

Women have nothing to be forgiven for



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The Pope's recent **declaration** regarding abortion could be seen as hopeful news for women and those that can experience pregnancy, and was acclaimed by **some** as a **radical turn**. By allowing priests to "**absolve the sin of abortion**", the Pope seems to be willing to open a space for dialogue within religious institutions and to progressively adapt official dogma to the lived experiences of Catholic people. However, his declaration was received with some **scepticism** in liberal circles, including by **Catholics for the Right to Choose**. Indeed, one could wonder, what exactly should women be forgiven for?

The Catholic Church has historically condemned the practice of abortion, conceived as a 'sin' – and 'murder' – that automatically leads to excommunication. Some might remember the controversial case of the **young Brazilian girl** whose mother was excommunicated after helping her end a pregnancy that had resulted from rape. Following the Pope's declaration, some **commentators** have recalled that this forgiveness is only temporary and limited to the Holy Year of Mercy. **Others** have also underlined the fact that the Church's official texts have not been changed and that, by religious law, abortion is still a crime.

I am not a theologian, and do not want to enter here into a debate regarding religious texts or truths. I am more interested in the impact this shift in position will have on public policies and women's lives. In **many** Catholic-majority countries like Ireland, Poland, Brazil, Chile or Mexico, abortion is still penalised and, as a result, women's lives are often put in danger through unsafe abortions.

This leads a significant number of women to travel to countries where abortion is legal to find medical support. NGOs such as **Abortion Support Network** for instance provide financial assistance to women from Northern Ireland to travel to England where they can have a safe abortion. But criminalisation also means that poor and black women are more exposed to the risks associated with unsafe abortion as they cannot afford to travel abroad or to access a private clinic.

In Brazil, the focus country for my PhD, a woman can face up to three years in prison for having had an abortion, while the practising doctor can face up to ten years. A **study** released in 2009 revealed that every year, about one million Brazilian women have an illegal abortion, and among them, 200,000 end up in the hospital due to complications and severe infections. Unsafe abortion is the third cause of maternal death in the country. Worldwide, the situation is just as dramatic. According to the **World Health Organisation** 21.6 million unsafe abortions are practiced every year, 47,000 women die from complications related to unsafe abortions, and unsafe abortion accounts for 13% of all maternal deaths.

Millions of women are clearly put at risk every year by these regressive policies, and not only do they face death and health complications but also criminal charges. So just exactly what is it that women should be asking forgiveness for? Shouldn't the Church be the one asking for women's forgiveness for promoting policies that endanger their lives?

This is what the group Latin American Catholics for the Right to Choose have been arguing. The **Brazilian branch** asks for the Church's full support for the legalisation of abortion, the end of stigmatisation, and an apology from religious institutions for the pain and suffering they have caused to women. The **Latin American network** of pro-Choice Catholics even demands that the Church recognises and faces charges for the sexual abuses committed against women and

children and that its hierarchy renounces the culture of misogyny within the Church.

These Catholic groups have been fighting for years for the decriminalisation of abortion in their countries, promoting a vision of Catholicism where women are conscious subjects capable of making their own decisions. They have worked against the ideas of 'sin' and 'murder' arguing that the life of the pregnant woman is worth just as much as the life of the unborn foetus. They believe in a Church that would not exclude women who face financial, emotional or physical difficulties that often result from the lack of bodily sovereignty. While the Pope clearly has to compromise with reluctant bishops, priests and other anti-choice groups and actors, this declaration of mercy clearly misses the opportunity to engage more deeply with the work already being done by more progressive Catholic groups and leaders.

It cannot be denied that this declaration is an important step towards women's right to choose and the pursuit of bodily autonomy. Most likely, it will also open up new possibilities in countries where abortion is still criminalised. But the language of 'sin' still attaches mostly to those who can become pregnant, and asks those who use abortion to apologise or repent for trying to save their own lives.



by Juan Paz (Source: www.marcha.org.ar)

It is one thing to empathize with an individual's decision to abort (past, present or future); it is quite another to extend mercy to those characterized as 'criminals' and 'sinners.' In a religion where women cannot access decision-making processes and positions of power, women are always already guilty of the sin of choosing bodily autonomy. Under these conditions, it will take much more than a year of mercy to end needless deaths, let alone to achieve gender equality within and outside the Catholic faith.

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