

Crisis Pregnancy, The Issues and Solutions are Complicated

As Catholics, we are committed to protecting the sacred lives of all, from conception to natural death.

In 2020 there were 5,359,550 pregnancies in the United States. Of these pregnancies, 67% ended in live birth, 17% in abortion and 15% in fetal loss.

- the largest proportion of pregnancies resulting in birth were reported to have occurred at about the right time (54–58%).
- Among pregnancies that ended in abortion, the largest proportions were reported as having occurred too soon (48–49%) or as having been unwanted (42–43%).

We don't have an abortion problem, we have a crisis pregnancy problem!

These days extraordinary focus on abortion has become a divisive, trigger issue in our society. Though it has been steadily dropping since the 1970's, the upwards of 700,000 children dying through abortion in the United States each year cannot be tolerated as acceptable. Yet, if policies and practices solutions carried out by government and societal institutions can crush the economically poor, and cause unimaginable pain and cruelty to whole segments of God's people, neither can such sins, though rarely even acknowledged, be tolerated as acceptable.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church **CCC2271** seems to make a final judgement: *"Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law."*

But, the Church also recognizes that in any situation where abortion is considered, the moral, ethical and medical implications of protecting and sustaining life are complicated and never black-and-white. Sometimes Catholics do have abortions. 2020 federal US law, which should be improved, in principle make abortion medically safe, constitutionally legal, and not rare enough for many. In addition, there is a body of Church Canon law that addresses the complex issue of abortion that surprises many Catholics who are ignorant of them. Both these bodies of laws must be understood and embraced. To undermine either the US law or Church Canon law cannot be tolerated as acceptable.

For some in our church, abortion is the preeminent issue, a black-and-white, right-and-wrong issue of saving life, that must be addressed by all means possible, sometimes in spite of the questionable moral and legal consequences.

But, for other Catholics, the Church's **"Consistent Ethic of Life"**, a.k.a, **"The Seamless Garment doctrine"**, demands solutions for all stages of life affecting all of humanity's nearly 8 billion people on earth today. As Joseph Cardinal Bernardin put it: *"A consistent ethic of life does not equate the problem of taking life (e.g., through abortion and in war) with the problem of promoting human dignity (through humane programs of nutrition, health care, and housing). But a consistent ethic identifies both the protection of life and its promotion as moral questions. It argues for a continuum of life which must be sustained in the face of diverse and distinct threats."*

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Therefore, other moral and legal solutions are being recommended because many Catholics are convinced severely restricting abortion and making it illegal won't solve the problem any more than Prohibition solved our country's "alcohol problem" in the 1920s. In fact, unexpected "crisis pregnancies" would not go away and would drive abortion underground, not stop it. These measures would also amplify the underlying social problems, which also cannot be tolerated as acceptable and must be addressed. These Catholics are focusing on the family and "responsible parenting": children and their parents before, during and after pregnancy with a basic principle that "if anyone thinks that abortion is a solution to the problem of an unexpected pregnancy, their hearts need to be changed to understand that abortion is not their best or only choice."

Clearly more work is to be done to make abortion truly rare, if not eliminated. When we want to understand an issue and its implications, we need to get close to it. That's exactly what the 2,700 crisis pregnancy centers in the United States are doing to address these issues. Catholic organizations like the Atlanta-based Pregnancy Aid Clinic (PAC) take it steps further. While independent of the Archdiocese of Atlanta, PAC does adhere to Catholic sexual and social teachings, thus protecting life and sustaining it.

In a recent Georgia Bulletin article (see below) Lisa Regan, Executive Director of the PAC said: "... *abortion masks social problems faced by women. If abortion is restricted, the problems faced by women do not go away but will become very visible...to everyone. ...It will require more services to be "ready to walk with them, ready for parenting classes, ready armed with adoption counselors and really good strong adoption programs, good strong parenting programs, mentoring programs, counseling, advocacy."*

"...[PAC] Clinic workers meet (the woman) without judgment, and compassionately listen to her story, and help her know that someone can walk with her... We work with them to remove the obstacles that are in their way of effective parenting... [our] work focuses on helping women know their options [during and beyond pregnancy]...women can receive free tests for pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, in addition to ultrasounds. ...The clinic also provides peer counseling, baby supplies, education programs, referrals to adoption agencies and other social services... giving a gas card to fill up a tank if it helps keep a job, or connecting with educational needs."

In 2019, PAC served some 1,600 clients, with some 1,500 pregnancy tests and nearly 900 ultrasounds. The clinic reported 300 clients "had a change of heart" about terminating the pregnancy.

Some think that the Church's **Canon Law 1398** is the final say on excommunication for abortion. It reads, "*A person who procures a completed abortion incurs a latae sententiae excommunication.*" The term latae sententiae is equivalent to "automatic"—as opposed to ferendae sententiae, meaning "imposed by competent authority."

Where is God's love, mercy and forgiveness in this? What did Cardinal Dolan mean when asked on Fox and Friends if the Church excommunicates women who obtain abortions and said: "*We don't do that anymore?*" Well, **Canon 1398** apparently is NOT the whole or final story, because there is a body of Canon Law and a Sacrament to deal with sin called Reconciliation: A Catholic women who has an abortion—and accomplices without whose assistance the offense would not have been committed

Canon 1329, #2“...are excommunicated automatically by the law itself **only if all the other requirements of the code are present.**”

Those conditions are as follows:

- 1) The abortion was directly intended and was successful. It was not a case of miscarriage or accidental loss of the child;
- 2) The woman involved knew a penalty was attached to the [Canon] law forbidding abortion;
- 3) She was at least 18 years old at the time of the abortion;
- 4) She had the full use of reason (she was not [mentally impaired] or psychologically disturbed);
- 5) She did not act out of serious fear.

If a woman (or accomplice) are told or even think they have suffered the penalty of excommunication would they ever know that might not actually be the case? When an abortion is chosen, the Church does not reject them, but in fact has a loving way to heal and develop their relationship with God! **Canon law (1355, #2)** gives the local ordinary (the bishop) power to remit excommunication. Many bishops delegate all confessors to absolve from this excommunication without recourse to themselves—at least in the case of a first abortion. The “serious fear” condition mentioned above is recognized as a very significant factor in most abortions. Unfortunately, some bishops and priests refuse to absolve...they are dug in...judge and jury...convinced of the facts....serious fear is considered meaningless...forgetting God’s love, mercy and forgiveness... how dare they!

Final thoughts, for now. The dilemma seems to be: who should make the final decision in the complex issue of abortion? Do sweeping Federal laws and maybe the Constitution change to severely restrict or make it illegal? Or, do State laws decide? Or, do the Federal laws remain constitutional unifying all citizens, do the Church Canon laws remain reflecting God’s love, mercy and forgiveness, and can the network of necessary social services be created so the individuals; mother, father and medical provider; in each crisis pregnancy, can make the difficult decision with changed hearts understanding that protecting and sustaining life can be the best choice. Dear God, we cannot answer these complicated questions without you in our lives!

Pregnancy Aid Clinic supports women with challenges of unexpected pregnancies

By ANDREW NELSON, Staff Writer, Published February 6, 2020

FOREST PARK—As the faithful gathered at the Cathedral of Christ the King for the annual Mass for the Unborn, staff at the Pregnancy Aid Clinic prepared for a day of pregnancy tests, ultrasounds and classes.

The day was lively. Some 19 women had appointments Wednesday, Jan. 22, for tests and to attend parenting classes.

Five pregnancy tests would come back positive, with three of the women considered likely to give birth. Two ultrasounds were performed.

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Upstairs in the brick townhouse, a class of nine pregnant women learned about nutrition and communicating with respect. Afterward, they shopped among racks of donated onesies, Boppy nursing pillows, strollers and baby supplies with “boutique bucks,” part of the earn-to-learn campaign.

‘I know where you are’

Michele Griner began volunteering at the clinic after work to counsel women weighing decisions about their pregnancies.

She knows what the clients face. Griner was a teenager when she got pregnant. At that crossroads, she chose to raise her daughter.

“What the enemy meant for evil, God used it for good,” said Griner, 55, who attends Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Atlanta. “And he brought me back here to minister to these young ladies and I can honestly say to them, ‘I know where you are.’”

Griner is a licensed social worker. For two years she has been the director of operations and client care.

“Like most of the clients we see, I thought my life was over. It’s the last thing you want,” Griner said. “But you have to trust in (God’s) plan and trust that he will work it out.”

The work is to assure women they can face the challenges ahead with a pregnancy they may not have expected; the center will help them with social services, emotional support and education.

While the women may be fearful, she hopes they can pause and take a breath.

The job is not to scare a woman into parenthood, she said. “That’s not our job. We mentor using the love approach, and the love approach says our job as advocates is to plant the seed,” said Griner. “The rest is up to the Holy Spirit. So that’s what we do, we plant the seed.”

Meet them without judgment

The Pregnancy Aid Clinic, founded in 1984, is a nonprofit organization. It is one of some 2,700 crisis pregnancy centers in the United States. Independent of the Archdiocese of Atlanta, it adheres to Catholic sexual teachings.

It operates on a budget of around \$1.3 million. It is financially supported by the Knights of Columbus, the Order of Malta and other individual donors.

It has offices in Forest Park and Roswell, where women can receive free tests for pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, in addition to ultrasounds. It also has a mobile clinic, a converted RV where women can receive the same tests as the clinic. The clinic also provides peer counseling, baby supplies, education programs, referrals to adoption agencies and other social services.

Lisa Regan, Pregnancy Aid Clinic executive director, stands beside the organization’s mobile RV.

In 2019, it served some 1,600 clients, with some 1,500 pregnancy tests and nearly 900 ultrasounds. The clinic reported 300 clients “had a change of heart” about terminating the pregnancy.

Crisis Pregnancy, The Issues and Solutions are Complicated

Georgia in 2019 passed a heartbeat bill to restrict abortions after the detection of fetal heartbeat, about six weeks into pregnancy. It is temporarily suspended as the law makes its way through the court system.

As abortion laws become more restrictive, proponents of abortion rights have a campaign against crisis pregnancy centers. Critics call these centers fake clinics, whose mission is to mislead women at a vulnerable time. NARAL Pro-Choice America's website states crisis pregnancy centers "lie to, shame and intentionally mislead women" about "accessing abortion care."

Griner said their work focuses on helping women know their options. "We're very clear. Anytime we have a call or a walk in about the services that we provide we don't mislead anyone. We don't let anyone who's seeking abortion think that we can provide that service," said Griner, sitting in her office. On her desk is a small replica of Homeless Jesus, that depicts Jesus as a homeless man sleeping on a park bench.

Lisa Regan, who has been executive director of the clinic for a year, said clinic opponents are wrong when they claim programs like Pregnancy Aid Clinic only care about women before they give birth.

At her clinic, advocates are there for the women, assisting them to find needed social services, giving a gas card to fill up a tank if it helps keep a job, or connecting with educational needs, Regan said.

Clinic workers "meet (the woman) without judgment and compassionately and listen to her story and help her know that someone can walk with her," she said. We work with them "to remove the obstacles that are in their way of effective parenting," said Regan, who attends St. Andrew Church, Roswell.

'We love on our clients'

Forest Park sits in the flight path of the nearby Hartsfield Jackson Atlanta International Airport. PAC's busiest clinic is in this community.

Clinic workers know some of the clients come here for the free tests and then make their way to the neighboring abortion clinic. The clinic's office used to be the abortion clinic. Now there is a large sign on its front, promoting free pregnancy tests. There is no noticeable sign for the abortion clinic.

The women who rely on the clinic are largely women of color and poor. Most earn less than \$14,000 a year, Griner said.

"I get to tell them they are worthy, things they may not have ever heard before," said Courtney Cook, 38, who has a master's degree in school counseling.

She too faced an unplanned pregnancy as a teen. Cook chose an adoptive family for her child. It's why she pours so much into this now. She stood in the same place where they are.

"I totally see myself in their decisions, in their relationships. That's why I tell them I love them and they are worthy," she said.

Crisis Pregnancy, The Issues and Solutions are Complicated

On the second floor, nine women attended the 90 minutes Parenting I and Parenting II class. Cook leads it, but she wants the women to share their own stories from life. She tells them she is passing on parenting book information but doesn't know from first-hand experience.

Cook said she's found her students do not hear positive messages often about themselves.

"We love on our clients and students and give them a space to breathe," she said.

Abortion masks social problems

The disputed Georgia heartbeat bill is causing Regan to think ahead.

There were some 36,000 abortions in Georgia in 2017, reported the Guttmacher Institute, a research group that supports abortion rights.

Nationwide, about half of women who get abortions live in poverty, according to the research organization.

Michele Griner stands outside her office at the Pregnancy Aid Clinic's south side location in Forest Park. Griner is the director of operations and client care. Pregnancy Aid Clinic also has a location in Roswell.
Photo By Michael Alexander

Regan said thousands of women may turn up to the clinic for pregnancy tests and financial support, if the law is enforced.

In her view, abortion masks social problems faced by women. If abortion is restricted, the problems faced by women do not go away but will become very visible to everyone, she said.

It will require more services to be "ready to walk with them, ready for parenting classes, ready armed with adoption counselors and really good strong adoption programs, good strong parenting programs, mentoring programs, counseling, advocacy.

Diana Resendiz showed up at the clinic in September. Today, she'd go home with an armful of diapers.

Resendiz, a 25-year-old mother of three, all under the age of 5, came in and learned from an ultrasound she was 16 weeks pregnant. She said her life was in a dark place, with a boyfriend who would soon be in jail for abusing her.

"I was ready to break free from the abuse and definitely this has kind of allowed me to prosper and to heal myself from everything that I've been going through," she said, pausing with emotion as her eyes welled with tears.

Resendiz worked with an advocate to find an adoption agency. A playdate arranged between her and the adoptive mother allowed Resendiz "to connect with her in a better way."

With her Mexican background, Resendiz said she felt adoption is not embraced in her community. But she has found the experience so far to be life changing.

Crisis Pregnancy, The Issues and Solutions are Complicated

“I’m blessing a family with a child,” she said, also giving herself a chance to heal and be a better mother for her children. “I feel like I have a have choice in my life.”