

The Virus, Abortion, and the Ethic of Isolation

This Coronavirus plague can really be a graced opportunity for the world to realize that radical autonomy from others is not all that it's cracked up to be.

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As I pen these words tens of thousands of human beings have perished due to the worldwide pandemic of the Coronavirus—over 25,000 in Italy alone. Hardly a corner of the globe has been left unaffected, with the United States leading the way in the number of confirmed cases, with over 46,000 dead. Our world is in a universal “lockdown,” with “social distancing” from one another the norm, “stay at home” the new learned behavior, and an unprecedented restriction on travel. Restaurants closed, businesses closed, schools

closed and nearly every church in the world has its doors locked—and in some cases literally sealed with chains or police yellow caution tape! The parents of grown children who even live nearby have for weeks not seen these loved ones, as the closest of human relationships are now governed by panic, fear, anxiety, worry, depression, in a society descending into sense of desperation and even despair.

How might we understand this current scourge visited upon the planet? Might it be, when all is said and done, that the human race—ironically or paradoxically or otherwise—is simply living-out an ethic it has embraced for many decades, and continues to embrace even in the midst of the crisis? Today the world, and this is certainly the case with American culture, has embraced individualism as the primary social-ethical value. Even Cardinal Robert Sarah has called the pandemic “a parable” that reveals modern man’s great mistake, namely our refusal to be dependent. As he stated recently in the French journal *Valeurs*:

Modern man wants to be radically independent. He does not want to depend on the laws of nature. He refuses to be dependent on others by committing himself to definitive bonds such as marriage. It is humiliating to be dependent on God. He feels he owes nothing to anyone.

I will argue that in no other area of societal experience and practice is this independence more dominant than in a “woman’s right to choose.” The slogan “I have a right to do what I want with my *own body*” is the creed that exclaims this radical autonomy upon which the quest for self-determination rests. My *own body*—meaning my *own self*—is not in-relation to others, and only by such a self-proclaimed autonomy may I truly be who I am.

This sort of radical individualism was enshrined within the United States Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. *Roe v. Wade* is not simply a court ruling with political impact. More than anything else *Roe v. Wade* is a philosophy. The decision articulates an anthropology about what it means to be human. *Roe v. Wade*’s denial of the right-to-life of unborn children is founded on two arguments. The first is that for the purposes of the right-to-life the unborn are declared to be non-persons, and as such they are not the subject of rights as the decision famously, or perhaps infamously stated: “We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins.” At most, unborn children represent “potential life.” However, the unborn stripped of their personhood is not enough to facilitate their slaughter. Plenty of things—literally things—are protected by law. Property is protected, ships protected, corporations protected and there are plenty of legal restrictions on how people may treat animals with some species absolutely protected in every sense. Thus, the “mere” failure of the justices to recognize the unborn as persons is not enough to have ushered in their extermination at the rate of over sixty million.

The denial of personhood to the unborn is an atrocious injustice. Yet, it is the other finding of the court that ultimately seals the fate of this disadvantaged class, namely the “right to privacy.” The “right to privacy” in *Roe v. Wade* is a privacy of a special kind—and indeed with *Roe* we have the invention, some may say “discovery,” of a new “right.” The “right to privacy” was engineered by the so-called Catholic Justice William Brennan—based on the

earlier 1965 contraception ruling of the Court, *Griswold v. Connecticut*. Here, as many may already know, the Court found that prohibiting the sale of contraceptives even to married couples was unconstitutional based on the “right to privacy.” This “right to privacy” was expanded to include non-married couples as well in the 1972 Supreme Court case *Eisenstadt v. Baird*.

However, in *Roe v. Wade* privacy is no longer a right that encircles the family, husbands and wives, or male/female couples, insulating them from unwarranted government regulation and intrusion into their “private” sexual affairs. The “right to privacy” shrunk from privacy that encompassed persons-in-relation, to a “privacy” that now encircled one particular individual—namely the *woman alone*. In *Roe v. Wade* the “right to privacy” is a sphere of privacy only around the woman. The woman in the court’s decision completely stands alone. The decision created and defends the isolated female, who must first be placed in this sphere of isolation in order to exercise the ultimate power to kill another—to indeed cast out-of-herself that person most close to herself—her unborn son or daughter.

This is the dynamics of *Roe v. Wade*. The court ruling is based on the premise that there are no inherent human relationships. The woman stands alone, apart from literally everyone else in the world and within such isolation any moral obligations she may have toward others are shattered. For instance, according to *Roe v. Wade* husbands in relation to their wives within the covenant of marriage do not exist. In *Roe v. Wade* a wife who conceives a child within the marital bond may kill that baby and the husband need never know, indeed has no right to know that his offspring was exterminated! The Court determined the woman owes her husband nothing because the woman who stands alone has no marital-relational responsibilities.

Fathers do not exist in *Roe v. Wade*. If a boyfriend who begets a child wishes to save that child from being put to death, he has no rights over the life of that baby. According to the original decision, not even parents of a pregnant minor daughter had any say as to whether or not their grandchild lived or died. In many states without parental consent laws put into place by pro-lifers, this is still the case.

Roe v. Wade created the autonomous woman. It is an ethic of isolation—a manifesto that declares that inherent human relationships simply do not exist—they have no moral meaning. In order for the slaughter of the unborn to be accomplished the bonds of the human community had to first be undone. Legalized abortion is practiced according to that Sartrean principle that “hell is other people.” Here is the declaration that human freedom depends on being free from others—to be free from anyone who may restrict my right to self-determination. Privacy in *Roe* rests on the assumption that human freedom is freedom from *being-in-relation* to others as the very presence of others compromises my choices and thus, according to the ethic of isolation, my very self-hood.

My pro-life work has taught me many lessons—but one lesson stands out from all others. I am perhaps one of fifty human beings in the world who has had the rarest of experiences—as I have retrieved the bodies of the aborted unborn from the trash and buried them. My book *Abandoned—The Untold Story of the Abortion Wars* records how the greatest lesson of

abortion was impressed upon me. In 1988 we had discovered that Vital Med, a pathology lab in Northbrook, Illinois, was leaving the remains of aborted babies out on its loading dock to be picked up by a waste incinerator company. The fetal remains were shipped there by parcel post from abortion centers as far away as Fargo, North Dakota.

Motivated by our faith, we knew we had to retrieve these abandoned bodies. Our first trip to the laboratory took place February 20, 1988:

Covered by the darkness of night, we wove our way through the labyrinthine streets between buildings and empty parking lots of the deserted industrial park. Finally, we arrived at our destination: a large garage connected to the building that housed the pathology lab.

We parked our cars in the parking lot of a building across the street. I got out of the car and breathed in the cold night air. Our small group walked to the entrance of the garage. A utility door on the right side of the garage doors had been left open, so we entered. We immediately stood on a long concrete ramp that led down to the loading dock. On the dock were three green dumpsters. Several heavy-duty cardboard barrels were stacked along the back wall. We began to walk slowly down the ramp. I could see dozens and dozens of boxes on the dock strewn about haphazardly. As we approached I felt a cold numbness stealing over me. When we reached the loading dock I knelt by a stack of boxes to examine them more closely. Pulling back the flaps of one of the boxes, I saw that it was filled to the top with the bodies of aborted babies. There were literally hundreds of them, all packed in Whirl Paks and specimen jars. Each box on the dock was similarly filled with fetal remains. Some of the boxes were open. The cardboard barrels also contained Whirl Paks, mixed in with waste and debris.

I was struck by the realization that all of these fetal children had been alive only a few short days ago. Now they lay dead and abandoned, cut from their mothers' wombs, cut from the human race: corpses of fetal bodies stacked on a loading dock inside an industrial park in boxes marked "for disposal."

As I stood on the edge of the loading dock it seemed my journey and theirs had brought us together at the edge of the world. Here the aborted had been cast adrift in a desolate sea. A dark, sad, heavy revelation suddenly took life deep inside my being. Abortion wasn't just about killing—and pro-life work wasn't just about restoring to the unborn their right-to-life. In the image of those tiny human lives scattered about the loading dock I came to know the true plight of the aborted unborn. The sort of deaths they suffered made them horribly, frighteningly alone.

We had to go to the edge of the world to bring them back—to give what remained of them their first and last human embrace.

My trips to "the edge of the world" taught me that the true plight of the aborted unborn wasn't "just" that they are deprived of their right-to-life. They endure a deeper plight as

they are plunged by abortion into a void of alienation. In their dismembered bodies is incarnated their dismemberment from the human family. I began to know their isolation and to understand that it is caused by the triumph of another individual in isolation—a lonely monadic self who must secure its own identity and power by suppressing or annihilating all who threaten to be in relation to it. The babies on the loading dock were apart from their mothers. Apart from their fathers. Apart from the towns and cities where they had been conceived. Far from home. In them I knew the denial of mankind's most intrinsic bonds. Abortion doesn't just kill the unborn—it is separation, the dissolution of human communion.

And so, the whole world is now thrust into separation by a deadly killer virus upon us as a plague. We cannot touch one another, cannot kiss, cannot embrace—and certainly we must never embrace the stranger. Indeed, we wear protection, donning masks and gloves. But our contraceptive culture, in its own way, already affirmed such barriers, perhaps prepared us for separation, by making sure that even in love-making our lives are not “infected” by another someone. The isolation we are forced to practice should cause us to recognize that we have forged it already in the ethic of isolation that continues to be defended.

Ironically, the isolation enshrined in the “right to privacy” that facilitates death is now the very necessary thing we must practice in order to live, even to the extent of a forced estrangement from loved ones. Might such “staying apart” be that living parable analogous to the breakdown of the integrity of the nuclear family that already defines our culture, as evidenced in sky-high divorce rates, absent fathers, out-of-wedlock births, mothers forced to raise children alone, and the dismissal and abandonment of the elderly? Yes, the isolation we experience now is pandemic-related, but it is a sign that certainly points to that deeper societal separation that may demonstrate to us that our ultimate problem is not a “mere” physical virus, but a false liberty that brings an end to human communion. From this we also need to be healed.

And perhaps nothing shows the dissolution of human communion more than, while most churches are closed for worship, most abortion clinics remain open. Catholic communal worship is suspended, that worship which is the primary instance of human unity in the world, as never before churches are shut up, dark, empty, and silent. Historically unprecedented, except for a few occasions of interdict, is the ultimate absence of the Catholic ceremonies that create human communion. With churches locked all over the world, it is at least nearly so! Yet, the rites of isolation continue to be offered in the still open abortion centers—as the right to self-determination enshrined in ceremonies of autonomy continue in homage to what the world considers truly essential.

This Coronavirus plague can really be a graced opportunity for the world to realize that radical autonomy from others is not all that it's cracked up to be, to force humanity to regain a renewed appreciation for human communion and indeed embrace all the moral responsibilities toward others that are inherent in our God-given human bonds.

If God is not sending the human race this plague, He is certainly allowing it. And the history of the Faith tells us that God withdraws his blessings only to stir up and awaken His people.

What is the lesson we should learn? If we wish to live by the ethic of isolation—we shall die by it. The world has been thrown into a terrible, sad, dark separation of persons—living the ethic it has embraced. But it is also a nearly historically unprecedented chance to renounce that deadly autonomy and come to know, welcome, and embrace the other.