

A Note on Abortion in the Renaissance

by ANTONINUS OF FLORENCE

St. Antoninus of Florence (1389-1459) was a Dominican moral theologian who served first as Prior of San Marco in Florence and then as Archbishop from 1446 until his death. During the Great Western Schism, Antoninus was loyal to the legitimate popes, and throughout his life he was in the forefront of the Dominican reform movement which had the Church well on the way to renewal before the Protestant Revolt of the sixteenth century. Working in the Renaissance Florentine world of Cosimo de Medici, Antoninus denounced evil in high places, formed a brotherhood to aid the poor, supervised confraternities of Christian doctrine, organized groups for nocturnal prayer, and remained almost alone among the dignitaries of the city to minister to the sick during plague years. Antoninus was canonized on May 31, 1523.

Antoninus took some time each day to work on his massive Summa Moralia which did for moral theology what St. Thomas did for Catholic doctrine. The value of the work lies in its encyclopedic treatment of morality based on Antoninus' reading of the Fathers, doctors and best moralists of his own day. In pursuing graduate studies at Princeton University, the editor stumbled upon the following passage in the Summa, concerning abortion. Since space in this issue does not permit another full article, Antoninus' views are simply offered here as being of special interest in the 1970's.

The passage involves the case in which the mother's life is in danger. A distinction is made between the animate fetus (with rational soul) and the inanimate fetus (without rational soul), because medical science at that time could not tell when human life began, and so the Church had not specified the moment of ensoulment. In any case, the guidelines set forth are clear, with the case of the inanimate fetus further clarified in Antoninus' footnote. The passage shows complete agreement in principle with the Church's stand today, some 500 years later. The editor's loose translation is followed by the Latin original, as a corrective to any inadvertent inaccuracies in the English text.

Doctors or, indeed, others, in giving medical treatment to pregnant women to procure a miscarriage and the fetus' death, though the sin is hidden, sin mortally. But if they do this to preserve the pregnant woman from the danger of death – a danger arising from the unborn child – then, according to John of Naples (in his 10th Quodlibet), one must distinguish something about the unborn child. For either it is animated or it is not yet animated by a rational soul. And if it is animated, in giving such medical treatment, the doctor sins mortally. The reason is that this is the cause of both the bodily and spiritual death of the unborn child. However, withholding treatment cannot be said to be a cause of death [of the mother], but rather the cause is the pathological condition. Withholding treatment is neither a direct cause, since the act in itself does not kill, nor an indirect cause – as when the sailor is said to be the indirect cause of the sinking of a ship which he could and should steer but does not (since giving treatment to save the mother from death is licit) – because, for all that, treatment should be held back, or rather ought not to be given, when the giving of it might be the cause of the death of the unborn child (*cf.* arg. 14, quest. 5). Therefore, as Ambrose said: “If the one cannot be aided unless the other is injured, it is more proper to help neither than to injure the other one.” If, however, the unborn child is not yet animated by a rational soul,¹ then one can and ought to give treatment, for it is licit to impede the animation of such a fetus [to save the mother's life], since this would not be the cause of the death of something human, and yet this good thing follows: it frees the mother from death. For that reason, in such a case one ought to give the treatment, though not in the former case. Now if there is doubt about the unborn child, as to whether it is animated or not animated by a rational soul, it is obvious that in giving such treatment one might sin mortally, for he exposes himself to the danger of mortal sin, *i.e.*, homicide, and “he who loves danger,” as

Scripture says in Ecclesiasticus 3, “falls into it.” Whence in such a case, the treatment ought not to be given.

NOTE 1: Many affirm that even this [aborting the inanimate fetus] is illicit for in any event there should always be doubt as to whether the fetus is animated or not (as he warns in Praelect. VI, in the second part, section 5, number 5), and this is more brilliantly established by P. Cardenas in *Crisi Theologica* (disp. 14, chap. 3); moreover, the same author admits the doubt as to whether it is illicit. Beyond this, others add that to procure abortion in itself is against nature and intrinsically evil, even if the fetus is inanimate: “for from the nature of things, and by arrangement of the author of nature, the fetus is conceived in order that it be animated, and that the animated child be brought into the world,” says P. Antoine de Just. (part 3, chap. 2, quest. 5). So, just as it is not licit to abort the inanimate fetus for the purpose of preventing homicide [of the animated fetus later on] (which is implicitly condemned in the proposition which we considered above [*i.e.*, the fetus is conceived in order to be animated]), neither can this be done for the purpose of preventing the natural death of the mother.

(Antoninus, *Summa Moralia*, Tome III on states in life, Title VII on Doctors, Chapter II on vices and salaries, paragraph II)

Medici vero vel alii in dando medicinas praegnantibus ad procurandum abortum et mortem ejus, ut occultetur peccatum, mortaliter peccant. Sed si faciunt hoc ad praeservandum praegnantem a periculo mortis, in quo est ex puerperio, tunc secundum Joannem Neapolitanum in 10. quodlibeto distinguendum est de puerperio; quia aut est animatum, aut nondum est animatum anima rationali. Et si quidem erat animatum, dando talem medicinam, medicus peccat mortaliter. Ratio, quia est causa mortis puerperii corporalis et spiritualis: non dando autem medicinam non potest dici causa mortis, ipse sed morbus; non enim est causa directe, quia actu suo non interfecit, nec indirecte, sicut nauta dicitur causa indirecte submersionis navis, quum potuit et debuit gubernare navem, et non fecit, quia licet dando medicinam potuisset matrem a morte preservare; non tamen tenebatur, immo non debuit, quum dando causa mortis esset puerperii, arg. 14, quaest. 5. *Denique*, ubi dicit Ambrosius: *Si non potest subveniri, nisi alter laedatur, commodius est neutrum juvare quam alterum gravare*. Si autem puerperium nondum est animatum anima rationali,¹ posset tunc et deberet dare talem medicinam, quia licet impediret animationem talis fetus, non tamen esset causa mortis alicujus hominis: et hoc bonum sequitur, quia liberat matrem a morte; ideo in tali casu debet dare, non in primo. Haec ille. Quod si dubium est de puerperio, utrum sit animatum vel inanimatum anima rationali, dando talem medicinam videtur, quod peccet mortaliter, quia exponit se periculo peccati mortalis, idest homicidii, et *qui amat periculum*, ut scriptum est, Ecclesiastici 3. *incidit in illud*; unde in tali casu non debet dari.

¹Id illicitum universum multi affirmant, saltem ex eo quod dubium semper esse debet, num fetus sit animatus necne, ut monui Praelect. VI. in secundam partem ¶5. num. 5 (quod luculentius statuit P. Cardenas in *Crisi Theologica* disp. 14, cap. 3.) in dubio autem id illicitum ipse Auctor fatetur. Aliqui praeterea addunt, quod procurare abortum per se sit contra naturam et intrinsece malum, etiam inanimis sit: *nam ex natura rei, et ordinatione auctoris naturae fetus concipitur, ut animetur, et animatus edatur in lucem*, inquit P. Antoine de Just. et jure part. 3. cap. 2. quaest. 5. ita ut, sicut non licet fetum inanimem explodere ad impediendum homicidium ex damnatione propositionis, quam loco allegato consideravimus; sic neque ad impediendam naturalem matris mortem liceat.

(Antoninus, *Summa Moralia*, Tome III, Titulus VII, Caput II, ¶II)