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Abortion: A Guide to Making Ethical Choices

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Preface

Abortion is a highly charged political issue. It is also an intensely private matter. To say that it is a private matter does not mean that it is outside the scope of moral decision making. The quality of the decisions that each individual woman makes affects our families, our communities, indeed, our whole society. Yet, almost all the attention of government and religion is focused on the political struggle; almost no effort has been put into developing criteria for individual moral or ethical decision-making.

It is clear to Catholics For a Free Choice that women welcome a moral method to assist them in clarifying their choice. Almost daily Catholic women call us with moral questions and personal dilemmas. We offer counsel conscious of the complexity of each woman's situation as well as the differing morally valid personal commitments they have made. As a result we approach our task with humility and respect for the differing conclusions they will reach. This guide is the first step in what we hope will be an ongoing dialogue amount those concerned with both individual and social good.

There are certain beliefs that formed the principles set forth in this guide. We are obligated to share these with you as they will help you evaluate whether or not the guide will be useful to you.

1. In making moral judgments about abortion, it is important to avoid rigid and negative attitudes toward sexuality itself.
2. The decision to abort can be a moral decision justified by many circumstances; the decision can also be unjustified.
3. Abortion must be legal for women to even begin to make a moral choice with real freedom.
4. The abortion decision involves intrinsic values. These values include, but are not limited to, the value of a woman's life and her life plan and the value of the fetus.
5. We all have an obligation to work actively to create a society in which women will not need to choose between the value of their own well-being and that of the fetus.

One final word, while this guide was first conceived to assist Catholic women, the questions it addresses are in the minds of many women, regardless of their faith group. In our answers we have attempted to be sensitive to the needs of all women who seek to exercise their obligation to make a moral choice about abortion.

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Introduction

Pregnant! How a woman responds to that word depends on so many things. For some it represents a sacrament of life, hope, joy, love, and dreams fulfilled. For others it represents despair, shattered dreams and broken promises. Sometimes our feelings are so confused we feel joy, sorrow, longing and fear all at the same time.

Some people believe that the only right way for a woman to respond to the news that she is pregnant is to give herself over to the pregnancy. Pregnancy is destiny. To meet this destiny, if need be, the woman must deny the deep relationship between her psychological and physical being, ignore the circumstances of her individual life, and somehow believe she exists in a vacuum which will allow her to emerge from a pregnancy unchanged - the same person she was nine months before.

Other people feel that there are many reasons why a woman becomes pregnant. Not all pregnancies are voluntary; not all are beautiful. Neither is pregnancy motherhood unless the woman makes that choice. All pregnancies, however, will cost the woman dearly. These people believe, therefore, that only the woman can decide how she will respond to the pregnancy. She can allow the pregnancy to continue and give birth to a new person. Or, if she believes her own ability to continue being a full person will be seriously impaired or destroyed, she can end the pregnancy by abortion.

Good people disagree on the moral response to pregnancy. Some say that once you are pregnant, the biological facts are clear and there is no choice but to stay pregnant until birth or natural miscarriage occurs. We believe this view is too simple. A more mature view does not accept situations such as pregnancy, abortion, or childbearing as 'fate' and therefore irreversible. Each of us must make decisions based on our own conscience and in so doing bring to bear what knowledge, feelings, experience and needs we have to each human situation.

You. And now you are one of those women for whom the word "pregnant" signals a tragedy rather than a blessed event. Perhaps you were afraid to get a prescription for a contraceptive or the contraceptive you were using failed. You might already be a mother and would like to have another baby if only there were enough food for the children you already have. Or maybe you have finally begun a long awaited career, after investing years in raising your children, and do not feel you can afford to defer this goal again. Perhaps your own health is so poor you cannot sustain a pregnancy or you have learned from your doctor that the fetus in your womb is abnormal and will result in the birth of a severely handicapped child.

However you became pregnant - willingly, half-willingly, or unwillingly - you are not now a victim. You can take charge of your life. This is not the time to let your responsibility to make a decision slide. You can decide to complete the pregnancy and keep the baby you bear or you can give it to someone who is better able to nurture it and bring it to fuller life. You can also decide that to end the pregnancy is the most responsible action you can take in your present circumstances.

This is one of the most important moments in your life. Focus on your thoughts as clearly and as calmly as possible, consider your options and reach a decision. You need to - and can - make a good decision but you need to make it soon. Soon, because the safety of abortion for you is directly related to when it is done: the earlier the safer. If you decide to complete the pregnancy, the eventual health of your baby will benefit from your earliest commitment to prenatal care.

Even if you did not make a conscious decision to become pregnant, you can now make a conscious decision about the rest of your life. Our past need not determine our future but it can help us make good decisions. A decision to end the pregnancy can be wrong or it can be the most responsible moral choice you can make.

This guide is written to help you think through that choice. Abortion is not an easy decision for a woman to make. Doctors, nurses, and counselors can answer your medical questions. It is often hard to find someone with whom to share your doubts and concerns. In this guide we address some of the moral questions you may be asking yourself as you face this very serious choice.

Life

1. "Is abortion murder?"

People who are opposed to abortion often say that it is murder. It is important to understand that while abortion does involve the taking of a human life - because all life that is in and of a human being is human life - in order to call it murder we would have to believe that prenatal life in the early stages of pregnancy is a human person and that there were absolutely no reasons that justified the taking of that life.

Two things make the taking of a life murder. First, the life taken has to be the life of a person. Thus, we do not call it murder when we kill animals. Nor do we call it murder when a surgeon operates on a person and removes parts of the human body. In this instance it is human life that is being taken by the surgeon, because everything that is part of a human being is human life, but it is not murder, because it is not the life of an individual human person. Second the taking of a person's life must be unjustified for it to be called murder.

Our language is rich - we have many words to describe our actions and our feelings. Different words also cause us to react differently to the same circumstances. Thus it is important in making serious moral decisions to understand both what a word means and what it implies.

Think about the reaction of a child to the death of a pet: "You murdered my fish," she might say to her mother or father. Not quite correct, but it conveys the deep feelings of loss and anger she is experiencing. When people call abortion murder, it often says more about how they feel than about what abortion is.

So that you can decide what word best describes the act of abortion for you and whether an abortion is best for you, you must search your own mind and conscience for what you believe about the personhood of the life within you and the justice of abortion in your circumstances.

Your belief may have been formed by your own study and reflection, by society, or by your religious group. How you think about the life in your womb - whether you believe it is a person with an immortal soul or whether you believe it is a pre-personal human life that is not yet an equal of you and other persons you know - will seriously affect your abortion decision and how you feel about the decision later in your life. While only you can answer these questions for yourself, we hope this guide helps you to reach a conclusion that is right for you.

2. "Is the fetus a person?"

The best legal, scientific and religious minds have never been able to agree upon an answer to this question. There is no universally accepted objective measurement that can pinpoint the moment when prenatal life becomes a person. Most religions, including the Roman Catholic Church, have not defined the moment when personhood begins and there is no scriptural evidence of God revealing that point in time to us.

At different times in history, different opinions about personhood were believed. In the Middle Ages, secular and religious society taught that little persons were contained in each male sperm. Both male masturbation and birth control were considered the murder of a person. Not until the nineteenth century did scientists discover that a woman contributes more than a nurturing place in her womb for potential human life. She also contributes half the genetic makeup of a fetus through the female egg. After this discovery, some people began to believe that personhood begins at conception, when the male sperm and the female egg unite.

Today, people are more inclined to believe that a fetus becomes a person when it is “viable,” that is, when it does not depend upon the mother’s body for its physical life support system. This new understanding of personhood was a major factor in the 1973 Supreme Court decision to make abortion legal in the United States.

Even many good religious people believe that prenatal life has to go through various stages of development until it more resembles born persons, or that the woman has to welcome the life in her womb and consent to the pregnancy, before God considers it a human person. They often say it is either when the woman consents to the pregnancy, or when the fetus has sufficient development and is viable, that God then infuses a soul into the body, or God breathes into the body of the fetus and it becomes a human person. Before that it is a precious and beautiful form of life but it is not a person.

In these examples, we see individuals and society struggling to reach some resolution between their beliefs and values and the available scientific information in a way that will protect both the developing life as it reaches personhood and also protect existing persons. You, too, will need to consider medical and religious aspects to decide what you believe is the value of the fetus.

Your rabbi, priest or minister can give you material to read that will help you decide what you believe about the life in your womb. Your doctor can provide answers to questions about fetal development and the biological and genetic aspects. Keep in mind that people are seriously divided on the issue of personhood and any literature you receive may give you only one side of the picture. In deciding how you will answer this question for yourself, consider that personhood is not something that can be touched and felt and measured. It is a quality which gives a being a right to life, makes it precious to us as individuals and as a society and, for the religious person, makes it sacred to God. The majority of people in our society believe that while it is important to value life in the womb from its earliest stages, it is wrong to attach a value to prenatal life that is equal or even superior to the personhood and sacred character of the woman who is pregnant. If you agree, then you will not think you are considering the abortion of a person.

3. “I believe the fetus is a person. Can I morally choose abortion?”

If you believe the fetus is a person, you will need serious overriding reasons to morally support a decision to have an abortion. The value conflict that confronts you is one of the most difficult a person can face in life. You need to try, as objectively as possible, to balance your belief in the personhood of the fetus, your belief about the nature of abortion, your justification for such a serious act, and the value of your own life and future. The decision about whether or not an abortion is justified when a woman believes the fetus is a person is similar to other decisions individuals and society must make about the justified taking of a person’s life. You may feel you have reasons that justify abortion regardless of your beliefs about personhood.

Throughout time, society, religion and individuals have set forth circumstances in which the taking of human life is treated as justified. Taking a human life in self defense is granted as a right by most societies. This applies to personal situations when you as an individual are called upon to defend your life against violent attack. The just war theory applied this to a nation called upon to defend its values and territory in a war - even when it involved killing civilians and non-combatants. Those who favor capital punishment do so because they believe it prevents irreparable harm to other lives in our society.

Some people make the distinction that in an abortion it is not the intention of a woman to end the life of a fetus, but rather to withdraw her bodily support from it. They say that a woman has no more of an obligation to provide such support for the fetus than a man or woman has an obligation to give an organ to a dying relative or stranger to save their life.

If your beliefs and values lead you to conclude that the fetus is a person, you then need to think about the relative value of your life versus that of the fetus. If you are committed to its value as equal to your own, then you may wish to continue the pregnancy. If you believe the fetus is a person, but believe that your life or your values are seriously threatened by continuing the pregnancy, then you can justify ending the pregnancy.

4. “I can’t decide if the fetus is a person. Wouldn’t it be better for me to be safe and not have an abortion?”

You should work to resolve in your own mind your beliefs about the life within you, remembering that even “experts” have different opinions and beliefs on this matter. Though you cannot know with certainty whether prenatal life is a person at every stage of its development, we do know with certainty that you are a person.

To rule out abortion on the chance that what is in the womb is a person is to ignore the needs and rights of a being (you!) whose personhood is not in doubt and who may be seriously harmed in mind or body if forced to carry the pregnancy to term. In doing so, you might also ignore the needs and rights of other persons, your husband and children, for example.

It is never safer to ignore injustices against concrete human beings in favor of taking care of possible injustices against possible victims. Moreover, it is not even moral to behave that way.

5. “Does the fetus feel pain?”

Some research indicates that the fetus responds to stimuli such as light, sound and touch. Since it does not have a highly developed nervous system or brain function, this response is best compared to the automatic responses we know in the animal and plant kingdom, such as a plant’s movement toward light or the amoeba’s withdrawal from touch. It is unlikely that the fetus feels pain early in pregnancy.

We sometimes falsely personalize the reactions of the fetus out of guilt or doubt about our decision. If you are concerned about the possibility that the fetus might experience pain you need to balance that concern and possibility with all the other factors which influence your decision, including your own pain and the pain of a baby that is born sick or unwanted. Physical and emotional pain occur in all our lives. It is not the determining fact in making a moral decision about abortion or anything else.

Religious Beliefs

6. “As a Catholic, I’d like to know the Church’s teaching on abortion.”

Some people have the mistaken idea that Catholics must believe that anything the Pope says on a moral subject like abortion is infallible. Traditional Catholic theology taught that the Pope cannot lead people astray from God’s Will (i.e., that he is infallible) only when he formally proclaims a doctrine of faith or morals as infallible. This doctrine must already be held by most people as part of the faith of the universal Church. The Pope then teaches it as an infallible doctrine that is to be believed by all members of the Church. The Pope has never done this on the matters of abortion. Moreover, most moral theologians in the Church agree that no Pope has ever issued an infallible teaching on any specific area of morality. Many even say that it would be almost impossible for him to do so because morality involves circumstances, and no one can know all the circumstances of each and every person in the world.

Another error about Catholicism is the belief that if you know what the Pope and bishops say about abortion then you know what the Catholic Church teaches on abortion. The Catholic Church is

greater than the Pope and bishops. Catholics believe that every member of the Church is part of the Church that teaches. Thus, you really have to look at all the different segments within the Catholic Church to know what the Church teaches on abortion. The Pope and most bishops hold the position that abortion is morally wrong. They believe that at some unknown point in its development the fetus becomes a person with an immortal soul. There is no Church teaching stating when ensoulment and personhood occur.

Theologians are also part of the teaching Church. Many theologians today are returning to an older theology that was held by very influential theologians in the Church, such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. That theology held that God infuses a soul into the prenatal life only after it is sufficiently developed to have a recognizable human body. If they knew what we know today about biology and brain development, those saintly theologians might have developed their theory further and taught that God infuses a soul into the fetus when the brain is developed.

Lay people in the Church are often surprised to find out that they are considered part of the teaching Church along with the Pope, bishops, and theologians. Many lay people in the Church today, particularly women, believe that abortion can sometimes be a moral option for a woman. In the most recent Gallup poll (July 1983) 22% of all Catholics surveyed believe abortion should be legal under all circumstances; an additional 57% believed that abortion should be legal in certain circumstances.

Besides the variety of beliefs and opinions in the Catholic Church on the subject of abortion, Catholicism also teaches that the conscience of a person is the final guide to be followed when deciding to act. The Catholic belief is that you commit a sin if you go against your conscience even if you are doing what is objectively right. You are not guilty of sin if you follow your conscience, even if most people in the Church would consider your action wrong. Persons have an obligation to form their conscience well. They must honestly and openly explore as many resources as they can to help them decide on a particular action.

Thus, the Catholic Church, when considered in its rich diversity, teaches that some abortions can be moral and that conscience is the final arbiter of any abortion decision. Unfortunately, the Catholicism that is taught in many Catholic parishes does not reflect the richness of the Catholic faith.

7. "What is conscience?"

Many people think that conscience is an inborn sense of right and wrong. They speak of it as if it is a little voice inside you that just needs to be tuned to the right channel for you to hear it.

We are not born with something called conscience. Conscience is something that has to be formed. Conscience is our progressively refined ability to think about situations in which we are involved and evaluate their moral goodness or badness for us. To make this evaluation we bring to bear on the situation the reasoning process of our mind, the feelings of our heart, the standards of moral behavior we have learned from society, and, where appropriate, religious teachings.

8. "How do I form my conscience?"

The roots of conscience lie in the fact that you are one among billions of human beings, all of whom have equal value, and share life on a common planet. Your conscience is born when you first experience the sacred value of persons. For the rest of your life your conscience is in the process of formation. You continually ask yourself questions about what actions are fitting to the value of persons and which actions violate the sacredness of persons. You are a person of conscience if you always attempt to act according to what you see as befitting persons.

Your conscience was formed initially by all those who led you to that first moment of moral awareness - parents, teachers, relatives, friends. The evaluations of situations that they conveyed to you, either directly through religious teachings and ethical values, or indirectly through what their feelings showed you, came together to form your conscience. This does not mean that you accepted those evaluations exactly as they gave them to you. If so, you would be following their conscience, not yours. But these evaluations, formal and informal, passed down for centuries as moral principles, or made by your best friend just yesterday, are all the raw material which you use to shape your own conscience.

The decision you make on abortion will shape your conscience for the future. Carefully examine all the evaluative questions that come together in an abortion decision. Make the choice that seems to be the best one for you in your circumstances. In doing so you are shaping your conscience and, in all likelihood, making a good choice, even if no one else agrees with your decision.

9. "Will I be excommunicated if I have an abortion?"

As we have said, the Catholic Church is composed of many people with differing views on the morality of abortion. There are Catholic theologians who hold that some abortions can be moral, and there are even priests and bishops in the Church who would privately tell you that some abortions can be moral. On the other hand, the official Canon Law of the Church at the present time states that anyone who commits the sin of abortion automatically excommunicates herself from the Church.

Many Catholics simply look at the fact that the sin of abortion carries the penalty of excommunication in Canon Law, and they think this means that any Catholic woman who has an abortion is automatically excommunicated from the Church. This is not the case. You can only be excommunicated for the sin of abortion. Sin does not occur automatically. It is not like becoming contaminated through contact with a poisonous substance. For you to commit the sin of abortion you have to think that an abortion in your case, with all the circumstances of your life and your pregnancy, is a sin against God. You then have to decide that you are going to do it anyway, thus going against your conscience.

The Catholic Church officially teaches that the conscience of an individual is supreme. If you carefully examine your conscience, ask yourself the kind of questions that are in this guide, and then decide that an abortion is the most moral act you can do at this time, you are not committing a sin. Therefore, you are not excommunicated. Nor need you tell it in confession since, in your case, abortion is not a sin. You should not consider yourself outside the Church or unable to receive communion, no matter what your friends or anyone else tells you. Remember that perhaps this is the time in your life when you most need the comfort of your religion and the sacraments. Don't make what may be a difficult decision for you even more difficult by considering yourself excommunicated.

If you do feel you committed a sin by having an abortion, you can seek reconciliation with the Church by speaking to a priest in the sacrament of Penance (confession). In most dioceses priests have permission from the bishop to readmit you to the Church following your automatic excommunication for the sin of abortion. (This is a very simple matter; there are no rituals connected with it). Also remember that you must be sorry for a sin and resolve never to commit it again to have it forgiven.

If you feel you are guilty of the sin of abortion but are not sorry for it, you might not have the proper understanding of sin. In that case perhaps you should seek counseling from someone in the Church who is involved in theological studies. It may be that inadequate or poor religious education has made you think that sin happens automatically. A good understanding of the theology of sin may

make you realize that you are not really guilty of the sin of abortion after all, and that you have the right to consider yourself a Catholic in good standing in the Church.

10. “Where do aborted fetuses go in the afterlife?”

Religions that teach there is an afterlife usually teach that the afterlife only applies to persons. Thus, the fetus would have an afterlife only if it is a person. Some religious people might express this by saying that it needs a soul to live an eternal life and only persons have souls. As we have discussed earlier, most people do not believe prenatal life is a person early in pregnancy, when most abortions are actually performed. However, if the fetus is a person, then it will certainly be with God in the afterlife. It has done no wrong, so how could it be rejected by God?

Some Catholics believe that fetuses will go to a place called limbo. They say that the fetus cannot go to a place of punishment, because it has done no wrong. But it cannot live with God in happiness, because it has not been baptized. They say that limbo is a place for good, unbaptized persons.

If you are Catholic and have heard about limbo, you should know that most Catholic theologians today say there is no such reality as limbo. Limbo was never mentioned in the Bible. It was invented by theologians centuries ago to take care of problems they had created by saying that everyone needed Catholic baptism to enjoy life with God. Today, theologians would say that God’s ways are beyond our ways, and that God has not made baptism the one and only passport to eternal salvation.

If you believe the fetus is a person, if you believe in God, and if you also feel that abortion is the most moral choice you can make in your circumstances, trust in God to take care of the fetus. Be assured that God would not condemn the fetus to banishment because of an abortion.

11. “Will God punish me if I have an abortion?”

Most people who believe in God think that the greatest thing that can be said is that God is love and God is all-Good. It is hard to imagine that a God of love and goodness would punish a woman for making an honest decision in conscience to have an abortion because she considered it in the most responsible decision she could make in her particular circumstances.

Moreover, responsible Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish thinkers hold that it can be a moral decision for a woman to choose to have an abortion. While no one knows God’s mind for certain, accepting the guidance of good people and looking within our own minds, hearts and consciences is the best we can do to determine God’s will and interpret God’s wishes for us.

We do not live in a perfect world. We have no guarantees that we will never suffer. However, don’t blame the bad things that happen in your life on God, and don’t blame yourself and your decision to have an abortion for anything that may happen to you in the future.

12. “What is the Protestant teaching on abortion?”

Many Protestant denominations hold different positions on the spectrum of moral matters. Most Protestants, however, have two things in common: a reliance on the Bible for guidance and a stress on the rights of individual conscience before God.

The only passage in the Bible that even approaches a discussion of abortion is Exodus 21:22. This passage states that if two men are fighting and wound a pregnant woman, they shall have to pay her husband a fine if she has a miscarriage, but they will have to give a life for a life if she herself dies. Though not referring to voluntary abortion, it does indicate that the fetus was not considered a person by Biblical writers. Moreover, it is this interpretation of Exodus that has been traditional in Jewish law through the ages.

Early Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century were opposed to abortion. They were even more rigorous than the Catholic Church because their theological doctrines required them to view the fetus as a person from the first moment of conception, rather than making the distinction between a formed and unformed fetus, the approved view in the Catholic Church at that time. Gradually, however, Protestant opposition to abortion lessened. This was due to several things: the influence of the passage from Exodus for interpretations of whether the fetus is a person, stress on God's forgiveness and mercy as making possible an ethic which deals with compromise and ambiguity, and a stress on companionship rather than procreation as the primary purpose of marriage.

During the nineteenth century medical and racial, not religious, considerations caused American Protestant opposition to abortion to strengthen once again. This has been attributed to: 1) a concern for the safety and health of the mother, which could be endangered by an abortion, and 2) a desire to build up the numbers of Anglo-Saxon Protestants, which were believed to be endangered by immigrants to America of other races and religions. Because of these two influences a majority of U.S. states passed the first anti-abortion legislation during the mid-nineteenth century. Those statutes were declared unconstitutional in 1973 by the Supreme Court of the United States. Since then it has been legal for women in the U.S. to follow their conscience in deciding whether or not they should have an abortion.

Since there is no clear Biblical teaching prohibiting abortion and since Protestantism cherishes freedom of conscience without coercion from secular or religious authorities, mainline Protestant denominations today generally have issued statements declaring their belief that a woman has the moral and the legal right to decide whether an abortion is the right action for her with her particular circumstances.

If you are a Protestant, you can find out the position of your particular denomination by speaking to your minister. He or she may be able to give you some helpful counseling in arriving at a decision concerning whether or not it would be consistent with your denomination's teachings for you to have an abortion. You should remember, however, that even if your denomination has a pro-choice policy on abortion, your own minister's personal views may prevent him or her from giving you unbiased counseling.

13. "What does Judaism teach about abortion?"

A value that is highly esteemed and stressed in Judaism is respect for life, including prenatal life. While persons have an absolute right to life in Jewish law there is, however, no absolute right to be born. An unborn life is not considered to be a person and so does not have the rights of a person. According to the Mishnah, the fetus becomes a person when the head or its greater part has been born. After this it may not be killed even to save the mother, because it would mean that greater value was being given to one person's life over another's. But destruction of fetal life before this time is not considered murder in Jewish law.

Both because the fetus is not considered a person and because of the Jewish respect for personal life, abortion to save the life of the mother was not merely permitted in the Mishnah but was required, even during the delivery process, as long as the larger part of the fetus had not yet been born. This gave rise to writings of rabbinic commentators on the Mishnah questioning whether lifesaving situations for the woman that mandated an abortion could be interpreted more broadly than the simple preservation of the physical life of the woman.

While rabbis might disagree on whether the Mishnah could be broadly applied to a particular case that comes before them, in general the rabbinic tradition in the Talmud teaches that the mother's

welfare is the most important consideration. An interesting illustration of this is that the rabbinic tradition would not permit abortion to save a defective fetus from pain in life but would permit it to save the mother the psychological pain of bearing such a child.

Although abortion is not interpreted as murder in Jewish law, abortion is sometimes interpreted as immoral because it is seen as a neglect of the positive mitzvah (duty) to procreate. In addition, some segments of the Jewish community today consider it a duty to rebuild the numbers of the Jewish population devastated by the Holocaust.

Because of these varying traditional and modern influences, there is no one unified Jewish position on abortion. Rabbis in Reform Judaism generally take a pro-choice stance toward a woman's decision for abortion, while rabbis in Orthodox and Conservative Judaism are generally less permissive. There is no one unified group that officially speaks for all of Judaism, but the Central Conference of American Rabbis, as well as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which represents the Reform movement, formally support the woman's right to moral and responsible choice.

If you are Jewish, you may want to seek guidance and counsel from your own rabbi. Because of traditional acceptance of some abortions by most branches of Judaism, it should not be difficult to find helpful and unbiased counseling.

14. "If I am not religious, is the decision about abortion easier?"

Whatever your beliefs, abortion is no simple matter. Abortion involves surgical procedures with medical risks for you, no matter how small. An abortion decision also includes consideration of your obligations to your sexual partner, close family, and other members of society. Moreover, whether or not you yourself are religious, religious thinking is part of our culture and affects all of us.

Unlike a religious woman, you probably will not define the personhood of the fetus in terms of "ensoulment," the joining of a spiritual principle - soul - to physical matter. Nor are you likely to fear that God will punish you for an act of abortion. The lack of any formal doctrinal framework for your beliefs does not, however, make your decision any easier. For many non-religious women the process of examining the value of their own life versus that of the fetus is thoroughly complex and deeply rooted in personal beliefs and value systems.

The fact that you do not turn to a religion for guidance does not imply that you are not a moral person concerned with the right way to lead your life. You are just as concerned with the moral questions surrounding abortion: is this a responsible action; are there viable alternatives; can you maintain your own integrity in the face of an abortion; what obligation do you have to others, and so forth. The essential need for the non-religious woman, like the religious woman, remains the same: a strong sense of your own dignity and of your right and responsibility to make this decision for yourself.

15. "Am I a bad person if I have an abortion?"

Having an abortion, in itself, does not make you a "good" or "bad" person. Catholic, Protestant and Jewish experts on morality generally agree that the morality of any act is determined by looking at your total nature and your conduct as a person.

"Badness" arises when an act or option is misused. If you decide to have an abortion after seriously considering all the medical, social, religious, and personal aspects and alternatives, then you have done all anyone can do to make any serious choice. If we lived in an ideal world where we never had to make unpleasant choices and where our choices never had to hurt us or anyone else, you

would never have to decide about an abortion. In the real world, good women choose to have abortions for good reasons and they are still good women after they have the abortion.

16. “If I have an abortion, will I become hard and callous about the lives of others?”

There is no doubt about the personhood of those who have already entered our world through birth and have their own independent existence. They are different from a pre-born life that is developing toward personhood in the womb of a woman. No matter how much of a burden they become to other people for their care, they are persons with a right to life and a right to expect that their needs be met by society. It is really unfair to born persons to compare them to embryonic or fetal life in the womb. While such comparison appears to be giving great value to prenatal life, it actually diminishes the lives of all of us, since it is saying that we are no more valuable than a fertilized egg.

Even if you believe that prenatal life becomes a person at conception, or very early in the pregnancy, remember that prenatal life is completely different from other forms of life. Persons who are already born into our world, no matter how dependent they are on others for their care, are not dependent on the body of another human being for their physical life support systems. If your life was dependent on the body of another person, then you would not have an absolute right to life. You could not demand that another person give you such bodily life support, and the person who refused such life support could not be characterized as hard and callous.

If you believe an abortion is the best choice you can make at this time, there is no reason to believe you will lose respect for the lives of others. You have made this decision to the best of your ability. You have weighed your commitment to your own life and to the lives of those your actions affect. You have reached an understanding of your ability to cherish and care for others. You have not failed to deal with the implications of an unwanted pregnancy or avoided decisions “by letting nature take its course,” whatever the consequences. As long as you keep your life open to the service of others, you will not be a hard and callous person. In actual fact, women we know who have had abortions are as generous and caring of others as women we know who have had no abortions.

17. “Is it selfish to have an abortion?”

Selfish is a word that can have good or bad connotations. In the sense that a woman has an abortion because she believes that to do so will be good for her and for her future life, the abortion decision involves self interest. It is concerned with the self of the woman. You have a positive moral obligation as a person to consider yourself. Selfishness is negative when a person acts exclusively in her own interest without regard for the rights or feelings of others. Few women have an abortion because of this kind of selfishness.

You alone can decide whether an abortion would be selfish for you in the good sense or the bad sense. Remember that having a baby can be just as selfish, in the bad sense, as an abortion. You may be a mother who is afraid she can do nothing with her life except have children. You may be unwilling to take the risks involved in building a career to follow when your children are grown. Even though you might not have the financial or emotional resources for another child, you might have it anyway. You might be a teenager who really wants to get away from home. You see a baby as a passport to independence and adulthood. In all these cases, you may have a child out of a selfish avoidance of the responsibility to turn your life in new directions.

It is often difficult for women to distinguish between negative selfishness, that is caring only for one’s own interests or comfort, and the kind of self interest that constitutes a responsible concern for one’s own needs. The second kind of selfishness - responsible self interest - is something women have to learn. All their lives many women are taught that they are supposed to give to others, that

their place in the world is to serve. Increasingly, women are finding that it is good to be concerned about themselves, about their own development, about their own future. It is only by being concerned about yourself that you can become a full person. And it is in becoming a full person that you can be a good parent and serve others, the true mark of unselfishness.

18. "Will I feel guilty after I have an abortion?"

You may feel guilty after you have an abortion, but that does not mean that you are guilty. Feelings of guilt can come from your conscience, reminding you that you have done something evil. They can also be the result of acting in a way that is really right for you, but which goes against the way your parents, society, church or synagogue told you was the right way to act.

You are less likely to feel guilty after an abortion if you have taken the time and effort to think very carefully about your decision, so that you are as convinced as you can be that it is the right thing for you to do.

If you regret your decision later in life, do not confuse that with guilt. Every decision in life carries possibilities of regret. You can probably think of other times when you had to make a serious choice, and when either alternative bore with it sadness or regret. You might also regret it later if you decide to continue the pregnancy. It is rare that we can make a choice that gives us everything we want and that doesn't make some other alternatives impossible.

If you do feel guilty later, seek professional counseling. It is important for you to affirm yourself as a human being and to not allow an abortion to damage your life.

19. "Are some reasons for having an abortion better than others?"

No single factor can make an abortion right or wrong. Such factors as your age, health, financial ability to care for yourself and a child, the health of the fetus, whether you are married or single, the kind of emotional support you have from family and friends, and your plans for your own future need to be considered in deciding if your reasons are justifiable.

All these factors contribute to deciding if you can physically or psychologically sustain this pregnancy. The questions you ask yourself affect the morality of abortion. Will you be seriously hurt by the pregnancy? Can you nurture, or give to someone else to nurture, the child who will result from the pregnancy? You alone must make the final decision. The morality of abortion depends upon your unique circumstances.

No one is pro-abortion, although many people are pro-choice. There are two negative factors present in deciding to have an abortion. First, abortion involves ending a precious form of life, even if it is not yet the life of a person. Second, while abortion involves a medical procedure with minimal but real health risks, that procedure and those risks are born by the woman. Abortion solves the problem of an unwanted pregnancy, but not without physical, psychological and emotional costs to the woman.

Results for having an abortion that outweigh these negative factors make abortion justified.

20. "Does how I got pregnant matter in making a moral choice about abortion?"

Whatever the morality of the circumstances leading to your pregnancy, making a moral choice about abortion is based upon your circumstances now.

If your pregnancy is the result of rape, incest or other extreme situations, you must consider your current physical and mental well being. While few women would consent to bearing a child under such circumstances, a rare women might believe the trauma that resulted in the pregnancy would

not harm her or her future child. A woman's judgment in these cases is not based on the morality of the act that led to her pregnancy. It is based on her own belief about what is best for her and what is the most moral course of action to follow now that she is pregnant. It is also based on her own circumstances, particularly the support systems she has to draw upon.

A single adult woman, a teenager, a married woman, all women have a moral decision to make when facing an unwanted pregnancy. The morality of abortion is not determined by how a woman became pregnant. It is determined by her honesty and caring in dealing with the reality of her unwanted pregnancy. A responsible abortion can be the proper response to irresponsible sex - even for a fully adult or unmarried woman.

Some people who ask this question are really thinking about something else. They are passing negative judgment on the morality of the sexual relations that led to the pregnancy. They feel that a woman should have to bear the penalty of an unwanted pregnancy if she engaged in sex voluntarily and was old enough to know what she was doing. This is bad thinking. Pregnancy should never be continued as a penalty. Childbearing is not a punishment for sexual relations. It is a voluntary and loving commitment to bring a new person into the human community.

21. "Does it make a moral difference how late in my pregnancy I have an abortion?"

While no one knows when the life within you actually becomes a person with rights equal to your own, it is reasonable to assume that the most responsible thing you can do is to have an abortion as soon as possible after you know you are pregnant and can make a good decision.

You also have an obligation to care for your own physical and emotional well being. As your pregnancy progresses, especially beyond the first 13 or 14 weeks, the medical risks of abortion increase (although abortion remains less risky than childbirth). The procedure also becomes more expensive and sometimes emotionally more painful.

When you have a clear knowledge of your pregnancy early, and there are no exceptional circumstances, it is both better for you and more moral to come to a decision quickly. If you decide to end the pregnancy, have an abortion early.

This does not mean there are not justifications for a later abortion. Genetic abnormalities of the fetus can be diagnosed by the medical procedure known as amniocentesis usually after the 16th week of pregnancy. Since it can take up to four weeks to analyze the amniotic fluid that is withdrawn from the uterus during this procedure, you might have to wait until the 20th week of pregnancy to find out whether you are carrying an abnormal fetus, and then decide whether to abort at that time.

Whenever you come to terms with your pregnancy, the right to consider abortion is still yours. Sometimes pregnancy is detected late. Sometimes life circumstances change - a marriage falls apart, you or your spouse might lose a job. You still have the right to consider abortion. Sometimes, early in pregnancy, we delude ourselves. We think the man will marry us, we are sure we'll miscarry, or we're afraid to tell anyone. Somehow it will disappear. A late abortion decision can be more complicated and difficult. There is always more than one factor that influences an abortion decision. Even late in pregnancy, however, it is never moral to ignore the full reality of your situation.

22. "Are there any situations in which abortion is a moral obligation?"

You should never feel that you must have an abortion if you would really prefer to carry your pregnancy to term. No matter how you became pregnant, what your age or the condition of the fetus, it is your right to decide to bear a child. No one should force you to have an abortion, and you should not feel like a bad person if you refuse to have an abortion.

Where medical risks to your life or to the person you would create are present, you need to seriously evaluate these. Amniocentesis is a way of discovering some types of abnormalities or genetic disorders that may be present. Amniocentesis should be considered if you are in a high risk category. These categories include risks to the fetus from your drug or alcohol abuse, incest, a family history of genetic disorders and your own age (older women have an increased risk of having children with genetic disorders). The information amniocentesis provides can help you in reaching a decision.

Remember that even if you discover some serious abnormality you are not obligated to have an abortion. The information about the fetus will help in planning for your baby's care, getting special prenatal care, and having specialists on hand at the time of delivery. Should you decide to have a baby in these circumstances, you do have an obligation to provide the best care for your baby and give it the best chance possible for a full life. The primary obligation of parenthood is love and a commitment to nurture your children. Women do have children with serious health problems and care for them and nurture them. Many such children grow and lead meaningful lives and contribute to their families and to society.

You do not need to ask serious questions about your ability to sustain difficult pregnancies and maintain your health, to care for existing children and to continue to meet your other obligations to your family and society. Only you can decide, based on your circumstances, what is possible for you in such cases. This is true if you are poor, if you would have to give up a career, if you already have several children, if your own health is threatened, and for other "reasons" people sometimes give as necessitating abortion. No circumstances obligate you to have an abortion. The right to procreative freedom includes the right to have a child as well as not to have a child. The right to choose is a two-way right.

23. "I've heard that many women have abortions as a convenience. Is this true and is it all right?"

While there are women who for many reasons don't think very deeply about why they are having an abortion, and many more women who choose not to discuss their reasons, people who counsel women seeking abortions tell us that almost all take the decision very seriously.

There are reasons for having an abortion which most people would consider frivolous and immoral. For instance, it seems wrong for a woman to willingly get pregnant and then to have an abortion just because she suddenly has a chance to take a trip to Europe and doesn't want to be bothered by nausea. Many would consider it wrong for a married woman to have an abortion if she were planning to get pregnant at the end of the summer but, through an error in timing, got pregnant in May.

Abortion is a serious decision. It is a rare woman who is able to have one "for convenience". In general, people seem to feel that for an abortion to be morally justified there must be a sufficiently serious reason. However, what may seem like a convenience to one person may actually be a necessity to another.

Responsibilities

24. "Whatever I decide about this pregnancy, what responsibilities do I have to myself in the future?"

In taking the abortion decision seriously you have developed a model for making other choices in life. You have actually had a mini-course in ethics and decision making. You have explored your beliefs and values about a moral issue important to you. You have sought, read and analyzed

information relevant to your decision. You have asked those close to you for input into your decision. You have had to weigh and balance conflicts. This is responsible personhood. Continue this in all areas of serious ethical life choices. Work, love, friendship, family, marriage: all have ethical components as important as those of sexuality.

Spend time thinking about your beliefs and values, and act in a way that supports those beliefs and values. An unwanted pregnancy is not an isolated event. It is often symbolic of the way we approach our lives. Do we view our work, our family, our relationships as accidents or as part of our life plan? Do we act in ways that contribute to our life plan or do we react to, or simply slide into, whatever comes our way? Responsibility and respect to oneself and others requires our examination of larger issues of conscience. This examination requires that we live our lives at a high level of awareness and that each of us take charge of our life.

25. "What responsibility do I have regarding my future sexuality?"

Sexuality should be treated as an integral part of your being. We are sexual beings because we have bodies. There are no non-sexual persons on this earth, although not everyone chooses to express their sexuality in the same way. Sexuality is not a demon to be banished from your life. Nor is it a god to be worshipped and given priority over every other aspect of your life.

Responsible sexuality means taking the necessary steps to ensure, as far as possible, that you will never have another abortion, because you will never again be faced with an unwanted pregnancy. Not everyone can succeed in preventing unwanted pregnancies, but everyone can at least try.

This does not mean that you should walk out of the abortion clinic saying that you will never again engage in sexual activity. That is a denial of your sexuality. It is unrealistic to think that that is the way to keep from having future abortions. It is also irresponsible. Persons do not usually change their behavior overnight. Sexuality is too powerful a force and the consequences of an unwanted pregnancy are too serious for you to be unrealistic in this area of your life.

The setting of your own sexual agenda is the main responsibility you have regarding your future sexuality. Don't let others set it for you. You can be a mature, self-directed person in all areas of your life including sexuality. Take charge of your life and determine how you will use your sexuality. Respect the sexual decisions you make, just as you expect the man in your life to respect those decisions. If he has a different opinion from yours, discuss it with him and attempt to arrive at an approach that is mutually acceptable to both of you. Keep in mind that a mature man is just as interested in your independence and self development as you are in his.

26. "Do I have a responsibility to use contraception in the future?"

If you are going to engage in sexual activity but do not intend to bear a child, you have a responsibility to use contraception yourself or make very sure that your partner is effectively protected. Even if you believe that men should take some responsibility for contraception, you should remember that it is you who will have an unwanted pregnancy if he fails his responsibility.

A wide variety of contraceptive methods are available. Sterilization, pills, IUDs, barrier methods such as condoms and the diaphragm, and natural family planning are the better known options. Your personal values, religious beliefs, medical and psychological factors and life style all need to be taken into account in deciding on a method. For example, sterilization should not be considered unless you have definitely decided that you do not want any, or any more, children. Taking the pill if you have sex infrequently may not be best. You might be able to combine methods to achieve a balance best suited to you. Some women find natural family planning a good way to learn more about the natural rhythms of their body. Physicians and nurses can give you information that will help you decide on the method of contraception best for you.

Whatever method you choose, it is using it that is most significant in its effectiveness. This requires commitment to preventing unwanted pregnancy and consciousness about the nature of your sexuality. Finally, in choosing a contraceptive remember that the most moral means of contraception is that which is safest and most effective for you in your circumstances.

27. "Is there anyone I must involve in my decision?"

Ultimately, the only one who can decide whether or not you should have an abortion is you. Coming to such a decision alone can be very difficult. You might find talking to people you trust and whose opinions you respect helpful. In the best of all possible worlds your parents and/or husband, boyfriend or lover will be among these advisors. But we don't always live in the best of all possible worlds. One important thing to keep in mind in seeking advice from anyone is to be sure that you really want that person's advice and that you are open to considering their views.

28. "Should I seek my parents' advice or permission?"

Ideally, in their concern for their children, parents should establish avenues of communication so that their children can come to them for guidance in making life's decisions. If you have such parents it is probably wise for you to seek their guidance in any decision about an abortion. They love you and they want what is best for you.

Some relationships between parents and children are troubled. Not all parents have the welfare of their children uppermost in their minds; some parents truly love their children, but can understand them only if they conform to the parents' rules; some parents have difficulty listening to and communicating with their children. In spite of these problems, this could be the occasion for a breakthrough in your relationship. It could be the beginning of a sharing, loving relationship in which your parents recognize that you are an adult and may make different choices than they would make.

This also may be the worst possible moment to try to establish a new kind of relationship with your parents. Telling them about an unwanted pregnancy and thoughts of an abortion may drive you even further apart and may create an unmendable rift between you. Sometimes another family member, perhaps an older sister or aunt, can help draw you and your parents together at this time.

You must decide what are realistic expectations for you to have about your parents, and you must decide what are your own motives for telling them. Are you really trying to make them angry and hurt them with this news? Do you feel guilty because you had sex outside of marriage, and do you really want them to punish you with their anger? Or are you really seeking their advice, friendship and love at this very difficult time in your life?

29. "What obligation do I have to the man who is involved?"

It is important to be honest with yourself about the nature of your relationship with and commitment to the man who contributed to the life within you. It is important to remember that sexual relations do not necessarily form a relationship, nor does insemination alone create fatherhood. Your relationship to the newly conceived life is unique and so too are your moral rights to decide for or against abortion.

If you are not married to the man who impregnated you, or if you are not in a stable, permanent relationship with him, deciding to share the fact that you are pregnant with him depends on your feelings for each other, as well as your commitment to each other as individuals and as partners. More often than not such sharing is rooted in your relationship with each other and not focused on the life within you. Nor is it a question of the man's rights. You have no moral obligation to consult him or to consider his desire that you continue the pregnancy.

If you are married to the man, or if you are in a stable, permanent relationship with him which you want to continue, and you both wanted to conceive, you would have a serious obligation to listen to and consider his views. You would owe him a full explanation of the reasons for your decision. Ultimately, however, the decision is yours.

In the case of an unplanned pregnancy in a marriage it is possible that your husband may want to have a baby while you may not. If he has already proven himself a good father and partner in parenting, providing not just his share of financial support but also his share of child care, you have a serious obligation to be sensitive to his wishes. You may come to share his enthusiasm for another baby. Your husband also has an obligation to consider your wish not to have a child and not request that you put his desires above your own. In any such serious disagreement in marriage, good and unbiased counseling can help. The impact of this decision on your marriage should be weighed carefully by both of you. Again, however, the final decision is yours.

30. “Do I have a right to expect anything from my parents, husband, boyfriend, or lover?”

We all have the right to ask those who love us and with whom we have intimate relationships to be supportive of us. The fact that we will ultimately make the decision does not mean others should “wash their hands” of the situation. This is particularly true of the man involved. Your pregnancy is the result of a shared experience, wise or unwise. You have a right to ask for support - financial and emotional. Do not be afraid to seek this support, but be prepared to deal with whatever response you receive.

31. “Should I tell a future husband about a past abortion?”

Having an abortion can be very complicated; you must decide how vulnerable you feel about this. Be sure you examine your own motives. Are you telling your future husband, or anyone else, about the abortion in order to share something that is important in your life? Or are you giving in to an immature desire to tell, in order to somehow punish yourself or even to punish the person you are telling? No one, whether parents or fiancé, has the right to know this. And you have no obligation to share this with anyone. If you want to share this information, however, with a kind, understanding, loving person who will still accept you for what you are, that is your privilege. It is an honor to the other person to be so trusted.

There are no easy or clear answers to this question. Ask yourself what would be the best course of action to help ensure that this will never be a problem for your marriage. Telling this to your fiancé could draw you closer together. He could also be a source of strength and help to you if you have any regrets or sadness about your decision. On the other hand, telling this fact of your past life to your fiancé could destroy the possibility of what would otherwise be an ideal marriage, if he cannot cope with this information. In that case, you must balance not telling him with the possibility that he could learn it later in some way and then lose his trust in you. It is always better if a husband and wife agree on the fundamental moral issues that can touch the heart of any marriage.

Ideally in a marriage a husband and wife should be completely open with each other, sharing their thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams, as well as their lives and bodies. The full ideal in any area, however, cannot always be realized in this life. It is also true that such complete openness requires time and commitment. In reality, we share ourselves with others more and more as we get to know them and trust them.

32. “Do I have any special responsibilities to my children?”

Children often become aware of abortion in an abstract way, through television news or through school and church discussion. This is especially true if your children attend Catholic school. Even if sex education is absent from the curriculum, they are likely to be told that abortion is murdering unborn babies.

Your older children's questions about abortion are an opportunity for you to help them understand what it means to become a person with both rights and responsibilities and to form their own conscience.

If you believe that your children were endowed with a soul or became sacred to you as persons at some point after conception, such as viability or when you consented to the pregnancy, there are ways of explaining this to them. There are ways of explaining this to them. There are ways of assuring them that they are more than their physical form. What could be more reassuring to a child than to know that her parents consciously and continuously have committed themselves to her growth and nurturing and that her personhood is the result of such love?

You can help your children understand the difference between the personhood of children to whom you give birth and the potential personhood of a fetus, or the potential personhood of fetuses you might have conceived but did not. All of us might never have been, not because our mothers considered aborting us, but because the union of a particular sperm and a particular egg and its eventual growth into a person is such a chance event in itself. In fact, only about 30% of fertilized eggs are ever born as live human babies, not because of abortion but because of spontaneous, early miscarriages. There are an infinite number of possible beings that have never been brought into existence in this universe.

Not every possible person can be born into this world. We who exist should cherish our lives and be grateful for the process that brought us to be. But that does not mean that we must become pregnant as often as possible or see every pregnancy to term in order to show our appreciation and love of life and our acceptance and love of the children we bear.

You might be questioning whether you should share your decision with your children. You have no moral obligation to share such an intimate aspect of your life with your children. Further, abortion is something children may have difficulty understanding, especially younger children. Older children might be brought into such decision making, but only if you are accustomed to involving them in other serious, personal decisions in your life.

Before you consider discussing your decision with them, weigh carefully the effects such a discussion might have on them. With young children (pre-teens) a discussion about your personal decision to have an abortion could make them anxious about your love and commitment to them rather than to serve as a learning experience. An older child is more likely to discover that you are pregnant or to become aware of your decision intuitively or by accident. Teens especially are watching parents for sexual information and clues about sexual values and behavior. Whatever aspects of your decision you choose to share with them, they need to know that they are loved and wanted by you and always will be.

Questions for Others

33. "How can we help our daughter make a decision?"

It is often difficult for parents to admit that their children have become adults. When they are children, you share responsibility for their decisions. When they become adults, responsibility passes from you to them. Your relationship to them changes from being a loving parent and authority figure to being a loving friend.

If your daughter is, by any reasonable calculation, an adult, it is a tribute to your parenting if she comes to you to discuss her abortion decision. Do not abuse that trust by taking the decision away from her and reverting back to your role as authority figure. Share your own views on abortion with her. You might be ready to share views with her that you never shared before. Raise questions

on both sides of the issue, but let her know that you will stand with her no matter what she decides. Follow-up support is as important as prudent questioning and advice before the decision.

Respect is the basis of every friendship. Respect your daughter's decision even if you disagree with it personally; that is the supreme test of your love and respect for her. This is true whether she chooses abortion or childbearing.

If your daughter is in her early teens and not fully adult, the problem is more difficult. You will feel freer to give your advice and urge your viewpoint. However, remember that your daughter's conscience is hers. The decision is also hers. Even if you consider your daughter a child, you may not violate her conscience just because she is young. If you think an abortion is the best way out of this predicament but she cannot bear the thought of one, you may gently counsel her but you must respect and support her decision.

The same would be true if she chose to have an abortion. Admit to yourself the ambiguity of all such questions, but remember that her need for your unquestioning love and support now is as great as it will ever be. And remember that however she resolves this situation, she will still be your daughter.

34. "How can I support my wife or girlfriend in her decision?"

The obligations of a husband or lover vary with the circumstances of the relationship that brought on the pregnancy. If you are married and the pregnancy resulted from a conscious effort by you and your wife to have a baby you may be disappointed if she then wants an abortion, and you have every right to press your case as gently and persuasively as possible. You must, however, recognize that the decision on pregnancy belongs to the pregnant, even if a decision for abortion represents a change of mind for your decision for abortion represents a change of mind for your wife. If you must become reconciled to an abortion, you should try to do so with exquisite sensitivity and love. To love a person is to respect that person's decisions, especially those decisions that are arrived at painfully and with great anguish. No woman approaches abortion lightly. Again, good counseling can be helpful in such serious choices.

If both you and your wife desire an abortion as a response to an unplanned pregnancy, you should support her in every way, accompany her for the abortion, and find time to be with her even more than usual after the abortion. The aftermath of an abortion may be a time of mixed and strong emotions. The abortion should not be treated casually or as "a woman's problem." It is a time of serious decision-making and you should be as close as possible during that time. You should also do some serious thinking and talking together so that your wife will not have to go through this experience again.

If your partner in a non-marital relationship becomes pregnant and you both want an abortion, you should remember that this is your problem too. The impregnation was shared; so too should the abortion be shared with whatever stress and expense it involves.

If you are the man involved in an unplanned pregnancy that occurs outside of marriage, and you have both agreed in advance on abortion in case of pregnancy, what if the woman changes her mind when she becomes pregnant? In such a case you should support your partner's decision during the pregnancy in any way you can. You must also decide whether you want to join with her in the long experience of child rearing. If you do not and if you had made that clear in advance, you should respect your friend's decision not to use her abortion option. She should respect your decision not to take on the role of father. In law, insemination equals fatherhood insofar as financial obligations are concerned. Morally, fathering involves more than insemination. How you choose to recognize the moral obligations of fatherhood is your decision.

In reality, most unmarried lovers do not make an agreement beforehand on abortion in the even of an unwanted pregnancy. The topic tends to be irresponsibly avoided. Therefore, since even teenagers can be assumed to know that sex can cause pregnancy even when contraceptives are used, the male is not “off the hook” simply because he hoped his friend would not get pregnant.

The answer to an unwanted pregnancy is not a forced marriage. This would only multiply errors. Also, the answer is not a forced abortion, if the woman is firmly opposed to this. It would take a series of booklets to spell out all the variables in such situations. In this space, however, let it be clear that if a child is born from a relationship, the male partner is not without moral responsibility to that child. The details and extent of that responsibility will vary with circumstances, but the moral responsibility is real. Sex can and does give rise to serious obligations.

35. “There are so many couples who want children and can’t have them. Do I have an obligation to consider them before I have an abortion?”

There are many people who cannot have children and who are very anxious to adopt. There is also a shortage of newborn infants available for adoption. In their unhappiness and longing for a child, childless couples sometimes strike out at pregnant women who choose abortion. To them it doesn’t seem fair that you should give up that which they want so badly. And yet, on reflection they understand that asking a woman to involuntarily continue a pregnancy for them is no different than forcing someone to become pregnant for them. Both are wrong. You certainly are not obligated to bear a child for anyone else no matter how much they desire a baby or what good parents they would make.

Being pregnant and having a child has some potential health risks for you; it can be a major obstacle in your life plan; it may even violate your sense of “self.” These factors are far more critical to your decision than the desires of a childless couple. You might even ask such a couple what moral obligations they have to adopt one of the many older and disadvantaged children in our society who are parentless instead of or in addition to seeking an infant.

Should you decide, independently of the desires of childless couples, to carry your pregnancy to term, you need to be sure that you either have the capacity to nurture the child that is born or to give the child up to be adopted by parents better able to love and provide for it. In these instances your obligations are to the child’s well being as well as your own, not the needs of the adoptive parents.

Before you decide on adoption, make sure you have examined your thoughts and feelings very carefully. Will you really be able to part with your baby forever after you have given it birth? What turmoil will it create in your life if you decide you can’t give it up after it is born? Is it fair to the baby to allow it to begin to bond with its adoptive parents, or fair to the adoptive parents to allow them to feel they finally have a child, and then for you to change your mind before the final papers are signed? How will you react twenty-one years from now if new laws allow adopted children to be given the name of their birth mother when they come of age, and this child arrives on your doorstep?

If the circumstances of your life and your pregnancy permit you to carry the pregnancy to term without seriously damaging your life or future, and if you place a very high value on fetal life and have a strong desire to give the gift of a child to a childless couple, to do so would be a very heroic and noble act. Such a decision requires great maturity, strength and systems of support to make it work. It should not be romanticized. Remember that giving a baby up for adoption is an extremely difficult thing for a woman to do. It is an extraordinary act of selfless love; it is never an obligation.

36. "I am four months pregnant and just discovered that I am carrying a defective fetus. Can you help me with my abortion decision?"

Your abortion decision is, in a sense, more difficult than abortion decisions made by other women. You must have desired this pregnancy to carry it this long and to go through amniocentesis and prenatal diagnosis. Thus, the abortion, rather than the pregnancy itself, represents the shattering of your hopes and dreams. Furthermore, it will be a late abortion and so will be more difficult for you physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

There are serious moral considerations to carrying such a pregnancy to term. A child with severe mental or physical handicaps will suffer a great deal in its lifetime. If you are a conscientious parent, you and your family will never have even the minimally normal life that other people have as long as the child lives. Such children also usually involve tremendous financial expenses for a family as well as society at large. They often put special strains on the marital relationship. These factors make abortion in these circumstances seem very moral to most people. You will want to balance these against your beliefs about abortion late in pregnancy.

While you are making your decision, do not let yourself be a victim of romantic thinking about the beauty and value of handicapped children. People will tell you that such children often pull families together and become very valued and cherished members of the family. While that can be true, such children place extreme demands upon a family. Visit a family or an institution where there is a child with the disorder diagnosed in your fetus. See first hand what is involved for the child and his/her family or caretakers. Experiencing the day to day reality of life with such a child is more useful than the dry, abstract description you will get of the disorder from a physician or textbook.

If you decide to abort, you can console yourself and know that it was actually a very moral decision to wait this long for an abortion. Your decision to wait was really a decision for life. You were open to the pregnancy and you were hoping that you would get good news from the amniocentesis, but you did not. Therefore, you regretfully decide for your sake, the sake of your family, and the sake of the prospective child that an abortion is the best you can do, even if you feel that it is a tragic choice to have to make.

An abortion decision in this case can also make you open to the possibility of new life. By not having this handicapped child, you may be open to having a healthy child in the future. Or not having to spend your talents and time caring for a severely handicapped child can make you available to serve life in many other ways that will utilize your unique talents and gifts. All such service of life can minimize the tragedy of the abortion choice you are making.

Making Choices

37. "After all is said and done, how do I go about making up my mind?"

Decisions involving procreative choice are serious decisions. When faced with the questions of whether or not to have an abortion, accept that it is your decision. Because of the intense feelings on the subject of abortion, many people will be trying to make the decision for you. The decision is yours; hold on to your right to decide.

Recognize and consider your own personal and moral commitments in life. Know that there is no one acceptable morally justifiable way of living your life. Your personal commitments will and should weigh strongly in your decision.

The first rule in making moral choices is to know what you are deciding. You need to inform yourself about the medical aspects of both abortion and childbearing - the actual medical procedures and their risks. You need to understand your own feelings, religious beliefs and values

as they relate to the fetus, and to weigh those against your circumstances and those of your pregnancy.

In a good moral decision, you must also look at all the alternatives open to you. In considering abortion, no alternative will be all good or all bad. But it is important to try to consider them all, so that later you do not regret your failure to have a complete understanding. If you decide to give birth to a baby, you must think of your long term obligations to the child. In a sense, pregnancy is at least a twenty year condition - nine months of uterine pregnancy and many years after that of bringing the child to independent adulthood. Deciding to stay pregnant is the beginning of a long story. A large chunk of your life is involved.

If, instead, you decide to give birth to the baby and then give it up for adoption, you have to ponder long and hard whether this is something you can bear psychologically and live with later on.

If the fetus you are carrying is genetically damaged, think of its future as well as your own. The gift of life is not always kind. If possible, visit the parents of children with the same genetic illness and learn what you can from their experience. You cannot make their story your story. You may not be able to cope as well, or you might be able to cope better. What you can learn from such encounters is what the illness involves and just what such a child and its parents have to go through.

If you are a teenager wondering if you could handle single parenthood, go visit your classmate who dropped out of school to have a baby. Visit teenage mothers whose babies are at different stages of development. Some teenage mothers begin to question their decision to have a baby only after the baby starts becoming independent, walking around, needing constant supervision, and requiring a responsible babysitter if the mother wants to go out. It is too late then for the mother to question her decision to have the baby.

You should face this important decision as you face any major decision in your life. People make big decisions in different ways. Conversations with trusted friends or with unbiased counselors are good for anyone who faces a major choice. If possible, it would be good to talk with women who have had an abortion. Clinics where abortions are done usually can refer you to clergy or counselors who will not attempt to decide for you, but who will call to your attention the questions you should be asking. Such persons should be ready to help you and support you with your decision. If you feel you are being pressured, look elsewhere for help. Good counselors try to help your conscience, not take it over.

Throughout your decision process, know that good women have decided for and against abortion. An abortion decision does not put you in a world of simple good and bad. However you struggle with your decision, neither choice will leave you without some qualms and some uncertainty. That is the human condition. Do your best to come to the decision with which you can live, and then be as strong as you can be, knowing that you have done your best.

Our Right to Choose

"I have been asked whether I would have wanted abortion to be legal at the time I was born and whether I have ever really contemplated how it would have been if my mother had chosen abortion instead of bearing me. The truth is that each of us, as self-reflective persons, can ask this question and, in the process, presumably get in touch with the inexorable value of the life we have lived. But such reflection is the fruit not of our existence as biological members of our species but of our lives as socially related beings who have been nurtured and valued and, for that reason, have come to value ourselves and to rejoice in our birth...I also know, as anyone who comprehends the development of self-awareness will understand, that if I had been aborted, there would have been no "I" to experience it. Furthermore, the "I" who was born into the world exists, in a large part, out of the freely given, active caring of a woman who was willing both to take a genuine risk in bearing

me and my siblings and to struggle to provide for us after the premature death of our father. My mother's love and courage, like all women's were no mere biologically induced responses but the expressions of her moral commitment to us. In the absence of such tenderness and care, born not of instinct but of moral freedom, it would have been better for me, or for anyone else, not to have been born.

All things considered, it is this reality, so basic to every living person's sense of well-being, that we endanger when we insist that women should bear all the children they conceive, merely because they have conceived them. And it is the capacity of women to undertake, in freedom, the consummately moral action of childbearing that is threatened when the politics of abortion play fast and loose with the particularity of women's lives..."

- Beverly Wildung Harrison

Quoted from: Our Right to Choose, Beacon Press, Boston, ©1983