If we could cut out rhetoric

This is the first part of a 4-part series on abortion, presented to stimulate a

discussion in the community on this important and

controversial issue. Both Parliament and the Supreme

Court face tough
decisions arising

from the conflict

between the

pro-choice and pro-life
positions.

The author of the series is Bob Lane, coordinator of philosophy at

Malaspina College. He wrote a similar series last year on capital

punishment. Mr. Lane will be teaching an evening course starting in

September, on biomedical ethics.

One of the problems in the public debate is that the issue of abortion is

the high level of rhetoric used by

persons on both sides.

We do not earn the right talk about "killing babies" until we have

figured out what counts as a baby. Similarly we do not have the warrant

for use ad hominem or guilt by

association attacks against the

Pope or the Roman Catholic

Church, nor do we have the need to

infiltrate pro-choice groups to find

out what their position is.

Not every pro-choicer is a social
democrat or an anarchist.

Not every pro-life is a Catholic and not every Catholic is a pro-life.

In fact, James C. Willke of the U.S. National Right to Life commit-
tee stresses "we are not in any

remote sense of the word a religious

organization. We have people of a bewildering variety of faiths and no-faiths.

"Op. 33, Enemies of

Choice.

Often we hear that religion has nothing to do with the right-to-life

position and that all persons driven by reason alone should be able to

see the truth of the pro-life position.

I submit that there is a religious presupposition in most of the

arguments put forward by the pro-lifers.

And interestingly enough there is some evidence for this submission:

Elsah Drogin, who is the president of

Catholics United for Life, put it quite plainly in a 1980 leaflet entitl-
ed "Why I am a Catholic Prolife Worker," where she wrote:

"The prolife movement has been a failure up till now, for more

babies than ever are going to the crematoriums today which are

thousands of times more effective

than Hitler's. That is why we ad-

vocate that Catholic families band

together in communities for the

purpose of mutual support so that

we can live a truly Catholic life and

avoid paying taxes which the gov-

ernment uses for abortion and

sterilization programs throughout

the world.

This certainly is a Catholic issue

because of the fact that the innocent

victims are not baptized. Only

Catholics believe these babies are

cheated out of life and heaven.

If Catholics were to pull out of the

problem movement it would instantly

and completely die out. Abortion is most certainly a Catholic issue -

and when we say it is not, we are only

confusing the issue; we want these babies to have the opportunity

to choose baptism. Baptism is more

important to us than physical life.

That is why the vast majority of

prolife workers are Catholic. To be

ashamed of it is to be counter-

productive."

I am not sure how or if we can

ever eliminate the emotional and

religious, that is the non-rational,

from our discussions of abortion.

Most non-philosophical writings on the subject are filled with hyper-

bole, loaded terms and other logical

fallacies.

One of my favorite examples is

the following exchange which took

place in a public hearing of a Cali-

fornia abortion committee:

Father William Kenneally: No

one has the right to take the life of

the child in this therapeutic

abortion, which is used as a
euphemism. Therapeutic means to
cure, and it doesn't cure anything, it kills somebody.

Chairman O'Connell: It cures the

mother.

Father Kenneally: It may.

Chairman O'Connell: I believe that's the origin of the term -

Father Kenneally: It cures by

killing. It's a kind of lynching in the

womb. "Lynching in the womb" certainly

sounds much more horrible than

"killing in the uterus."

In these articles I propose using

"the conservative position" to refer to

the position that abortion is morally

permissible if, and only if, it is

necessary to save the life of the

mother. That's a small "c" conser-
vative and is not intended to bring

connotations of Brian or Bill at all.

And I will use "the liberal position," again with no intended politi-
cal connotations, to refer to the

position that abortion is morally

permissible at any time on the re-

quest of the mother.

Right to life arguments often get

started like this:

1. Everyone has a right to life.

2. A fetus is a person

3. Therefore, a fetus has a right
to life.

Although the argument looks

simple it is not without presupposi-
tions and problems. First, the

"everyone has a right to life" claim

is in need of clarification. Is this

claim based on a prior religious

claim? And if so what is the nature

of the religious claim? Is it based

upon a long inductive argument? It

seems clearly not based on

empirical evidence and if that is, we
do not in fact act as if everyone has a

right to life. Our century has been

particularly good at killing persons

in the past 88 years. At best, in the

case of war, we can follow the

Catholic position of "just war" and

say that under certain circum-
estances there are moral reasons for

killing other human beings.

The second problem, as Judith

Jarvis Thomson points out in her

paper, A Defence of Abortion, is

that even if you grant premise No. 1

it does not get you the conclusion

the conservative position wants.

Why? Because the right to life

principle cannot resolve conflicts

between persons with an equal right
to life. This is where the conser-
vative usually slips in "innocent
"life," as a way of ranking one person

above another.

Premise No. 2 - A fetus is a per-

son is also problematic in a deep

and confusing way. The case before

the Supreme Court now turns on

deciding when a human being is a

person and hence when that human

being is protected by the constitu-
tion and the charter of rights.

Biology cannot help us here, for

while we must do is decide when we have a person. Obviously, from the

moment of conceiving we have a

human being, or at least the

"blueprint" for one, but do we have

a person?

Part 2 will be published in

Wednesday's issue.

Bible Thoughts

"But let every man prove his

own work, and then shall he have

rejoicing in himself alone, and