

"Declaration on Procured Abortion" (1974), by the Vatican ^[1]

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As various societies around the world began legalizing abortive procedures or liberalizing government stances on [abortion](#) ^[5], the Roman Catholic Church's leaders felt the need to respond to these changes by clarifying the Church's position on procured [abortion](#) ^[5]. One incident in particular that may have inspired the "Declaration on Procured Abortion" is the landmark case in the United States Supreme Court in 1973: *Roe v. Wade* ^[6]. This case, which legalized a wide range of [abortion](#) ^[5] procedures in perhaps the most influential nation in the world, spurred conversation regarding the morality of procured [abortion](#) ^[5] throughout the world. The Vatican's response was initiated by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which, under the guidance of the Prefect Franciscus Seper and Archbishop Hieronymus Hamer, became the "Declaration on Procured Abortion."

Ratified on 28 June 1974 by [Pope Paul VI](#) ^[7] and delivered by him on 18 November 1974 in Rome, Italy, the document addressed the idea of procured [abortion](#) ^[5] from the point of faith, reason, morality, and law. In each assessment, the excuses and explanations for allowing elective abortions are found wanting, according to Catholic doctrine, largely because they violate the right to life that each human is entitled to simply by being a member of the human community.

With respect to faith, the document discusses some of the Church's historical viewpoints on [abortion](#) ^[5], acknowledging that at times there was disagreement as to whether abortions at particular stages killed a being with a human soul. After citing many of the principle Catholic viewpoints on [abortion](#) ^[5] and [ensoulment](#) ^[8] in the past (with references to Athenagoras, the Didache, [Pope Innocent XI](#) ^[9], [Pope John XXIII](#) ^[10], [Pope Pius XI](#) ^[11], [Pope Pius XII](#) ^[12], [Pope Sixtus V](#) ^[13], Pope Stephen V, [St. Thomas Aquinas](#) ^[14], and Tertullian), the document declares that there was always agreement on the sinfulness of any procured [abortion](#) ^[5], which cannot be outweighed by excuses on behalf of the mother's personal situation. It goes on to provide religious reasons why God must reject [abortion](#) ^[5], and reasons why faithful Christians must reject it in kind.

With respect to reason, the "Declaration on Procured Abortion" argues that the right of each person, an individual and genetically unique human being even in the earliest stage of development, to life precedes any right to an elective [abortion](#) ^[5] that may be claimed by pregnant women. The right to life is indicated as the predecessor to all other rights — the fundamental right that technically cannot be granted or taken away by any society or law because they are not qualified to make such a decision, but only to acknowledge and protect that right. The document argues that particularly when dealing with innocent or vulnerable human life, extreme caution must be taken such that when there is any uncertainty in the matter (caused by ideological pluralism), societies must err on the side of protecting that life. If in doing so a smaller right is affected, for instance the right to decide when to have children, the right to life is always to take priority.

With respect to morality and law, the document declares that to allow for ethical pluralism simply because ideological pluralism exists is to assume a variety of actions can be just as permissible as a variety of opinions, even on very grave issues—a conclusion that the Congregation argues does not follow. The "Declaration" warns that any legalization of [abortion](#) ^[5] would go against natural law and would violate the state's obligation to protect the weak, innocent, and marginalized. The document also warns that by making it legal to kill the unborn, a society would set a poor example of what it means to respect human life as well as take a step backwards in addressing additional human rights issues. These issues, the Congregation explains, are important for Christians everywhere to tackle, so that societies no longer feel any pressure to make [abortion](#) ^[5] legal. The document encourages the improvement of health care, adoption organizations and procedures, protection of women in vulnerable or delicate situations, and grants to families so that excuses with regards to finances, societal pressure, or the inability to care for the child cannot be made. Furthermore, [abortion](#) ^[5] as a form of personal or governmental [birth control](#) ^[15] is strongly condemned.

The document also warns against the misuse of technology when concerned with human life, suggesting that manipulation of early life and the use of technology for abortive methods should be strictly prohibited. The document mentions that fertility must not be seen as the enemy, and that all members of the Church are called to help create societies that respect life and welcome new members of the human community by restoring each person's right to life to the forefront of everyone's consciousness.

Overall, this document expresses the Church's modern, though not complete, approach to procured abortions, as it points out why Christians should not accept an assault on the unborn. It reiterates the Church's belief that life must be respected from

conception ^[16] to natural death and denies that intentional abortion ^[5] may be permissible under any circumstance. The beliefs represented in this document have been elaborated on by each pope since its release, and even by Pope Paul VI ^[7] himself. In short, the “Declaration on Procured Abortion” warns modern societies not to liberalize abortion ^[5] laws and gives brief defenses as to why they should refrain from doing so.