

The Early Church Fathers on Abortion

Even early non-Christian writers raised objections to abortion. Ovid [B.C. 43-A.D. 17] refers to it as warfare. Juvenal [A.D. 67-127] calls it murder. Certainly, it should come as no surprise that the Church would also object to such a violent act. And object they did. They saw it for what it was; the taking of innocent life, an action which can never be reconciled with the Christian faith. We can certainly empathize with a young woman who finds herself with an unplanned child. However, we also know from others who have been in the same situation, that in the long run choosing life is best for all involved.

The Didache

The second commandment of the Teaching: "Do not murder; do not commit adultery"; do not corrupt boys; do not fornicate; "do not steal"; do not practice magic; do not go in for sorcery; do not murder a child by abortion or kill a newborn infant (2:1-2 [A.D. 70]).

Letter of Barnabas

Thou shalt not slay the child by procuring abortion; nor, again, shalt thou destroy it after it is born (19 [A.D. 74]).

The Apocalypse of Peter

I saw a gorge in which the discharge and excrement of the tortured ran down and became like a lake. There sat women, and the discharge came up to their throats; and opposite them sat many children, who were born prematurely, weeping. And from them went forth rays of fire and smote the women on the eyes. These were those who produced children outside of marriage and who procured abortions (2:26 [A.D. 135]).

Athenagoras

What reason would we have to commit murder when we say that women who induce abortions are murderers, and will have to give account of it to God? For the same person would not regard the fetus in the womb as a living thing and therefore an object of God's care [and then kill it]...But we are altogether consistent in our conduct. We obey reason and do not override it (*A Plea for the Christians* 35 [A.D. 177]).

Tertullian

In our case, murder being once for all forbidden, we may not destroy even the fetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance. To hinder a birth is merely a speedier man - killing; nor does it matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to the birth. That is a man which is going to be one; you have the fruit already in the seed (*Apology* 9:6 [A.D. 197]).

The Law of Moses, indeed, punishes with due penalties the man who shall cause abortion [Ex 21:22-24]" (*On the Soul* 37 [A.D. 208]).

Minucius Felix

There are some women who, by drinking medical preparations, extinguish the source of the future man in their very bowels, and thus commit a parricide before they bring forth. And these things assuredly come done from the teaching of your gods (*Octavius* 30 [A.D. 226]).

Hippolytus

Women who were reputed to be believers began to take drugs to render themselves sterile, and to bind themselves tightly so as to expel what was being conceived, since they would not, on account of relatives and excess wealth, want to have a child by a slave or by any insignificant person. See, then, into what great impiety that lawless one has proceeded, by teaching adultery and murder at the same time! (*Refutation of All Heresies* 7:8:4 [A.D. 228]).

Council of Ancyra

Women who prostitute themselves, and who kill the child thus begotten, or who try to destroy them when in their wombs, are by ancient law excommunicated to the end of their lives. We, however, have softened their punishment and condemned them to the various appointed degrees of penance for ten years (Canon 21 **[A.D. 314]**).

John Chrysostom

Why sow where the ground makes it its care to destroy the fruit? where there are many efforts at abortion? where there is murder before the birth? for even the harlot thou dost not let continue a mere harlot, but makest her a murderer also. You see how drunkenness leads to whoredom, whoredom to adultery, adultery to murder; or rather something even worse than murder. For I have no name to give it, since it does not take off the thing born, but prevents its being born. Why then dost thou abuse the gift of God, and fight with His laws, and follow after what is a curse as if a blessing, and make the chamber of procreation a chamber for murder, and arm the woman that was given for childbearing unto slaughter? (*Homily 24 on Romans* **[A.D. 391]**).

Basil

She who has intentionally destroyed [the fetus] is subject to the penalty corresponding to a homicide. For us, there is no scrutinizing between the formed and unformed [fetus]; here truly justice is made not only for the unborn but also with reference to the person who is attentive only to himself/herself since so many women generally die for this very reason (*Epistle to Amphilocheus*, Bishop of Iconium First Letter 2 **[A.D. 374]**).

Let her that procures abortion undergo ten years' penance, whether the embryo were perfectly formed, or not. (ibid Canon II **[A.D. 374]**).

Jerome

You may see many women widows before wedded, who try to conceal their miserable fall by a lying garb. Unless they are betrayed by swelling wombs or by the crying of their infants, they walk abroad with tripping feet and heads in the air. Some go so far as to take potions, that they may insure barrenness, and thus murder human beings almost before their conception. Some, when they find themselves with child through their sin, use drugs to procure abortion, and when (as often happens) they die with their offspring, they enter the lower world laden with the guilt not only of adultery against Christ but also of suicide and child murder (Letter 22 13:2-5 **[A.D. 384]**).

Ambrose of Milan

The poor get rid of their small children by exposure and denying them when they are discovered. But the rich also, so that their wealth will not be more divided, deny their children [when they are] in the womb and with all the force of parricide, they kill the beings of their wombs [while they are] in the same fruitful womb. In this way life is taken away from them before it has been given (*Hexameron* 5:18:58 **[A.D. 388]**).

Augustine

Therefore brothers, you see how perverse they are and hastening wickedness, who are immature, they seek abortion of the conception before the birth; they are those who tell us, "I do not see that which you say must be believed" (Sermon 126, 12 **[A.D. 411]**).

Sometimes, indeed, this lustful cruelty, or if you please, cruel lust, resorts to such extravagant methods as to use poisonous drugs to secure barrenness; or else, if unsuccessful in this, to destroy the conceived seed by some means previous to birth, preferring that its offspring should rather perish than receive vitality; or if it was advancing to life within the womb, should be slain before it was born (*On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1:17:15 **[A.D. 420]**).