Sacred or Sovereign: The Battle Over Life's Beginning

Life. The word takes on tremendous meaning, when in actuality it's so small—a flicker, a whisper, a cell dividing in the dark. When does that flicker become something we deem "human?" When does potential tip into presence? It's hard to say. The science can show us the mechanics: a sperm meets an egg, something begins. But how can one pin down the soul of it, the life of it? Is it in a heartbeat, a breath, or a cry? Or is it in the moments after: the memories, the relationships, the living of life itself? Maybe this is not for us to know. Maybe life, like so much else, is a mystery we carry, not a problem to solve. But that doesn't make the questions any less pressing when you're faced with them in real time.

Choice is such a loaded word. It sounds like sovereignty, but choices are rarely simple. They're tangled up in context: where you are, who you are, what the world is asking of you. The decision to have an abortion doesn't happen by accident. It's shaped by a thousand factors like money, health, relationships, dreams, fears. And it's rarely black and white. There's something sacred about having a choice at all, though, isn't there? It's an acknowledgment of agency, of humanity. But that doesn't mean it's simple. To make a decision is to shoulder the responsibility of what's to come, and that responsibility can mean a lot of regret, heartache, or endless "what ifs" and heartache. Or a choice could bring about relief, a clarity of one's values. Nonetheless, a choice bears heavy weight.

When I think about abortion, I keep coming back to the idea of what truly makes us human? Does humanity spark from our biological complexes, or from our mind, or from a spiritual sense of a soul, or from our emotions and ability to love? A fetus is potential, a roadmap that hasn't been traveled or marked. But potential isn't the same as *being*. A seed isn't a tree,

though it holds the promise of one. Does that make the seed sacred? Maybe. But is the sacredness of the seed equivalent to that of the tree, which gives shade and fruit and holds a thousand lives in its branches? What about the person carrying that potential? They're not just a vessel; they're a full, living being—a person with their own fears, loves, and stories. That matters too, doesn't it?

I grew up in the pews of St. Rocco's Catholic Church, where sunlight filtered through stained glass windows, where the air was always thick with incense and the prayers of my fellow Catholics. My Catholic upbringing wasn't just a part of my childhood; it was the architecture of it. Everything—holidays, Sundays, even the way my mom prayed to St. Anthony whenever my brother or I misplaced an item—seemed tethered to the teachings of the Church. Abortion wasn't just a sin at St. Rocco's. It was an unthinkable act, one that priests and teachers wrapped in words like "murder" and "evil." I don't remember the first time I heard those sermons, but I do remember the way I completely and wholly trusted my priests, believing fully that abortion is murder, a mortal sin that must be avoided at all costs.

My mom reinforced those teachings at home, though often not in direct ways. One afternoon, when I was about 15, she asked me to make her a promise. It was midday; we were in the middle of cleaning the bathroom, sharing typical teenage "girl talk" about boyfriends and relationships, as I had just entered my first relationship. While we jested over the excitement of new relationships and she rehashed stories of her early relationship with my dad, her tone suddenly shifted. "You'd never get an abortion, right?" she asked me in a heavy, hushed voice. I didn't know what to say at first. She glared at me with big brown eyes, a frozen expression I could not read. "I wouldn't," I said, because it felt like the right thing to say. The only thing to

say. She then surprised me, leaning forward to tell me something she'd never told me before. "I had one," she said, her voice almost a whisper.

I didn't move. I don't think I even breathed.

She told me she'd been young, she didn't see another option, so she made the choice. But it wasn't just a choice. She explained how this was something she carried with her each and every day, a weight that never left. She regretted it so deeply, in ways she or I cannot begin to explain. "It's not something you can take back," she said, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. "It stays with you. No matter what." Her words hung in the air between us, as my heart sank thinking about a potential brother or sister I could have had, that was never given the chance. "Promise me," she said again. "Promise me you won't make the same mistake." I nodded. I promised. How could I not? At that moment, she wasn't just my mom, she was someone who had been hurt, someone who wanted to protect me from this same pain.

But I was 15. I didn't fully understand what I was promising. It felt familiar, just another rule to follow, a piece of the Catholic framework I was raised in. It didn't occur to me then how complicated life could be, and how the world doesn't always fit into the neat lines we tend to draw for it.

The first time I really questioned my promise was in my fall semester of freshman year in college when my friend, let's name her Sara, got pregnant. She wasn't Catholic, but she knew I was. I think that's why she hesitated before telling me she planned to have an abortion. "I can't have this baby," she said, her voice breaking. She voiced how she didn't feel ready to be a mother, how she couldn't give up everything she worked so hard for, how she wasn't ready to bear this responsibility. I wanted to say something comforting, but all I could hear was my

mom's voice in my head: *Promise me.* I felt like I was betraying her just by listening. But then I looked at Sara and I realized how much courage it must have taken for her to tell me. I didn't fully agree with her decision, but I couldn't imagine being in the same position as her. *Would I really give up my dreams?* But I didn't judge her, either. She wasn't a bad person; she was just a person, trying to navigate something impossibly hard. And maybe, I thought, that's what everyone who chooses abortion is, a person doing their best in a world that doesn't always make it easy to do the "right" thing.

My mom's regret has always stayed with me. It's shaped the way I think about abortion. Pro-life or pro-choice is not as clean cut as it seems. It's not just an ethical question, but a deeply personal one. I wonder sometimes if she told me because she wanted me to understand the seriousness of an abortion, or if she told me because she needed someone to know, if she wanted someone to carry a piece of that weight with her. I think about how much courage it must have taken for her to share her story with me, to admit to something she was taught to see as unforgivable. And I think about the way she looked at me when she made me promise, like she was trying to protect me not just from sin, but from pain, the regret she burdens every day.

But as I've gotten older, I've started to see the cracks in my promise. My mom's story is her story, shaped by her choices, her circumstances, her regrets. It's not Sara's. It's not mine. And while I'm hurt deeply by her pain, I also know that no two situations are the same. What if I found myself in a position where carrying a pregnancy felt impossible, where I knew I wasn't prepared to be a Mother, where I knew I couldn't provide for my child, where my own life was at risk? Would I still keep that promise? Would she want me to?

I don’t know if I’ll ever have a clear answer about abortion. It’s a question that's entwined with love and fear and hope and regret. What I do know is that life and choices are messy. Promises matter, but so does compassion. And sometimes the hardest thing isn’t choosing between right and wrong; it’s accepting that the line between them isn’t always clear.

I think about my mom a lot when I try to make sense of all of my questions. I think about her regret, her faith, and the love that drove her to ask me to promise. I don’t know if I’ve kept that promise to her yet. Even questioning feels like a betrayal. But in the end, I’m trying to do what she taught me: to see life as sacred, complicated circumstances and all.

When I first started really questioning abortion—beyond the sermons at St. Rocco’s, beyond my mom’s regret—it was like thinking I was dipping my toe in a puddle, where in actuality I stepped into the ocean. I wanted answers, clear ones, but every question seemed to lead to more questions, which led to questions that questioned those questions, and every answer felt more complicated than the last.

One of the first things I tried to understand was *when*. When does life begin? It’s one of those questions that seems simple until you actually try to pin it down. The Church’s answer was clear: life begins at conception. It was what I’d always been taught, it was all I’d ever known. But as I started my exploration, I realized the world isn’t nearly as united on that idea.

I read about fetal development, trying to understand what the science said. By six weeks, the heart starts to beat, though a flutter is a more appropriate term, as it's driven by electrical impulses rather than a fully formed organ. By twelve weeks, fingers and toes are forming. By twenty weeks, some argue a fetus might feel pain, while others say it’s unlikely until much later.

It was fascinating to read. It was unsettling to hear. The more I learned, the harder it became to draw a line. Is life just a heartbeat? Or is it consciousness, awareness? How could we ever pinpoint when a fetus' consciousness develops? What does it really mean to be alive?

I tried to reconcile what I was learning with what I believed. If life begins at conception, as the Church teaches, does that mean every fertilized egg is a soul? What about the ones that don't implant, the pregnancies that end before a woman even knows she's pregnant? Are those lives, too?

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that even the Church's teaching wasn't very straightforward. The Bible doesn't explicitly mention abortion, though it often discusses the value of life. Historically, even Catholic theologians have disagreed. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, believed the soul entered the body weeks after conception. The Church only adopted its current stance in the 19th century.

It felt strange, blasphemous even, to question something so central to my faith, to my values. But it also felt necessary. If I was going to make sense of my mom's promise, If I were to understand my *own* beliefs, I needed to understand not just what I was taught, but why.

The more I read, the more I realized that abortion isn't just about biology or theology. It's about lives that already exist, too. I started reading about the kinds of situations that lead people to seek abortions, and I finally began to understand how circumstance plays so heavily into choice.

I read about women who were raped, who became pregnant not through love or choice, but through an act of violence. I thought about what it would mean to carry a child conceived

from one's rapist, from a traumatic experience, and to look at a baby and see the face of someone who hurt you. Could I do it? Could my mom do it? And what about pregnancies that threaten the mother's life? I read about ectopic pregnancies, where the fertilized egg implants outside the uterus. These pregnancies can't survive, and when they go untreated they can kill the mother. In some places like Texas, abortion bans are so strict that doctors hesitate to treat these cases, afraid of being prosecuted. Josseli Barnica lost her life for this reason, as doctors delayed treatment of her miscarriage, which falls under the gray area of Texas' abortion laws. Do all people deserve to abide by predetermined religious guidelines as to how they can treat their body? Where is the line between laws built on morality versus religion, and how do we draw this line to be fairly applicable to all people? How are deaths like that of Barnica fair?

As my questions grew, I kept reading. I came across stories of women who died because they couldn't get the care they needed. Women like Savita Halappanavar in Ireland, who was denied an abortion even as her body went septic. She begged for help, but the doctors said no, as her baby still had a heartbeat. By the time it stopped, Halappanavar was already gone. I couldn't stop thinking about those stories. I couldn't stop imagining what it would feel like to be in their place, to know your life is slipping away because someone else decided your pregnancy mattered more than you did.

As I kept exploring, I started to see how laws about abortion aren't just about morality. Many of these laws are about power, both those in power and those whose power is stripped. In places where abortion is banned or heavily restricted, people don't stop seeking abortions. They just take greater risks. I read about unsafe abortions in countries where the procedure is illegal: women drink bleach or insert sharp objects into their bodies. Women dying from infections, hemorrhages, desperate to end pregnancies they couldn't continue. Even in places where

abortion is technically legal, restrictive laws can put it out of reach for many women. Waiting periods, mandatory counseling, parental consent for minors, these are just some of the barriers that make it harder, especially for people who are already vulnerable.

I read about young girls who became pregnant after being raped, forced to carry their pregnancies because the law said they had no other choice. I read about families plunged into poverty because they couldn't afford to raise another child. And what kind of life would those children be getting now? Was the loss of their quality of life equivalent to the loss they would've faced if the child was never born? I thought about my mom's regret, about the weight she carried, and I wondered how much heavier that weight might have been if she hadn't been able to make that choice at all.

Through all of this, I kept coming back to St. Rocco's, to the sermons and prayers that were the building blocks of my childhood. I wanted to believe there was a clear answer, a right answer, one that would honor both my faith and the reality of the world we live in. But the more I learned, the harder it became to find that answer. I started to see the teachings of the Church as a compass that could point me in a direction, rather than a GPS that would direct me exactly where I needed to go. I thought about Jesus, about the way he always seemed to choose compassion over following these rules. He didn't condemn the woman caught in adultery; Rather, he told her to go and sin no more.

Maybe abortion isn't just right or wrong. Maybe it's about love— love for the unborn, yes, but also love for the living.

I think a lot about what it means to take on responsibility for another life. It's strange, beautiful, and overwhelming. Parents carry that responsibility every day, the weight of a child's physical

and mental needs. But responsibility is also a choice, not something that should be forced. When you bring a life into the world, it should come with intention. To do it without those things feels like a kind of violence, something I don't know if a loving Jesus or God would stand for.

Abortion, then, isn't just an end. It's not rejecting life, but acknowledging one's limits and admitting when you're not ready for a big responsibility. And that, in its own way, feels deeply human. Unfortunately, the world often fails the people who have to make this choice. Think about the lack of support—affordable healthcare, childcare, education shame and stigma—of all the fear and judgment. Our systems make it so hard for people to thrive, let alone raise a child. When someone chooses abortion, it's often because the world hasn't given them the tools to choose otherwise. That's not just a personal failing; it's a societal one. It's important to put aside one's personal beliefs to look broader and consider how deeply societal among other factors influence a person's choice.

We want things to be clear. Right and wrong, good and bad. But abortion doesn't fall in a clean cut category. It's messy, and it's personal. It's easy to stand at a distance and pass judgment, to not think of oneself in another's shoes. It's not about politics or principles, it's about your body, life, and future. And it's also about something bigger than you, something that doesn't have a voice yet. That tension creates a balance that's impossible to weigh, and it is what makes abortion so hard to talk about. It's not a neat story with a clean moral. It's life, with all its differing viewpoints and endless contradictions.

If there's one thing I wish we could hold onto in this conversation, it's compassion. For the people who have to make this choice, for the lives that might have been, for the complexity of these situations. No one comes to this decision lightly. It's a choice deserves understanding,

not condemnation. At the end of the day, abortion is about people—people trying to make the best choice they can in a politicized world with strict laws, limited support, and quick judgement. And that choice is something we must honor, even if we don't always agree. Abortion is one of those topics that makes you confront what it means to be human. It asks you to wrestle with questions of life and death, of sacredness or sovereignty. There are no easy answers here. There are no universal truths. But maybe these open-ended questions are okay. Maybe the point is to have these conversations, to analyze different viewpoints without needing a perfect answer or reaching a unified voice.

I constantly remember my conversation with my mom and the promise I made. I remember the story she shared, and the way her regret shaped her faith. I don't want to carry her regret, but I also don't want to forget it. It's part of her, part of me, part of the legacy of love and pain that we all inherit and learn from. And maybe that's part of the answer: to carry the stories of Halappanavar and Barnica and every woman who has made this decision with compassion. The battle over life's beginning can reflect our values, our fears, and our hopes, but it also asks us to do the hardest thing of all: to see each other, fully and without judgment, and to choose compassion anyway.