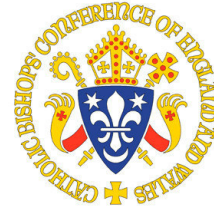




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**Open Letter on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1967 Abortion Act from the Presidents of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Scotland and England and Wales**

The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 Abortion Act is an important moment for reflection. It gives us all an opportunity to seek to cherish human life and to support women in difficult circumstances. The law affects attitudes, but it does not itself compel anyone to have an abortion. Even without a change in the law the abortion rate could fall dramatically if enough minds and hearts were changed.

The miraculous nature of human reproduction has become ever more apparent through recent advances in medical technology. In 1967 Ultrasound was a primitive tool. Ultrasound scanners today can reveal in extraordinary detail the development of a human life in the womb. Premature babies are now able to survive at ever younger ages. Developmental biology makes increasingly clear the beautiful and intricate processes of continuous development and growth of the single unique organism which is formed at conception. That is when our lives started. From that point on, there is a new human life which is neither the life of the father nor the mother. In 2007 we understand better than ever before, because we have seen it with our own eyes, the wonderful process of life that is brought to an end by abortion.

The 1967 Act was intended to solve the problem of illegal abortion, on the basis that it was a major cause of death in pregnant women. Yet our countries now perform nearly 200,000 abortions every year. We have one of the most liberal abortion laws in Europe with abortion up to 24 weeks and abortion in the case of disability (and on some other grounds) up to birth. Whatever our religious creed or political conviction, abortion on this scale can only be a source of distress and profound anguish for us all. The Catholic Church throughout the world has been constant in its opposition to abortion as morally wrong, and has been determined to give voice to the silent cry for love and recognition that belongs to every human life. The Church has for many years in our countries been at the forefront of offering practical, emotional and spiritual care to women and babies in need. It has sought, too, to help the many women, and men, who suffer grief, pain and loss following an abortion experience.

In the years since 1967 much has been made of the slogan 'the woman's right to choose'. Yet the right to make a genuine choice is exactly what very many women who have abortions say they do not have.

Abortion **is** a moment of choice. Abortion is always a choice between life and death, but we recognize that it is made in complex personal and domestic situations. It can be especially difficult for the mother if she feels abandoned by her partner or that by having the child she will lose the support of her family or society. Women in this situation can feel intensely isolated. Many women and men, too, already feel the pressure of caring for their families. They often have to cope with financial burdens and the demands of a career. In such situations, family relationships can feel so strained that they do not feel they can welcome another life. If the pregnancy is unwanted it can be easier to argue that it is somehow in the interests of the child not to be born because the child will not be welcomed. At times, the life of the child is seen as an unnecessary limitation on the mother and the father. The child's life is placed in opposition to theirs. When this happens abortion can be portrayed as the lesser of two evils which removes an obstacle to the "success" of the parents' lives. Yet life, especially new life, is ultimately never a deprivation. It is a gift that always enriches; a promise filled with hope. We should never let ourselves be persuaded otherwise.

Often, 'a woman's right to choose' fails to acknowledge the role of the father. It seems to pass over the fact that the majority of men do want to be fathers of their children. If we accept 'a woman's right to choose' as the governing principle of such a profound choice between life and death, then rather than encouraging men to accept responsibility, it can support their denial or avoidance.

For everyone involved, abortion will often have been a painful and shattering decision. For many women it is one in which they, perhaps even as much as their unborn child, will have been the victim. This is why we believe that abortion is not only a personal choice, it is about the choices our society makes to support women, their partners and families in these situations. If our society makes life its choice then there is no reason why the child, the mother and the father, and indeed the whole family of society cannot grow to fulfill their potential. Abortion robs everyone of their future. Individually and as a society we believe we have another choice: to give birth to life.


How can we all help bring about change? There is nothing to stop our society from acting now to foster a new understanding and approach to relationships, responsibility and mutual support:

- By being parents and families who cherish life and support our daughters and sons in making decisions which are responsibly pro-life.
- By providing sympathetic counselling and help for young women who find themselves pregnant.
- By providing more and better facilities to support and help young mothers who choose to have their babies.

- By dismantling a conveyor belt that can often take a young woman through to having an early abortion without any of the alternatives being properly explored or resourced. Making genuine freedom of choice a reality is the first and crucial step in a fundamental change of mind and heart.
- By supporting and developing better educational programmes which place the gift of sexual relations within the context of marriage and fidelity. Such programmes can help people understand realistically the joy and sacred responsibility of parenthood. They can inform them about the resources available within the Catholic Church and society for supporting families and parents at moments of difficulty.
- By respecting and supporting the decision of those in healthcare who refuse to perform or assist in abortions on grounds of conscience.
- By pressing for achievable change in the law in the light of advances in medical developments, even if Parliament will not abolish the law. Whilst upholding the principle of the sacredness of human life, it is both licit and important for those in public life who oppose abortion on principle to work and vote for achievable incremental improvement to what is an unjust law.

The Catholic faith lets us see the radiant glory of human life from its beginning to its end. When we know that every person whatever their age, race or condition carries the image of God, we see their infinite value and dignity. Whether we have this vision of faith or not, cherishing life is the central value of every society that wants to flourish.

The Catholic Church offers to participate with others in working for this timely change of heart and mind. We hope and pray for the sake of our common humanity, and the lives at stake, that the next 40 years will tell a very different story. The time to take a different path is now.



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