a failure to support their parents. We wish it were otherwise and, overcome by the injustice and shame of this painful reality, we button our lips and turn away.

Even the majority of women who undergo an abortion do so with very heavy hearts. One study found that 74% of women who have abortions acknowledge that abortion is morally wrong, and that 83% of women would have carried their baby to term had they received support from their husband, boyfriend or family. Tragically, more than half of these women had the abortion because they felt coerced by an outside source such as a boyfriend, family member, or doctor. (cf. Reardon, DC, *Aborted Women, Silent No More*, Alcorn Books, 2002)

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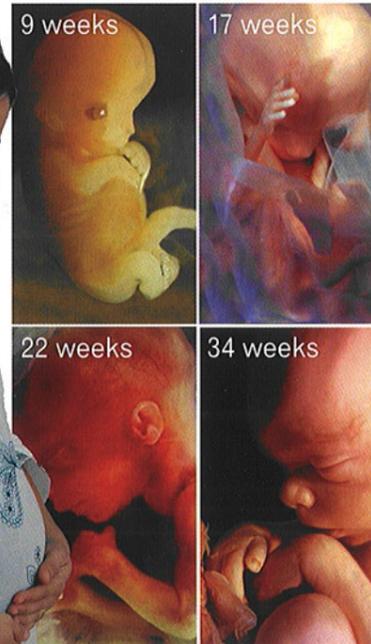


These figures remind us that community silence and complicity often go hand in hand. Silence enables us to overlook painful realities: to tolerate the injustice of abortion and to ignore its personal and social effects. Silence can perpetuate our culture's lack of support for motherhood and its failure to promote life-giving alternatives to abortion. Silence can be deadly.

What are the ethics of abortion?

Unborn human beings are members of the human family from the moment of conception: '...from the time that the ovum is fertilised, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. This has always been clear, and ... modern genetic science offers clear confirmation. It has demonstrated that from the first instant there is established the programme of what this living being will be: a person, this individual person with his characteristic aspects already well determined.' (CDF, *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, 12-13)

Like other members of the human family, unborn human beings should never be deliberately killed. Every human being is precious, from the



WOM in the MB

very beginning of his or her life, until natural death. The concern of the Church to be inclusive, to recognise the claims of each and every human being to our protection and compassion is surely Christianity at its best. In doing so, we join many people of other religions, and some of no religion, who believe respect for the dignity of every human being gives rise to the recognition of the so-called sanctity or inviolability of human life and a series of basic human rights.

Therefore, direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. (cf. Pope John Paul II, Enc. *The Gospel of Life*, 62)

Irrespective of whether it occurs as the result of a procedure or a medication, soon after conception or much later in the pregnancy, the deliberate and direct killing of the unborn unjustly deprives a human being of the opportunity to grow and develop and experience all that life on earth has to offer.

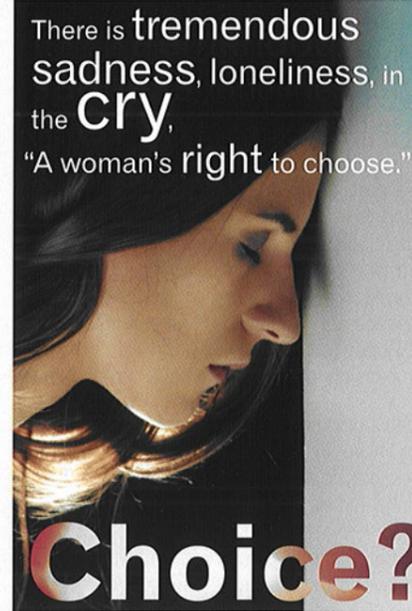
What are the effects of abortion?

The intentional killing of the unborn is clearly the most serious and unjust dimension of abortion. But the Church is also concerned about other, often devastating, effects of abortion.

Foremost among the other 'causalities' of abortion are women. When women are faced with an unexpected or difficult pregnancy, abortion might promise to solve all of a woman's problems at once: relationship problems, difficulties with finances or housing, educational or workplace problems, the demands of caring for existing children, embarrassment or shame, fear of the unknown....

But in reality, abortion simply covers up a woman's problems. As Frederica Mathewes-Green writes, 'The quick fix of abortion ... hides too many losses: her child, her bodily integrity, her dignity as a woman worthy of faithful love and workplace understanding. ...There is tremendous sadness, loneliness, in the cry, "A woman's right to choose."' (Mathewes-Green, F. 'Compassion and Concentric Circles of Support,' www.fnsa.org)

Abortion can also create new problems. Dr Theresa Burke, founder of Rachel's Vineyard retreats, has counselled thousands of women whose lives have been shattered by the trauma of abortion. She explains: 'Abortion is a death experience. It is the demise of human potential, relationship, responsibility, maternal attachment, connectedness and innocence. Such a loss is rarely experienced without conflict and ambivalence.' As a result, abortion



can lead to profound grief, sadness, heartache, guilt, shame and anger. Some women try to numb themselves with alcohol and drugs or re-enact their pain through promiscuity and repeat abortions. Others develop eating disorders, panic attacks, mental depression, anxiety and thoughts of suicide. (Theresa Burke, 'Abortion and Depression,' *Zenit*, 4 Mar. 2006)

Burke's experience is supported by a growing body of evidence, including the research of New Zealand's Professor David Fergusson, who has found that women who undergo abortions have elevated rates of subsequent mental health problems, including depression (46% increase), anxiety, suicidal behaviour and substance use disorders. (Fergusson, DM, Horwood, LJ, Ridder, EM, 'Abortion in young women and subsequent mental health,' *J Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Jan. 2006; 47(1):16-24)

Other studies have linked abortion to an increased risk of long-term physical problems such as infertility, difficulties with subsequent pregnancies and breast cancer.

Because men are involved in 95% of all abortion decisions, abortion can have a dramatic impact upon their lives as well. If they encourage, manipulate or even force their girlfriends, partners or wives to abort, or abandon them because of the pregnancy, they can also experience post-abortion symptoms. Men who try but are unable to dissuade the mothers of their children from having an abortion can experience serious depression, rage and grief that can be turned inward in self-destruction or acted out in numerous unhealthy ways. (cf. Kevin Burke, 'Men and the Abortion Aftermath,' *Zenit*, 29 Aug. 2007)

Families suffer too. When an abortion is undertaken with the hope of salvaging a relationship, many couples find that the relationship often ends anyway, especially if trust and intimacy have been damaged. Grandparents and siblings mourn the loss of their newest family member and the promise of unconditional love and acceptance that is central to family life.

Abortion also affects the wider community. It dulls our sensitivity to the value of human life and encourages 'quick fix' illusory solutions that sacrifice some lives for the sake of others. It has

a particularly sinister effect upon the integrity of healthcare professionals, undermining their commitment to use medical knowledge and skill for the good of all.

But what about women's 'right to choose'?

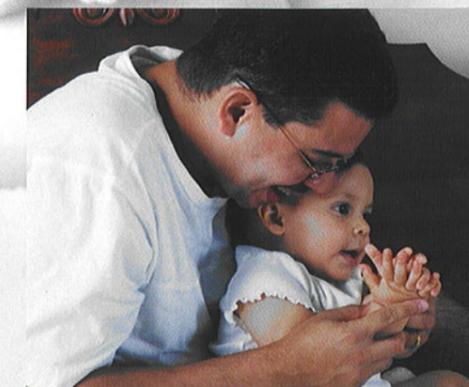
There are many reasons why a woman may decide to have an abortion. In the encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II explains that the Church understands that this decision is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as it is '...not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.' (*The Gospel of Life*, 58)

Sometimes, too, external pressure may come directly from the father of the child, or indirectly, such as when he leaves the mother alone to face the problems of pregnancy. Pressure to abort can also come from a woman's wider family circle and from friends. Sometimes, John Paul II explains, 'the woman is subjected to such strong pressure that she feels psychologically forced to have an abortion: certainly in this case moral responsibility lies particularly with those who have directly or indirectly obliged her to have an abortion.' (*The Gospel of Life*, 59)

These passages remind us that amidst all of society's talk about women having the 'right to choose' whether or not to continue a pregnancy, many pregnant women are left feeling as though they have no other choice than to have an abortion. They know that abortion will mean the death of their child, but continuing with the pregnancy can seem to threaten their well-being and future as well. The 'right to choose' abortion can then seem like the 'obligation to choose' abortion.

However, even if it is freely sought, abortion is never a good choice. In many areas of life, our freedom or 'right' to choose is limited by the more fundamental rights of other people, and especially the right to life.

While a woman has a right to choose what to do with her own body, the unborn child is not her own body – it is someone else's. Half the time 'he' is of the opposite sex to the mother. Like the mother, the unborn child has the right to life.



"Human life is sacred and inviolable at every moment of existence, including the initial phase which precedes birth. All human beings, from their mothers' womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the 'book of life' (cf. Ps 139:1, 13-16)." (*The Gospel of Life*, 61)