

# Roman Catholic Church Quickening

Although the concept of quickening was not developed initially by the Roman Catholic Church, much of their histories are intertwined. Quickening, the point at which a pregnant woman can first feel the movements of the growing embryo or fetus, has long been a pivotal moment in pregnancy. Historically, it has also been a pivotal moment for law and the Church in deciding the criminal and religious sanctions for women who intentionally procured an abortion.

It is interesting to note that although many of the debates in the early Roman Catholic Church regarding procured abortion centered on animation, another term for “quickening,” this was not the original focal point in embryology and development for Church leaders. In fact, the Old Testament of the Bible mentions only that a formed fetus, or one with the shape and features of a human baby, would warrant full legal protection in the “life for a life” sense, as referenced in Exodus. Much of the Bible discusses life in the womb as active, but quickening is rarely mentioned specifically. One example is when the “infant” in the womb of Elizabeth is said to “leap for joy” at the presence of Mary, who had just recently conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit as described in the Gospel of Luke.

Many early Church leaders and publications, such as the *Didache*, Tertullian, Athenagoras, Basil the Great, and others, also indicated that quickening was not used to determine the value of life in the womb. Later Catholic theologians, leaning heavily on Greek philosophers like Aristotle, declared a distinction in the severity of the crime of procured abortion based on a particular point in development. Indeed, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas both cited a point after conception, generally the point of quickening, as the moment at which the life in the womb becomes human, meaning ensouled with a rational human soul. For Augustine and Aquinas, intentional abortion was always an offense against God but after the point of ensoulment it was much more so. These and other Church theologians often declared that abortion after quickening was a highly immoral action, worthy of immediate excommunication and/or the legal penalty for homicide.

Using quickening as the standard for determining how serious a crime it was to procure an abortion was a tradition that lasted for centuries as common Church and legal practice. Though theologians, clerics, and legal authorities published a variety of opinions on the matter, it was not until 1588 that the Roman Catholic Church dropped the distinction between the quickened and the unquickened fetus with the release of “*Effraenatam*,” an encyclical written by Pope Sixtus V. Overwhelmed by the large number of cases brought before the clergy and Church courts, the document’s decision was reversed by the next pope, Gregory XIV, and the quickening test was reinstated. Presumably in response to the liberalization of abortion practices and laws, as well as in anticipation of the loss of Church legal power through the Papal States, Pope Pius IX released the encyclical “*Apostolica Sedis Moderationi*” in 1869. This document, like “*Effraenatam*,” dismissed quickening as a standard for determining the right to life of the fetus and reaffirmed the consequence of immediate excommunication for any intentionally procured abortion.

The condemnation of abortion without regard to quickening or stage of fetal development is still the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church and many popes have since elaborated on the Church’s beliefs in their own papal documents. “*Humanae Vitae*” by Pope Paul VI and “*Evangelium Vitae*” by Pope John Paul II both dismiss the importance of quickening in determining the value of embryonic or fetal life and fiercely defend the decision set in motion by Pope Pius IX. In addition, as science has progressed with technology to observe life in the womb, the Roman Catholic Church has pointed to techniques such as ultrasound to support the irrelevance of quickening for determining the beginning of life. The documents named above are also reinforced by the Catechism of the

Catholic Church, which confirms the idea of immediate hominization or ensoulment upon conception and disregards quickening as a point of legal or moral significance.

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