



TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

*The Pro-Life Movement:
A History*

AN EXPERT GUIDE BY DANIEL K. WILLIAMS





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The Pro-Life Movement: A History

Historically, the pro-life movement has been far more politically diverse than many people have realized because it is grounded in a human rights claim that has appealed to people of widely different socioeconomic, racial, religious, and political backgrounds. The pro-life movement emerged in its modern form in the mid-20th century as a reaction against calls to legalize abortion, and rests upon the philosophical foundation of human rights, which insists on the value, dignity, and right to life of all human beings. For that reason, some pro-lifers have insisted

that a consistent life ethic also necessitates opposition to war, capital punishment, euthanasia, assisted suicide, and all other forms of unjustified life-taking – though today many pro-lifers do not fully embrace all aspects of the consistent life ethic. Despite this internal heterogeneity in the movement, all pro-lifers do endorse the principle that the fetus is a person and that the unjustified destruction of an unborn human being is therefore a grave moral evil and a violation of the most fundamental human right – the right to life.

Abortion Debates before the Modern Pro-Life Movement

ANCIENT VIEW OF ABORTION: The debate over the ethics of abortion began at least two millennia ago. The Hippocratic Oath, a product of the 5th century BCE, included a clause against abortifacients, though both abortion (which was usually induced through poisonous herbs) and infanticide were widely practiced in the ancient Greek and Roman world. Early Christians took a countercultural stance in decrying both practices. The *Didache*, a 2nd century Christian work, condemned abortion as a form of child-

killings, as did several other Christian works of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, including the Epistle of Barnabas, and the writings of Athenagoras of Athens and the North African Christian apologist Tertullian. The Council of Ancyra (314 CE) set ecclesiastical penalties for abortion, thus bringing the subject into canon law. The 4th century theologian Basil of Caesarea also equated abortion with murder, a view that both Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism have retained.

¹ *Didache* 2; Barnabas 19:5; Athenagoras of Athens, *A Plea for the Christians* 35; Tertullian, *Apology* 9. For a historical survey of Christian views on fetal life from antiquity to the present, see David Albert Jones, *The Soul of the Embryo: An Enquiry into the Status of the Human Embryo in the Christian Tradition* (London: Continuum, 2004).

MEDIEVAL VIEWS OF ABORTION: Most late medieval and early modern Catholic discussions of abortion followed Aristotle in differentiating between a “formed” and “unformed” fetus, with destruction of the “formed” fetus being equated with murder and destruction of the “unformed” fetus viewed as a lesser sin. In the late 20th century, some pro-choice Christians appealed to these writings – especially the statements of Thomas Aquinas – as evidence that the Catholic Church’s teachings on abortion have been inconsistent and that its current opposition to all abortion began only in the 19th century. It is important to note, however, that discussions of the exact timing of ensoulment, while of interest to many late medieval theologians, were never used to suggest that abortion, even in early stages of gestation, was not sinful; the church always condemned abortion and viewed it as the destruction of “proto-life,” if not a fully ensouled human being. It is also useful to point out that the widely accepted late medieval theological view of delayed ensoulment was based on the writings of Aristotle, and seems to have been at odds with the ancient Christian view that did not differentiate between different stages of pregnancy in condemning all abortion as murder. And finally, of course, one can note that since this view was based on Aristotle’s understanding of embryology and not the statements of Scripture or a church council, it was not enshrined in ecclesiastical doctrine, and thus was always subject to re-evaluation. With new discoveries made in the science of embryology, the Church’s understanding of the subject changed as well.

EARLY MODERN VIEW OF ABORTION: Although Martin Luther and John Calvin, both Protestant Reformers, condemned all abortion, English common law reflected the more widespread late medieval view that differentiated between abortions performed before and after “quickening” (the point at which a pregnant woman first perceives fetal movement, which can vary widely, but often occurs near the end of the second trimester). Those performed before quickening were not prosecuted, while those performed after quickening were treated as tantamount to child-murder.

In the early 19th century, American doctors overturned common law assumptions by successfully lobbying state legislatures for the first modern abortion prohibitions. The

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new science of embryology was made possible by microscopic studies that were impossible in earlier eras. Doctors argued that fetal development occurred on a continuum and that quickening did not indicate any medically determinable change in the nature of the fetus. Unborn human life, they concluded, should therefore be protected at every stage of pregnancy. State legislatures were quickly persuaded. In 1821, Connecticut became the first state to adopt an anti-abortion law, and other states soon followed. By the end of the 19th century, abortion was illegal everywhere in the United States. These laws were enacted by Protestant-dominated state legislatures, though the Catholic Church of the 19th century also embraced the view that human life should be protected from the moment of conception.

Despite the widespread adoption of anti-abortion laws, they were unevenly enforced, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when illegal abortion rates may have reached their highest point. In New York City, a major center of the illegal abortion industry, “abortion rings” connected with crime syndicates may have performed hundreds of thousands of abortions per year. Police did attempt to break these up, although many police departments made the prosecution of illegal abortion providers a low priority. Moreover, licensed doctors who pushed the boundaries of abortion laws by providing elective abortions in their offices under the pretense of medical necessity were almost never prosecuted.

The Beginning of Abortion Advocacy

Beginning in the 1930s, proponents of abortion legalization – most of whom were physicians who had become frustrated with anti-abortion laws that they believed had only harmed women by driving them to unsafe illegal abortionists – claimed that thousands of women died each year from botched illegal abortions.² This was probably true in the 1930s, but it was not the case after the discovery of penicillin, an antibiotic that was introduced in the United States during World War II. Penicillin revolutionized medical care and greatly reduced the risk of death from infection. By 1950, the CDC reported barely more than 300 deaths per year from illegal abortions. By 1965, the number had dropped to 200. Thus one of the original arguments for legalizing abortion – the claim that abortion restrictions resulted in the deaths of thousands of women each year in “back-alley” abortions – had lost most of its force by the 1960s, even though advocates of abortion rights continued, and still continue, to make this claim.³ Indeed, the pro-choice movement’s adoption of the coat-hanger as one of its most popular symbols in the early 1970s relied on the myth that legalizing abortion was the only way to save women’s lives.

However, if the discovery of penicillin undercut one argument for abortion legalization, it also gave their cause a new argument: existing abortion laws needed to be updated to reflect the new reality of antibiotics and safe C-sections. Some doctors and lawyers who assumed that the only justification for prohibitions on abortion was to protect women from a dangerous medical procedure argued that if both abortion and childbirth were safer than they had been before World War II, perhaps abortion did not need to be restricted only to situations in which it was

necessary to save a woman’s life. This argument, of course, did not accord much value to fetal rights, but it reflected an increasing willingness among some Protestants and Jews in the mid-20th century to view the fetus as either only a potential life or a life with subordinate value to the mother. Very few Americans in the late 1950s and early 1960s were willing to disregard the value of the fetus altogether and legalize elective abortion, but at the same time, a majority (according to public opinion polls) wanted to broaden the legally permitted grounds for terminating a pregnancy. In 1959, the American Law Institute called for abortion reform legislation that would permit abortion not only in cases where the woman’s life was in danger but also in cases of rape or incest, dangers to a woman’s health, and suspected fetal deformity.

California and New York were the first states to introduce abortion law reform. They were also the states where opponents of abortion law liberalization formed the first state right-to-life organizations in order to lobby against the proposed bills.

The vast majority of the pro-life activists and leaders were Catholics.⁴ Unlike most Protestant denominations, which generally ignored abortion debates during this era, the American Catholic bishops frequently spoke out against both contraception and abortion. Many Catholics heard homilies against abortion in their local parishes, and Catholic diocesan papers gave prominent coverage to abortion law reform debates. It was therefore not surprising that Catholics mobilized to oppose abortion legalization in the 1960s, while Protestants would wait until later to join the movement.

² For examples of these arguments, see A. J. Rongy, *Abortion: Legal or Illegal?* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1933); William J. Robinson, *The Law against Abortion: Its Perniciousness Demonstrated and Its Repeal Demanded* (New York: Eugenics Publishing Co., 1933); Frederick J. Taussig, *Abortion: Spontaneous and Induced, Medical and Social Aspects* (St. Louis, MO: C. V. Mosby, 1936).

³ Glenn Kessler, “Planned Parenthood’s False Stat: ‘Thousands’ of Women Die Every Year Before Roe,” *Washington Post*, May 29, 2019: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/29/planned-parenthoods-false-stat-thousands-women-died-every-year-before-roe/>

⁴ Political surveys of the 1970s showed that African Americans (including African American Protestants) were more likely than white Catholics to oppose abortion, yet most pro-life activists in the 1960s were white middle or upper-middle-class Catholic professionals, especially doctors and lawyers.

The Emergence of the Right to Life Movement

Activists called their campaign the “right-to-life” movement (a term that, after 1970, was often shortened to “pro-life”). This reflected their conviction that they were waging a human rights campaign, grounded in constitutional law (such as the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendment’s insistence that American citizens cannot be deprived of their lives without due process), as well as the arguments of natural law and the promise in the Declaration of Independence of the inalienable “right to life.” It also accorded with the international human rights movement that had formed in the wake of the Second World War and that had received expression in the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. For Catholics in particular, the right to life of all human beings, including the unborn, was the foundational right from which all other human rights were derived.

Many of the mid-20th century’s pro-life activists were New Deal liberals who favored an expanded social welfare state and viewed the right to life as part of a liberal human rights campaign to protect the less fortunate. In keeping with 20th century Catholic social teaching, they viewed the right to life not merely as an individual right to be protected from harm, but as a comprehensive social obligation to support human life at every stage of human existence, beginning at conception. This was especially true of the most liberal pro-lifers of the late 1960s and early 1970s, who called for a comprehensive defense of human life that linked anti-abortion advocacy to the fight against poverty and opposition to the Vietnam War.

Despite the pro-life movement’s effort to ground its arguments in the human rights-oriented social justice campaigns, pro-lifers rapidly lost ground and suffered a string of legislative

defeats: thirteen states liberalized their abortion laws between 1967 and 1970. Abortion law reform advocates succeeded in characterizing their opponents as religiously motivated sectarians who were attempting to impose the dogma of their own faith on the rest of Americans in violation of the principle of separation of church and state. Although pro-lifers believed that their campaign was based on universal human rights principles, not religious doctrine, the fact that the vast majority of pro-life activists were Catholic made it difficult for them to counter the popular stereotype.

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In an effort to appeal more broadly to Protestants, Msgr. James McHugh, who organized the first national pro-life organization, the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) in 1968, separated the issue of abortion from the issue of contraception.⁵ The NRLC emphasized that the right to life was inviolable and that this right could not be abrogated simply because a fetus was deformed or because its existence threatened a woman’s physical or mental health.

In 1970, however, four states – New York, Hawaii, Alaska, and Washington - repealed almost all restrictions on abortion until the last weeks of the second trimester of pregnancy. New York had an especially permissive abortion policy: it allowed elective abortion through the 24th week of pregnancy, with no restrictions except the stipulation that the procedure be performed at a hospital. Since New York had no residency requirement for abortions, it immediately became a destination for women from other states who wanted an abortion, and by 1972, the state’s hospitals were performing 200,000 legal

⁵ Protestants had changed their stance on birth control in the 1930s, and the unpopularity of the recent Catholic campaign against contraception made many non-Catholics suspicious of any Catholic campaign against reproductive rights. Even some Catholics resented the anti-abortion activism of their church’s bishops. It was becoming increasingly obvious, in the face of declining church attendance shortly after Vatican II, that many Catholics felt free to dissent from church teachings on contraception and, in some cases, on abortion – which meant that state legislators representing Catholic districts no longer had to worry about a backlash from voters, since Catholics no longer voted monolithically on abortion.

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abortions per year. Pro-lifers were dismayed. They had long compared the policy of legal abortion to the Holocaust, and feared that once legal abortion was introduced, other life-compromising evils, such as infanticide, would follow. Now that legal abortions were occurring on a previously unimaginable scale in New York, they prepared for the worst.

The Pro-Life Movement and Women’s Rights

By the early 1970s, however, the pro-life movement increasingly found itself in conflict with another rights-based movement: second-wave feminism. Before the late 1960s, the fact that most pro-life organizations were led by men was not a political liability, because the same was true for the abortions rights movement. From the 1930s through the mid-1960s, the campaign for abortion legalization was not a women’s rights issue; it was not connected to feminism, and the majority of its activists were men. The men who joined the movement had various motivations for doing so, including protecting women’s health, promoting doctors’ rights, controlling population growth, and modernizing the law to reflect current medical practice.⁷ But few claimed that women had a fundamental right to abortion. That changed in 1967, when the National Organization for Women (NOW) endorsed the cause. NOW co-founder Betty Friedan (who also co-founded the National Abortion Rights Action League [NARAL] in 1969) argued that women’s

However, New York’s permissive abortion laws also led to a public backlash that strengthened the pro-life movement. Pro-lifers won dozens of state legislative victories, and evangelical Protestants, who had previously stayed on the sidelines of the debate, began speaking out more forcefully against abortion. The pro-life cause was also helped considerably by the new technology of fetal photography.⁶ Before the mid-1960s, most Americans had never seen a fetal photograph, and even at the beginning of the 1970s, many had only a vague idea of what a fetus looked like. Now, for the first time, the American public could regularly see pictures of 19-week-old fetuses that looked like fully formed miniature infants or 8-week-old fetuses with tiny webbed arms clasped next to their emerging face. Sometimes these photographs succeeded in swaying ambivalent voters. Public opinion surveys indicated that they were the key to a pro-life victory in a Michigan referendum on abortion in 1972.

equality depended on abortion rights; without the right to control their own bodies and decide whether they wanted to be pregnant, women, she and others argued, would never achieve gender equality. The second-wave feminist movement therefore made abortion rights a central cause. Many progressives who supported second-wave feminism began to characterize the pro-life movement as a misogynistic cause led by men who wanted to control women’s bodies.

Yet pro-choice women’s organizations did not speak for all women. Public opinion polls showed that women were actually slightly more likely than men to oppose abortion. Women had played a leading role in organizing the first pro-life groups in the 1960s, launching letter-writing campaigns to lobby against abortion legalization, and in the early 1970s, they began serving as presidents of state and national pro-life organizations as well.⁸

⁶“Foetus 18 Weeks: The Greatest Photograph of the 20th Century?” Guardian, November 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/nov/18/foetus-images-lennart-nilsson-photojournalist>.

⁷For an overview of the role of population control and environmental concerns in the pro-choice movement of the early 1970s, see Mary Ziegler, *After Roe: The Lost History of the Abortion Debate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 95-127.

⁸Marjory Mecklenburg headed the pro-life effort in Minnesota. Judy Fink and Randy Engel led pro-life organizations in Pennsylvania. Louise Summerhill founded Birthright International.

The most prominent woman in the pro-life movement during the 1970s was probably National Right to Life Committee president Mildred Jefferson, a Boston surgeon who was the first African American woman to graduate from Harvard Medical School.

Pro-life activists who claimed the feminist label for themselves argued that abortion was the “ultimate exploitation of women.”⁹ Abortion, they argued, devalued women’s unique ability to become mothers and allowed men to avoid the consequences for their sexual exploitation of women, all while also enriching male abortion doctors. Leading pro-life feminist Juli Loesch said that abortion promotes the idea “that a man can use a woman, vacuum her out, and she’s ready to be used again. . . It’s like a rent-a-car or something.”¹⁰ As pro-lifers would continue to argue for decades, the women who sought out abortions deserved a better choice. Giving women that choice, many pro-life feminists argued, meant that all members of society needed to make a commitment to provide women with the prenatal healthcare and economic resources they needed to carry their pregnancies to term and care for their children. Prominent pro-life feminist Sidney Callahan described abortion as “an abandonment of women and children.”¹¹

Even though nearly half of all American women identified as pro-life, the perception that abortion rights were women’s rights

The Quest to Reverse Roe v. Wade

Prior to Roe, some state pro-life organizations, especially in the socially conscious northern Midwest, had been preparing campaigns to expand federally subsidized health insurance for pregnant women and offer subsidized adoption. After Roe, however, most pro-life activists gave less attention to those causes than the restoration of legal protection for the unborn.

was difficult for the pro-life movement to overcome, and it likely contributed to the defeat that pro-lifers experienced with the Supreme Court’s ruling in Roe v. Wade (1973). Contrary to later popular perception, Roe v. Wade was not the beginning of legal abortion in the United States; in actuality, more than half a million legal abortions were performed in 1972 – mostly in New York and California. Roe’s declaration that women had an unrestricted constitutional right to an abortion during the first trimester of pregnancy and a mostly unrestricted right during the second trimester contributed to an expansion of legal abortion during the 1970s (with the number of legal abortions exceeding 1 million per year by the end of the decade), but it did not begin the trend. It did, however, provide the first official Supreme Court statement that the unborn were not protected in the Constitution. For pro-lifers, the Court’s decision in Roe v. Wade was the equivalent of its ruling Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857), when it had infamously denied the citizenship rights of Black men, women, and children. Roe v. Wade had done the same to the unborn.

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—JULI LOESCH

If Roe v. Wade had denied constitutional rights to the unborn, a constitutional amendment that affirmed the right to life from the moment of conception seemed to be the only remedy. The Human Life Amendment (HLA) therefore became the top priority of every pro-life organization of the mid-1970s, whether they were conservative-leaning organizations such

⁹This quotation comes from a 1982 speech by Mary Winter, founder of the Pittsburgh-based Women Concerned for the Unborn Child, as cited in Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 151.

¹⁰Juli Loesch, as cited in Jason DeParle, “Beyond the Legal Right,” *Washington Monthly*, April 1989.

¹¹Sidney Callahan, “Abortion: Abandoning Women and Children,” Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life publication, [1970], as cited in Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn*, 152. Despite the efforts to ground the pro-life cause in a feminist vision, there were substantial differences between most second-wave feminist leaders and self-identified feminists in the pro-life movement. Pro-life feminists tended to be “difference feminists” – that is, they emphasized women’s unique differences from men (especially in the area of childbearing) and celebrated them, whereas some of the most prominent second-wave feminists minimized bodily differences between the sexes.

as the National Right to Life Committee or more politically progressive groups such as American Citizens Concerned for Life (ACCL).¹² The pro-life movement consistently withheld its support from any politician who did not endorse the HLA, even if they also promised policies that would reduce the abortion rate.

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Until the mid-1970s, abortion was not a partisan issue. The Republican Party included pro-choice advocates such as Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and Senator Barry Goldwater, as well as opponents of abortion such as Senators Jesse Helms and Mark Hatfield. Likewise, the Democratic Party was home to pro-life advocates such as Senator Harold Hughes and supporters of abortion rights such as Representative Bella Abzug. Indeed, some liberal Democrats who eventually became pro-choice, such as Senator Edward M. Kennedy and civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, spoke out forcefully against abortion in the 1970s before the issue became a source of partisan division. But in 1976, the Democratic Party included an endorsement of *Roe v. Wade* in its party platform (an endorsement that would be strengthened in the 1980s and beyond), while the Republican Party endorsed the campaign for an anti-abortion constitutional amendment. Even though the Republican Party still included a sizeable number of pro-choice members of Congress, many pro-life activists increasingly believed that the GOP was their only reliable ally in the quest to pass the HLA. They were especially enthusiastic about Ronald Reagan, the first Republican presidential candidate to endorse their preferred

constitutional amendment. When the Reagan administration was unable to deliver the HLA, pro-lifers began focusing instead on overturning *Roe v. Wade* by changing the Supreme Court.

Overturning *Roe v. Wade* was a considerably more modest goal. Unlike a constitutional amendment, the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* would not, in and of itself, protect unborn human life in constitutional law, nor would it lead to the immediate end of abortion in the United States. Instead, it would return abortion legislation to the states – a situation that presumably would lead some states to restrict or prohibit abortion, while states with the strongest pro-choice legislative majorities (like California and New York) would undoubtedly keep abortion legal.

What has come to be known as the judicial strategy strengthened the pro-life movement’s ties to the Republican Party, but some pro-lifers resisted this move. On the left, Catholics and some Protestants who had viewed the pro-life cause as a progressive campaign to protect all human life were dismayed by the NRLC’s willingness to narrow the campaign to focus solely on abortion and ally themselves with Republican politicians who supported nuclear arms buildup, capital punishment, and economic policies that many liberals thought would be devastating for the poor. In 1983, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin led the nation’s Catholic bishops in calling for a consistent life ethic (also known as a “seamless garment” life ethic) that would combine anti-abortion advocacy with opposition to nuclear war and capital punishment.¹³

As the abortion debate continued to polarize along partisan lines between the 1980s and the 2000s, the pro-life movement refocused the national conversation on late-term and partial-birth abortions, where public opinion was in their favor. By 2020, approximately one-third of states banned abortion after twenty weeks, and the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act prohibited a specific late-term abortion procedure.

¹² The insistence on the HLA as a political litmus test was so pervasive in the pro-life campaign that some liberal pro-life advocates (such as Sargent and Eunice Kennedy Shriver) who disagreed with the strategy left the movement. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who combined anti-abortion activism with a campaign for the rights of the disabled, had been a popular speaker in national progressive pro-life organizations in the early 1970s, but she parted ways with the pro-life movement in the mid-1970s, when she and her husband insisted that, since the HLA was not a realistic political goal, pro-lifers should abandon the quest and focus on policies that would reduce the abortion rate, such as -federally funded prenatal healthcare or childcare.

¹³ Joseph Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American-Catholic Dialogue,” December 6, 1983; Joseph Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: Continuing the Dialogue,” March 11, 1984.

By pursuing an “incrementalist” strategy that focused on limited gains at the state level instead of the national changes that had long been the movement’s priority, pro-lifers in the second decade of the 21st century succeeded in closing dozens of clinics in the South and Midwest. By 2019, six states had only a single abortion clinic operating. The total number of abortions in the country also fell, with a 19 percent decrease in the total number

of abortions between 2011 and 2017. By 2019, the number of abortions per year was lower than at any point since 1973.¹⁴ Even while some of the mandates of *Roe v. Wade* remained in effect, the United States had in a sense returned to the era that existed immediately before *Roe* – that is, an era in which legal abortion is widely available in certain states and hardly available at all in others.

The Pro-Life Movement Today

The restoration of the pre-*Roe* era, in which abortion is legally available in some places and not in others, was not exactly what pro-lifers had hoped for when they launched their campaign for a Human Life Amendment in response to *Roe v. Wade*. Instead, they dreamed of constitutional protection for all human life. The idea that the pro-life movement would largely lose its alliance with African Americans and with politically progressive Democrats would have been deeply disappointing to many early pro-life leaders, as would the movement’s inseparable connection with political conservatism and the GOP. At a time when approximately 30 percent of Democrats hold pro-life views, and when nearly 50 percent of Hispanics (a group that votes overwhelmingly Democratic) would like to make most or all abortions illegal, the NRLC’s practice of channeling its congressional political support only to Republicans who are likely to cooperate with a conservative judicial strategy complicates the pro-life movement’s relationship with a sizeable number of pro-life sympathizers, especially among racial minorities.

Perhaps all sides in the abortion debate during the 1970s would have been especially surprised at the changing demographics of abortion. Because of a drastic decrease in the number of surgical abortions among the middle-class (a decrease that seems to have been driven largely by contraception and possibly chemical abortifacients in some cases), surgical abortion is now largely the province of the poor.

As late as 1994, only 25 percent of women who obtained abortions in the United States were below the poverty line, but by 2014, 50 percent were – and another 25 percent were considered “low income.” Fifty-nine percent were already mothers of at least one child, and the vast majority (86 percent) were unmarried. Their number-one reported reason for abortion was economic; they believed they did not have the resources to care for another child. Perhaps Richard Doerflinger, the deputy director of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, was right when he declared in 2013 that the most effective way to reduce the abortion rate was to “fight poverty.”

At an individual level, one of the pro-life movement’s most effective strategies has been crisis pregnancy centers, which now outnumber abortion clinics by at least three to one. Through the persuasive power of 3D ultrasounds, personal conversations, and the offer of material resources, the nation’s 2,500+ crisis pregnancy centers have convinced numerous women to choose life for their unborn children.

Because of its origins as a human rights cause, the pro-life message has continued to resonate even with younger people who have rejected many other socially conservative causes. Yet despite their successes, pro-lifers have been frustrated at their inability to create the culture of life that they had envisioned.

¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Abortion Surveillance 2019.”

Even as an unprecedented number of new abortion restrictions have been enacted in socially conservative regions of the country, abortion availability has continued to expand in pro-choice states, and a national consensus in favor of a Human Life Amendment is unimaginable. Even if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, the nation is likely to remain deeply divided on abortion for the foreseeable future, and states with pro-choice legislatures and governors will likely continue to expand abortion access through Medicaid subsidies and additional legal protections. Perhaps the moment is right for a reflection on what it means to be pro-life in a pluralistic society in which consistently pro-life views are still a minority position. Does being pro-life mean attempting to overturn *Roe v. Wade* through the Supreme Court? Does it mean passing incremental restrictions on abortion? Does it mean attempting to reduce the number of abortions? Or does it mean pursuing a consistent life ethic by promoting a broader culture of life?

Different pro-life activists might answer these questions in different ways, and the political and strategic choices they make will therefore differ. Yet despite their disagreements, pro-lifers are united in affirming the value of unborn life and are committed to doing whatever they can to protect it.

Timeline

- **1947:** The National Catholic Welfare Conference issues a declaration of human rights that begins with the “right to life . . . from the moment of conception.”
- **1959:** The American Law Institute proposes a model abortion reform law that would allow abortion in cases of rape or incest, dangers to a pregnant woman’s health, and suspected fetal deformity.
- **1962 - 1965:** Vatican II reaffirms the Catholic Church’s high view of fetal life and connects it to a broader life ethic based on human dignity.
- **1965:** Edward Golden organizes the New York Right to Life Committee, which may have been the first state pro-life lobbying group in the United States.
- **1967:** Colorado, California, and North Carolina become the first states to pass abortion liberalization bills modeled after the American Law Institute’s proposed abortion reform law. By the end of 1972, thirteen states have adopted ALI-style abortion liberalization bills.
- **1968:** Msgr. James McHugh organizes the National Right to Life Committee as the first national coordinating committee for state pro-life organizations. It soon becomes the nation’s largest pro-life organization.
- **1973:** The Supreme Court issues a 7-2 ruling in *Roe v. Wade* that declares that women have an unrestricted right to abortion in the first trimester and a mostly unrestricted right in the second trimester, based on the right to privacy.
- **1976:** Congress passes the Hyde Amendment, which restricts federal funding for abortions through Medicaid.
- **1976:** The Republican Party platform endorses an anti-abortion constitutional amendment, while the Democratic Party platform includes a cautious endorsement of *Roe v. Wade*.
- **1992:** *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, a 5-4 Supreme Court decision, reaffirms the basic parameters of *Roe v. Wade*. Pro-lifers are dismayed because they expected that the Reagan and Bush administrations’ conservative judicial appointees would vote to overturn *Roe*.
- **2007:** In *Gonzales v. Carhart*, the Supreme Court (by a vote of 5-4) upholds the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act, the first time the Supreme Court has upheld a federal abortion restriction.
- **2021:** The Supreme Court, which now has a 6-3 conservative majority, agrees to review a Mississippi law that bans abortion after the 15th week of pregnancy.

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