

You Are Not Alone

**Catholic Women
and the Abortion Decision**

It is sometimes difficult for Catholics to talk about abortion.

You may feel that no one else shares or understands your experience. On these pages we answer some common questions Catholics have about abortion and provide two meditations for your decision-making. We want you to know *you are not alone*.

Do Catholic women have abortions?

Yes, Catholic women have abortions. In fact, Catholic women have abortions in many countries at about the same rate as other women.

What do Catholics believe about abortion?

Catholics the world over support the right to legal abortion and believe it can be a moral option.

What is the church's teaching on abortion?

Catholic teachings on abortion have changed over time. Many past and present Catholic theologians have said abortion can be a moral choice. Others disagree.

St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas both believed that the fetus did not become a person until later in the pregnancy. Even today, although the Vatican does not condone abortion, it has said definitively that it does not know when a developing life becomes a person. The Catholic tradition is more than the teachings written down by popes and theologians. Catholicism

is based on a deep respect for the conscience, which each person must follow above all else when making a moral decision.

Will I be excommunicated if I have an abortion?

The simple answer is that church law does not state that every woman who has an abortion is automatically excommunicated.

Under church law, penalties can sometimes be imposed for abortion under specific circumstances. But it also recognizes that in some situations a person might receive a lesser punishment or none at all. Some believe this includes a woman who acted according to her conscience in choosing an abortion.

Do I have to confess to having an abortion?

That's between you and your conscience.

Why do women have abortions?

Women have abortions because they don't want to be pregnant. Each woman's circumstances are unique, which means she is the one best placed to decide about her pregnancy. No matter what her reasoning, her decision should be respected.

Ultimately, you know your life better than anyone, and only you can make the right decision about your pregnancy. Take as much time as you need.

After all is said and done, how do I go about making up my own mind?

Decisions about a pregnancy are serious. When faced with the question of whether or not to have an abortion,

accept that it is your decision, not anybody else's.

- Consider your commitments in life—to others and also to yourself.
- Know what you are deciding. Ask your doctor or nurse about the medical aspects of abortion and childbearing—the different procedures and risks.
- Understand your feelings, religious beliefs and values as they relate to your pregnancy; weigh those against your feelings, beliefs and values about other circumstances in your life.
- Look at all the alternatives open to you. No alternative will be all good or all bad. Considering each of your options will lead to a good decision.
- Conversations with trusted friends, unbiased counselors or a partner are good for anyone who faces an important decision like this.
- Clinics where abortions are performed can usually refer you to clergy or counselors who will raise helpful questions. If you feel you are being pressured in any way, look elsewhere for help. Good counselors try to help but don't push you in any direction.

Throughout your decision-making process, remember that other women, including many Catholics, have asked themselves these same questions. Some have decided to continue their pregnancies and some have not.

Meditations

We sometimes forget the spiritual dimension of all-important decisions and events in our lives. Women need spiritual support and affirmation when making any personal choice, including decisions about a pregnancy. This can take the form of quiet reflection with the prayers you know best. Or, consider trying one of the following meditations. They can be used alone or shared with people close to you.

Meditation in Search of Wisdom

Background

This meditation will guide you towards making a decision about your pregnancy.

Centering

Play soothing music quietly in the background.

Candle Lighting

Light a candle, absorb its power and pray.

Prayer

Gracious and loving Holy Wisdom, fill me with wisdom that I may see clearly the choice that I need to make. Bless me and comfort me with your Spirit.

Visualization

- Imagine yourself walking on a path through the woods. See your future if you decide to continue the pregnancy. At the end of this path find what your life would be like in 10 years. (Pause for a few minutes and see this future.)
- Now begin again. See another path through the woods—your future if you decide not to continue the pregnancy. At the end of this path find what your life would be like in 10 years. (Pause for a few minutes and see this different future.)
- After you have imagined these two pathways, find a cozy room with a comfortable chair. Sit in this chair and think about what you have seen. (Pause for as long as you like.)

Reflection

Sit and watch the candle burn, write down your thoughts in a journal and/or share your insights with people you are close to.

Closing Affirmation

Wisdom, you come to those who reflect upon life in all its complexity. You help make choices based on honesty and truth. You live within me. I listen to you. I trust you. Wisdom, with you I am never alone.

Song

Choose some music to complete the meditation.

Affirmation of Choice

Background

This exercise affirms that you have made a good decision. It can be used at any point to provide strength, healing and closure. The affirmation is meant to be performed with friends, but you can do it by yourself with the knowledge that you are not alone—other Catholics support you.

Gathering

The leader invites supportive people—if you have included them—to gather in a circle. She welcomes them and begins the affirmation.

Song

This should be your favorite comforting song.

Prayer

Blessed are you, Holy One, for your presence with _____ (your name).

Praised be you, God, that you have given your people the power of choice.

We are here to support the choice that _____ has made about her pregnancy. Such a choice is never simple, but she has come to this conclusion with integrity and strength.

Our beloved sister has made the choice that is best for her and her family. We stand by her side now and support her in her decision. We will walk with her on the road ahead.

Blessed are you, Holy One, for your presence with her.

Reading

Choose a poem, reading or scripture verse with a positive message.

Sharing

The leader invites you (and others, if you wish) to speak about your decision. You should feel free to make a gesture, such as lighting a candle, sprinkling flower petals or sharing dried flowers, to express your feelings.

[For the following ritual, oil or water may be used.]

Blessing of _____ *(your name):*

_____, we love you very deeply. To show that we support both you and your choice, we give you this bowl and this oil. Oil soothes the bones. Oil strengthens and heals. (Here, the leader can add some insights you've shared, or reflect upon some of your strengths.)

We bless you with this oil. (Each person takes oil from the bowl and anoints your hands, face, feet, neck, shoulders and/or head. Each closes the blessing by embracing you.)

_____ (your name), the bowl is a symbol of this

day. When you need wisdom—and such days come to each of us—look at this bowl and remember our love for you.

Closing Song

Choose a song to complete the affirmation.

Meditations adapted from text by Diann L. Neu, feminist liturgist, psychotherapist and co-director of WATER, the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual, in Silver Spring, MD.



Catholics for Choice

Catholics for Choice shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being and respect and affirm the moral capacity of women and men to make decisions about their lives.

Catholics for Choice produces a wide range of publications on Catholic healthcare, Catholic public opinion, conservative Catholic organizations and the rights of Catholics in the church. For a full list of CFC's publications, please visit our website, www.CatholicsForChoice.org.

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