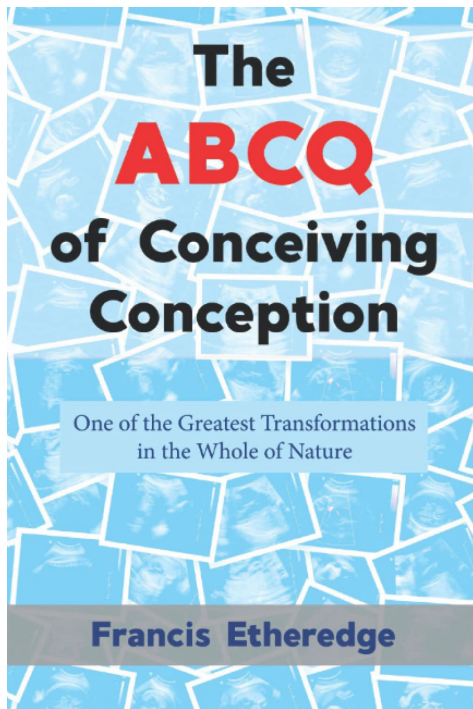


## When Does Human Life Begin?



*The ABCQ of Conceiving Conception, One of the Greatest Transformations in the Whole of Nature* by Francis Etheredge (St. Louis, MO: [En Route Books and Media](#), 2022, 199 pp.)

Reviewed by Christine Sunderland

I have often reflected on mankind's tendency to rationalize thought and behavior, to give reasons – excuses – for the manner in which life is lived, both individually and as a society. We are all people “in relationship” to one another, Francis Etheredge explains, and we must construct ways of living in community.

For this reason, this need to respect one another's common humanity throughout the world, we seek to forge law and custom that theoretically support human life as lived together.

C.S. Lewis called this moral law the Tau, a deep, indwelling sense of right and wrong that, when we feel others might question our behavior or beliefs, urges us to provide reasons, rationalizations for our actions. We want our conscience to approve or at least look away.

In *The ABCQ of Conceiving Conception, One of the Greatest Transformations in the Whole of Nature*, Francis Etheredge, Catholic theologian and bioethicist, goes to the heart of this desire as he gives us the ABC's as well as answers to the Q's, the questions.

In the ABC's, he considers the scientific definition of conception, the moment new life is formed, when the egg accepts the sperm, closing upon it. This is the moment of fertilization as well as the moment when God ensouls this new creation, this new life. This is the moment when the person is given the genetic mapping that will propel him or her forward through life, through birth, growth, maturity, old age, and finally, death of the body and release of the soul. The genetic code is set at this moment of fertilization, of conception, the beginning of both being and becoming.

Why, one wonders, is this simple and clear argument met with counter-arguments? Why are there questions, the “Q” of this title? The questions come from the desire to have our way, to trample on others to get our way, to choose our own path regardless of others.

Francis Etheredge challenges the rationalizations given for abortion to be a legal right. One of these rationalizations is viability, the ability for the embryo-child to live independently outside the mother's womb. Does viability occur at 15 weeks? 20 weeks? Full term? And yet, he

answers, the newborn baby wouldn't meet this standard. Many adults do not meet this standard. Individuals stricken ill or handicapped would not meet this standard of independence.

How has this legalization of abortion affected the human community? Abortion, at full term and on-demand in some States, has become the seedbed of other dark and unstable social ills, causing, I believe, the collapse of the family and leading to mass shootings, criminality, and disorder. For when we turn our back on other living human beings, we turn our back on all humanity, the human community. When we legalize the taking of innocent life, we live for our own pleasure and will.

We live in a world of materialism that reasons we have a duty to ourselves to act in any way that expresses our feelings. Materialism says there are no other values than our own perceived values. Materialism says there is no truth outside our opinions. There is your truth and there is my truth. There is no objective "Tau," no moral law that mankind is subject to. Materialism says we are only body without soul, only flesh without spirit. We are animals, creations of instinct. We are mere matter, so we don't matter. Anything goes.

And yet deep down we do not believe this. We make excuses to explain bad behavior, the murder of an innocent life that gets in our way, a child we choose to die. We believe we must have an excuse for this legalized genocide. We know it *was* wrong to kill in the past, *is* wrong to kill in the present, and *will be* wrong to kill in the future. We make excuses.

I am deeply grateful for Francis Etheredge's contribution to the debate of when human life begins, particularly in light of the upcoming decision of the Supreme Court regarding *Roe v. Wade*. Modern science tells us clearly that life begins with fertilization. In this book the science is explained, and we are given the philosophical and theological arguments that complement this knowledge. With great care and conviction, Etheredge leads us through the reasoning to the truth of the moral law and what it means to be human.

We are persons in relationship to one another, Francis Etheredge explains. The family is our first experience of this – mother, father, relatives. We are also the greater human family, and how we treat any one person affects how all persons are treated. We must protect human identity and dignity throughout the world, and we begin by honoring those nearest us.

We begin, Etheredge argues, by allowing human beings, upon conception, the full rights of the human race, the right to "completing human development." As members of the human race, we do not have the right to treat "the human person as if he or she is a product to be manipulated." (38)

For science has learned that from the first contact between sperm and egg a new entity is created, the dynamic embryo. This is a "dynamism that unfolds the uninterrupted presence of the person from conception... the first and irreversible moment of fertilization; and, therefore," Etheredge adds profoundly, "this constitutes a nature sacrament: an outward sign of the inward action of God bringing the whole person to exist from the very first moment of fertilization." (75, 95)

Thank you, Francis Etheredge, for showing us who we are and who we are meant to be, for reminding us that we are, after all, more than matter for we truly matter:

“As we emerge, then, from our national identities and increasingly recognize that abstract truths about human personhood, that to be a human person is to be a human being-in-relation, need 'returning' as it were to the concrete reality from which they came – we will appreciate more and more that parent and child, brother and sister, aunt and uncle communicate the profoundly interpersonal structure of human identity.” (167)

And lastly, because the human being is formed at the moment of conception, he or she has full right to legal representation from that moment of conception, just as any human being would have such a right. It is “the court’s role to protect all innocent human life.” (181)

Francis Etheredge has made a vital contribution to the human community, for we are the family of mankind and the family of God. We are brothers and sisters accountable to one another, in relationship, a true sacrament of human dignity. We are not alone.

Francis Etheredge, Catholic husband, father of 11, 3 of whom are in heaven, is author of 13 books on [Amazon](#). Visit him at [LinkedIn](#) and [En Route Books and Media](#).



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