

The Supreme Court has been preparing a decision on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. The case concerns the right of the State of Mississippi to restrict abortions to the first fifteen weeks of pregnancy, a direct challenge to the court's 1973 decision *Roe v. Wade*, which permitted abortions even through the third trimester. A draft of the decision has leaked, suggesting that this case will likely shift the establishment of such legislation away from the courts and onto the states. The leak has prompted extreme reactions both from those who support *Roe* and those who oppose it. We still do not have a final decision on the case, so all reaction is premature—as is all preaching.

The position of the Catholic Church is well known: We hold that human life begins at conception, and that a child is conceived with rights and dignity. Others disagree either with the moment at which an embryo becomes human or with the notion that the child's right to life supersedes the mother's right to decide on her best time for pregnancy and birth. These are emotionally charged matters that concern values including freedom, love, life, choice, health, work, destiny, religion, politics, holiness and sin. The strong rhetoric characteristic of our times thwarts attempts to find common ground, even when it exists: People generally make decisions based on what they think is right. Those on one side of the debate may accuse people on the other side of malice, often without fully giving their views a hearing. Very few people want to kill or to inhibit the rights of women; to stifle the voice of a child or to limit proper health care. Most people live by what they think are good reasons. Some women in traumatic circumstances feel that an abortion was their best option; others come to regret profoundly the choice they made. It is good for America to come to a reckoning on the issues so that we can reassess our values and live by them anew.

Abortion may be the most emotionally charged issue of our day. In the day of the apostles, the most emotionally charged issue was a different procedure: circumcision. Today's reading from Acts of the Apostles presents a pivotal moment. In spite of persecution, or even spurred by it, the gospel spread beyond Jews into the Gentile nations. Paul and Barnabas found this amazing. Other leaders were disturbed; they thought Gentiles could not become Christians without first becoming Jews, which was a big deal especially for Gentile men. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to get this resolved. Well-meaning people stood on both sides of the argument. They talked it through at a gathering that sounds like emotionally charged debates today among people of good will. Their final conciliatory letter reads in part, "some of our number who went out without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind." The group in Jerusalem sided with Paul and Barnabas and explained the results this way: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us."

Whatever results from the abortion debate, we pray that it will be a decision that comes from the Holy Spirit, and that each of us will find ways to protect the rights of infants, to affirm the authority of women, and to provide for children whose parents feel ill prepared to receive them. That will lead to peace of mind if we listen not to our own private judgment, but to the opinions of others and to the voice of the Holy Spirit.