

# A Woman Centred Approach to Abortion

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Whether abortion takes place is a decision that a woman makes, whatever opinion the law or the culture may follow on the sanctity of the life within her body. Pope John Paul recognized this in 1995 when he addressed an urgent appeal to women, saying:

“You are called to bear witness to the meaning of genuine love, of that gift of self and of that acceptance of others which are present in a special way in the relationship of husband and wife, but which ought also to be at the heart of every other interpersonal relationship. The experience of motherhood makes you acutely aware of the other person and, at the same time, confers on you a particular task: Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman's womb ... This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings not only towards her own child, but every human being, which profoundly marks the woman's personality.”<sup>1</sup>

He described that way in which a mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling the child to grow inside her, respecting his or her otherness. Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health.

Doctors who deal with women considering abortion note that even in those circumstances a woman will often speak protectively of the child, not wanting to take medicines that would harm the child, conscious of the responsibility of carrying another within her.

The choice of abortion is thus an enormous contradiction that no woman can take lightly. It is a tragedy that many women feel forced to accept in circumstances that seem to render them powerless. In a culture that promotes abortion, deciding not to abort can require great courage especially if her male partner does not support the pregnancy or if he threatens the relationship should she not abort.

A man who repeats the mantra of choice, saying, “It’s your choice” in fact offers her no support in his indifference. Often a young woman will find herself not only abandoned by her partner, she may also be under pressure from her own mother who has other ambitions for her daughter’s life and career at that early stage. Men are often responsible for contributing to the choice to abort.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988), 18: AAS 80 (1988), 1696.

In trying to work toward a culture of life we need to be aware of these pressures on women and our first response should be to try to reduce the pressures upon her. We need to create places where a woman can go to discuss her circumstances with someone who genuinely supports her and offers her the time and the support to consider her options and explore her own idea of herself and her own values. In that way, freed from external pressures, she will be most likely to make a decision that is life-affirming for herself and her child.

It is a mistake to subject a woman who is in distress to further pressure. What she needs is pregnancy support which has two components:

- a) Counselling to assist with decision-making; and
- b) On-going advice, material, emotional and spiritual support during pregnancy

The aims of decision-making counselling are distinct from pre-procedure counselling. Pre-procedure counselling is for a person who has decided on a course of action and is being guided in what to expect during and after the procedure to ensure that their consent is adequately informed.

Decision-making counselling is client-centred and non-directive and aims to assist a person to make a decision by:

- a) Providing emotional support, time and space so that the client can make a decision that is reflective rather than panicked;
- b) Assisting a client to talk through the problem(s) facing her by examining options and their implications for the client's own values;
- c) Assisting the client to clarify her own sense of self in relation to a new problem and to make reasonable decisions for herself about what she wants now and in the long term;
- d) Assisting the client to make reasonable decisions in relation to others;
- e) Informing and exploring with the client the availability of emotional and other support;
- f) Indicating to the client the need to seek medical or other professional services in relation to her pregnancy and encouraging her to seek that assistance from her own doctor or from another doctor or professional.

Decision-making counselling ought not to attempt to direct the patient in relation to her pregnancy or toward any particular decision. The client is most likely to make a good choice if the counsellor serves to reduce the sense of panic and urgency and instead assists the client to regain control of her own circumstances. The aim is to give her greater confidence in being able to cope with pregnancy and to assist her to make a reasonable decision for herself. This provides the best chance of a life-affirming choice.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Bishops' Commission for Doctrine and Morals, *Preliminary Advice on Pregnancy Support and Counselling Services* September 2008  
[http://s2.cam.org.au/~acbcport/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_download&gid=246&Itemid=315](http://s2.cam.org.au/~acbcport/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=246&Itemid=315)

Counselling is an engagement of client and counsellor, of two people. Professional counselling is client-centered, but it is an engagement of the counsellor as a person who cannot be required to act contrary to her own conscience. It may be that in that engagement the client asks the counsellor's view and it may be reasonable in those circumstances for the counsellor to reveal her own view, while stressing that professionally her role is to assist the client to make her own reasonable decision after informed discussion.

Pregnancy counselling does not direct the client to obtain a particular service, but does discuss the available options. It is appropriate in circumstances in which abortion is available that the counsellor discuss this option and provide information about what may be involved in abortion, including demonstrated risks and ill-effects. However, referral for a medical procedure is done after medical assessment and is not the task of a pregnancy support agency. It would also compromise the role of a decision-making counsellor if part of the role were to be a referral agency for medical procedures.

Providing information about pregnancy, about available support and about the stage of development of the foetus would be important matters to discuss in relation to providing an informed basis for making a decision.

Many women have accepted the advice of the family planning experts and use contraception in the expectation that they will not become pregnant. Many do not acknowledge or are not aware that even the combined contraceptive pill which has a perfect use pregnancy rate of less than 1 per hundred women years, in actual use has a pregnancy rate of between 3 and 6 per hundred women years. Many women over their twenty-five years or so of possible fertility will be likely to become pregnant while using the pill or other contraceptives. In most western countries approximately one adult woman in every three will have an abortion; many will have more than one.

Pope John Paul II decided to speak to those women directly acknowledging the many factors which may have influenced her decision, and the fact that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. He went on to say:

“The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly 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 forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord. With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pope John Paul II *Evangelium Vitae* 1995 n. 99