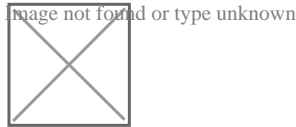


Abortion, Oikonomia and the “Hard cases” (Valarie H. Protopapas)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



This examination of the issue of abortion, the Orthodox concept of oikonomia and certain individual situations used to support and promote the «right» to an abortion has been undertaken primarily because there is a legally and culturally perceived «right to an abortion» in America.



Fetus removed for mom's health reasons

Young people growing up today cannot remember a time before the Supreme Court decision *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973 legalized abortion on demand throughout all nine months of pregnancy. Should *Roe* be reversed by the High Court, legislative initiatives guaranteeing access to abortion presently exist in many states and at the federal level, strongly suggesting that the procedure has become

institutionalized in our present culture and will not be either easily or quickly abolished whatever the efforts made toward that end. For that reason, it is becoming ever more difficult for the Orthodox Church to assert among the Faithful as well as witness outside the Faith to Her doctrines on the sanctity of innocent human life — doctrines which clearly state that no such «right» to an abortion exists in the Church and further, that no one can claim to be an Orthodox Christian while utilizing, promoting, providing, supporting or condoning abortion.

Yet, even with a complete understanding of the Orthodox doctrine on abortion, some consideration must be given to the so-called «hard cases» which, though few in number, present a far more complex situation than that of an abortion performed for social or economic convenience. In point of fact, these «hard cases» are presented as reasons for having or performing an abortion in less than 3% of the 1.5 million abortions performed annually in our nation since 1974. This fact makes them relatively unique instances of pastoral consideration and as such, possible candidates for the application of oikonomia. This small study will, hopefully, provide some information for those with the weighty responsibility of interpreting the Faith and at the same time, comforting and guiding those who have turned to them in their hour of need. It is with the hope that the material herein presented will be of use and in humble recognition of the limitations of the author that this study has been undertaken.

About the term «oikonomia» (economy): This Scripturally-based concept is explained in more detail later in this article. However, for those encountering the term for the first time — and in order, hopefully, to maintain their interest in the subject under discussion — oikonomia is a pastoral function permitting what may or may appear to be the violation of the letter of canon law and/or pious practice without violating the spirit of either. In the West, the concept degenerated into the practice of «dispensation»; that is, a pope, bishop or priest «dispenses» with a particular point of Church law under appropriate (grants «dispensation») circumstances at the behest of the suppliant. Of course, owing to the fallen nature of all human beings, the same type of thing can happen in the Orthodox Church with the practice of oikonomia (who can forget Jackie Kennedy Onassis's «Greek Orthodox» wedding?) but, in its proper understanding, oikonomia is always practiced with the intention of furthering God's Plan of Salvation. Thus, a soldier going to war may be permitted to marry during Great Lent when all such festivities are usually forbidden. Likewise, a guest may eat meat on a Friday (a violation of the rules of fasting) in order to avoid the greater fault of offending his host. However, it must be absolutely understood that oikonomia can never permit, excuse or justify the commission of a sin. If a bishop or priest does so, he has exceeded his authority and fallen into sin.

The Definition of the Term «Hard Cases»

In the abortion debate, proponents of the so-called «right to choose» often cite the «hard cases» in defense of their advocacy of abortion on demand. These consist of a pregnancy due to rape or incest and that which threatens the life — sometimes health — of the mother. Pregnancy arising from these unique and extremely emotional situations are used as a platform from which to attack those who support the right to life of the unborn child (pro-lifers).

It is by such ad hominem attacks that abortion advocates encourage the belief among the general public that those who oppose abortion are heartless, judgmental, intolerant and lacking in compassion. Popular wisdom poses the question: who would legally force a woman to bear a child conceived by rape or incest, or condemn a woman to sacrifice her own life or health for the sake of her unborn child? The purpose of this study is not to become involved in the general arguments presented by either side on this issue, but rather to view the debate in light of Orthodox doctrine in general and the concept of oikonomia in particular.

(To be continued)