

Ethics and the Search for Christian Unity

Roman Catholic-Reformed Consultation

1980

The Statement on Abortion

Touched by the tragic personal and social dimensions of decisions regarding abortion, the members of the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian Reformed Consultation wish to express our common concerns. We are conscious of the need for our churches to call attention to the profound moral dimensions of the situation and to identify the individual and societal factors which give rise to the issue and make resolutions so difficult. We believe that our defining traditions have much to contribute through dialogue towards the clarification of principles and the exercise of charity in this matter.

We live in a moral universe. Our human capacity and even willingness to know or apply moral principles in situations of conflict are limited and make us conscious of our human finitude and brokenness and of our need for graced guidance and open inquiry.

These limitations have sometimes prevented us from recognizing the wealth of 'Christian resources for pastoral guidance concerning responsible sexuality, family planning, and public witness on moral issues. At the same time, we affirm the importance of drawing upon our traditions in dealing with these issues. The proper structuring of family life, the honoring of the gift of the covenant of marriage, the demands of caring for future generations, and the protecting of the weak and vulnerable must be part of any discerning moral position.

Abortion decisions exist in a milieu of closely related social evils which 'limit peoples' choices. Social, educational, and economical inequities suffered by women are part of the problem. Any discussion of abortion in our times should proceed with a recognition of the pervasive bias of cultural and ecclesial traditions which devalue women.

Until these factors are acknowledged there will not be a climate in which a morally and humanly satisfactory resolution to Abortion can be effected. Women are too narrowly regarded in terms of their reproductive functions. Women encounter problems of poverty, inequality of opportunity, and sexual exploitation. If our churches are to be credible in addressing abortion, they must take the lead in accepting women as full and contributing members of the human and ecclesial communities. They must work to develop supportive networks to which pregnant women have a rightful claim. We recommend extensive, open discussion in the churches on the, reproductive functions, on responsible sexuality, on the social aspects of pregnancy and child rearing, and on the new problems raised by prenatal diagnostic information as well as the pervasive sexual bias influencing many of our ecclesial and societal structures and institutions.

Moral and spiritual formation of conscience, in which the churches have an important role, pertains to many questions concerning the value of life, of which abortion is only one. Those who face abortion decisions are moral agents and therefore free to make responsible decisions with the due regard for the unborn, the pregnant woman, the family, the society, and the faith

community. Considering an abortion places on everyone involved a serious moral responsibility.

Some of the basic principles on which the Consultation was able to reach agreement include the following:

1. the transcendent basis for respect for human life is the image and likeness of God in which human beings are created;
2. the ultimate responsibility for moral decision making rests with the individual conscience guided by reason and grace;
3. authentic moral decisions can never be exclusively subjective or individualistic but must take account of the insights and concerns of the broader religious, social, and familial community;
4. judicial and legislative standards are not always coterminous with moral demands, and therefore the legalization of abortion does not of itself absolve the Christian conscience from moral responsibility; and
5. religious groups have the right to use licit means to influence civil policy regarding abortion.

Some of the areas in which substantial differences were discovered and which call for further dialogue between our two traditions including the following.

1. the moment and meaning of personhood;
2. the rights of the unborn in situations where rights are in conflict;
3. the role of civil law in matters pertaining to abortion; and
4. the interrelation of individual versus communal factors in decision making.

In the light of our common Christian heritage and in recognition of our real differences, our ministry, with regard to abortion, will be characterized by the following: we will attempt to clarify the basic principles pertinent to decision making in this area. We will always respect the personal dignity of those involved in making decisions about abortion. Regardless of the ultimate decision reached, we will offer pastoral support insofar as our personal conscience and moral convictions allow. We will not resort to stereotypes and abusive language. We will work to transform societal arrangements which press people into untenable moral dilemmas. We will attempt to create compassionate community which overcomes alienation, loneliness, and rejection and which makes real a genuine community of moral discourse and decision. We will take responsibility as part of the mission of the church to create an ethos which values all life and which works toward a society where abortion need not occur.

The Statement on Human Rights

The people of God are called in every age to proclaim righteousness, to struggle against injustice, and to care for one another, for the structures of civilization, and for creation. In our age, human rights is a particular way of speaking of the ethical demands of righteousness and justice under God's rule. At their deepest point, all human rights are grounded in nothing else than God's righteousness, which we know through Jesus Christ. It is under the grace of God's

righteousness that humans speak of a universal and reliable moral law that is known by revelation and reason. It is engraved on the human heart in such a way that no one and no group is excused from recognizing the claim that other humans must be treated with justice, and that societies must be arranged on the basis of freedom and equity.

We confess that as humans we have not always been obedient to God's call, to that which we know in our hearts. We further confess that our churches in their divisions have failed to be truly reformed and truly catholic, and hence have not always led people of conscience, civilizations, or even the worshipping communities to obedience to the universal moral law. We are too often guided by the interests of material, ethnic, national, sexual, and even religious domination. Thus, we can only rejoice when humanists and groups such as the United Nations speak for human rights. We affirm that such efforts are theologically as well as humanly valid and are rooted in God even if God is not fully acknowledged. Human rights, as a reflection of God's will known to humanity by graced reason, are a proper guide to legal entitlements and protections which are to be heeded by individuals and enacted in civil, political, and economic areas by governments.

Human rights have two aspects. One is primarily personal and involves both the right to live with dignity and the duty to respect others in all things. Humans bear within them the image of God, which is the basis for their claims and duties. Therefore, individuals ought not be arbitrarily deprived of their rights of life, liberty, or the means of sustenance, growth, and creativity.

The other is primarily social. Family, cultural, scientific, political, ethnic, and religious groups have a right and a duty to organize, assemble, speak, and manage their internal affairs in responsible ways. Freedom of religion is especially necessary for the preservation of human rights in society. Communities of faith which are free to influence persons and to exercise prophetic witness prevent individualisms which neglect the common good and prevent political authority from becoming a conspiracy of the few against the many.

In the West, the constant and continuing struggles between Christ and Caesar, between *ecclesia*, and *imperium*, between pastors and magistrates, between church and state, between faithful believers and loyal citizens, have established a tradition which demands that political power and individual interest is to be limited and subject to universal moral law. This tradition is shared by the Roman Catholic and the Reformed churches in principle if not always in practice, and these branches of Christianity have provided historical contexts in which the possibilities for human rights have come to a fuller expression. Advocates of human rights also arose at times outside these traditions.

These advocates sometimes advanced the recognition of a universal moral law for peoples and nations and, at other times, confused the issues with the interests of specific nations and classes. Distorted communities, both bourgeois and proletarian, have appeared whenever human rights have been undercut by absolute individualisms or absolute collectivism at the hands of either religious or secular forces.

The universal character of human rights, although developed or discovered in a particular history, means that individuals have public duties to, as well as claims on, society. This also means that governments, as the custodians of coercive power, must be limited and restrained.

Government under law, with protection of minorities, with guarantees of basic freedoms, and with the rights of opposition, is normative for all societies. While states must have sufficient power to control overt wrong, protect persons, provide for defense against aggressors and rebels, and promote the common good, no government is fully competent in interpreting the universal moral law for all areas of life. Each familial, cultural, scientific, and especially religious organization, for example, has a right and duty to discern and carry out the moral law in its own sphere as a vocation from God. Hence, civil governments must allow them freedom in organization, belief, and practice. Further, no state may prevent these parts of society and its peoples from working politically toward reform of government when that, government fails to live up to the universal moral law or overtly subverts it. When a regime becomes the aggressor against its own members and when other means of reform are closed, revolution may be a necessity to reconstitute a society under moral law.

As Christians we know that a heavy moral burden rests on those who advocate and implement change by violent means. Several modern developments influence moral action in these extreme situations. The global interdependence in technology, economics, and communications allows new transnational pressures to be brought to bear on governments which attempt to stop reform from within. And both massive modern weaponry and divisive ideological tension make conflict liable to escalate destruction.

The study of human rights, its theological rootage, its history and principles, is sharpened by a close look at particular cases. In our study we turned to the crisis in southern Africa, a troubled area deeply influenced by branches of the Christian tradition, yet one where many features of human rights are violated. The failure to apply human rights to economic and racial questions is dramatic. Southern Africa illustrates one failure of people to carry out these universal principles, but it is by no means the only case present or past. Indeed, it only typifies pathologies of state absolutism and of economic and racial injustice that are present in less dramatic forms in many parts of the world under many flags and ideologies. Moreover, in South Africa, the regime is sustained by a distorted form of imperial Calvinist doctrine that operates as a legitimizer of tyranny, much as a misguided form of authoritarian Catholicism has done in other ages and in other parts of the world. Fuller understanding of the theological foundations of human rights, and a fuller obedience to God's will, can serve to correct these distortions. In the case of South Africa, with its documented denial of civil, political, familial, economic, and religious rights of black people at the hands of a white minority, we see no alternative, as a matter of human and theological principle, but the support of those liberation movements which respect human rights and bear the promise of religious and civil freedom with economic justice for all. Failure to support such movements is likely to produce a liberation movement which itself ignores principles of moral law in civil, political, and religious matters. We recognize the moral obligations which this places on persons, governments, and some corporation leadership and urge them not to retreat from these matters of moral principle.

To all Reformed and Roman Catholic Christians in South Africa and to all those victimized by the present situation, we commend the "Koinonia Declaration" drawn up by Reformed Christians and the several statements by the, Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference as sources of inspiration and genuine teaching. Any person or institution, secular or ecclesial, which interacts with southern Africa must bear the burden of proof that its action fosters freedom and equity for

all. Under, other social and historical conditions, liberation from the particular pathologies that reign will take many forms, and the resolution of conflicting rights may vary in view of specific contexts; but all forms of struggle for liberation, and all specific resolutions of conflicting rights, we jointly affirm, must be in those directions which keep alive the prospect of fulfilling basic and universal human rights in all areas of human existence and society.

As Christians in the Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions, we urge all persons of conscience, all those in authority, and especially our member churches to reflect on the meanings and implications of human rights and to apply them to their practices and policies, for the development of all people, for the upbuilding of civilization, and to the glory of God.