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Whose body is it, anyway?

By Fr. John Breck

With the U.S. Senate voting overwhelmingly to ban the late-term procedure known as “partial birth abortion,” we are led, as Christians in a highly secular and pluralistic society, to look once again at the implications of what the French euphemistically call the “voluntary interruption of a pregnancy.”

Over the centuries, theologians have held divergent views regarding the beginning of human life and the point after conception at which a “person” can be said to exist. It has been noted before in this space that some Church Fathers hold to “immediate animation,” while others opt for a theory of “delayed animation.” To the former, fertilization and conception are synonymous, and they understand that human life, even “personal existence,” begins with the creation of the genetically unique zygote, the one-celled embryo at its earliest stage of development. The latter group argues, on various grounds, that the soul only “enters” the body at some point after fertilization—for example, at implantation or quickening—and only at that point do they consider the process of conception to be complete. I have also suggested reasons why, from the point of view of Orthodox anthropology, the latter view does not correspond with fact or reality.

Given our knowledge of embryology today, there can be no doubt that the embryo is a genetically unique organism from the time at which it is formed by the fusion of the nuclei of sperm and ovum. The gamete of each parent normally contributes twenty-three chromosomes, producing a new human being with a unique composition of forty-six chromosomes. Since the chromosomes contain the body’s DNA, the “genetic blueprint,” the embryo is a living, genetically

unique organism from fertilization, one that will, if left to develop normally, grow in an unbroken continuum through the various stages we (misleadingly) label zygote, pre-embryo, embryo, fetus, and newborn infant. From one end to the other of that continuum, it is in fact a matter of a living, growing child.

What needs to be stressed is the uniqueness of that child from the very beginning, a uniqueness that is both genetic and developmental. To move from embryological to biblical categories, this means that from conception the child growing in the mother's womb is a living human being: a composition of flesh, soul and spirit that constitutes the somatic unity St Paul speaks of as the "physical body" (1 Cor 15:44). Because that child is created in the Image of God, he or she is also a personal being, with a particular and unique origin and destiny.

A classic rebuttal to pro-life militants is the ironic, rhetorical question that has been raised as often as any other in the thirty years since *Roe v. Wade*. "Whose body is it, anyway?!" The question presupposes that a child growing in the mother's womb, at any stage of the pregnancy from fertilization to birth, is nothing more than a mass of tissue, comparable to a mole, a fingernail or a strand of hair. Accordingly, the answer to the question can only be: "Well of course, it's yours!"

If the "growth" were anything other than what it in fact is—a unique, living human being—then the woman would have every right, both moral and legal, to dispose of it as she wishes. The fact is, however, that the child's uniqueness—again both genetic and developmental, growing in a continuum from conception toward birth—means that it is definitely not analogous to some bodily growth. It is a unique and complete human being (as "complete" at its own stage of development as a two-year old or a sixty-year old is at his). Therefore it possesses the moral quality—and should be accorded the same legal protection—as any newborn infant or adult.

Because this truth has been formally denied by our country's laws, it has been obscured in our collective conscience. The logical and inevitable result has been 1.3 million convenience abortions each year, several thousand of which have been "partial birth." This means that several thousand of those abortions have involved legally sanctioned infanticide.

Abortion kills a living human being. This is as true at the embryonic stage as it is at later stages of growth in utero, including the moment of birth. To deny this is to deny the witness of God's Word as well as the givens of modern embryology. And indirectly it is also to deny the seriousness of "post-abortion

syndrome” that so often weighs upon mothers (and fathers) who have opted to terminate a pregnancy.

Whether we like it or not, sexual activity carries with it very definite responsibilities. If a woman is subjected to the violence of rape or incest, any resulting pregnancy has a very different moral weight than it does in cases where she engaged freely in the act that resulted in conception, even though such violence in no way lessens the full humanity of the child growing within her.

To raise the issue of responsibility today, especially in the realm of sexuality, is to offend political correctness in the most flagrant way. Nevertheless, we need more than ever before to educate, with love and clarity, the children who are ours—both boys and girls—if we are to help them to assume a responsible attitude toward sexuality and its consequences.

Whose life is it? It’s the woman’s life and that of her baby. It’s the father’s life and that of the child he helped conceive. In the final analysis, it’s the life of God, who creates us in His image; animates us with His life-giving Spirit; and calls us, from conception to death, to grow into His likeness.