


A close-up photograph of a woman with long dark hair, smiling gently and looking down at a baby. The woman is wearing a light-colored, possibly striped, shirt. The baby is in the foreground, looking up towards the woman. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting.

Protecting the Least Among Us:

A Statement of the Society
of Jesus in the United States
on Abortion





Our common calling is to stand in solidarity with the unborn, the “least of our brothers and sisters” (Matthew 25:40).

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St. Ignatius of Loyola instructs us, when beginning a period of prayer, to name clearly the grace that we seek from God. As we, the Jesuits of the United States, renew our opposition to abortion and our support for the unborn, we seek the graces of clarity, compassion, and resolve.

In treating this delicate and controversial topic, we hope to provide our brother Jesuits, colleagues, parishioners, and students with the spiritual leadership and ethical guidance they expect from us. As an international Society, we take with utmost seriousness the task of bringing the Gospel to the world, sharing the fruits of our spiritual heritage, and engaging in dialogue with all cultures and persons we encounter. In this statement we wish to underscore the correctness of Catholic Church teaching regarding abortion, joining with many other people of conscience who are working to protect life in the womb, and who are seeking an end to abortion so as to restore our country's respect for the core human value of the right to life. We wish to add further insights to support this teaching, drawing upon the heritage of our Jesuit history and the treasure of Ignatian spirituality.

In 1995, representative Jesuits from around the world met in Rome for the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. In the document "Our Mission and Justice," they noted that "Human life, a gift of God, has to be respected from its beginning to its natural end" (57). The most fundamental building block of a just social order is respect for human life. Until men and women individually and collectively make a profound commitment to the value and dignity of all human life, we will never find the true peace, justice, and reconciliation God desires for us.

As we Jesuits survey our culture, we cannot help but see abortion as part of the massive injustices in our society. A spirit of callous

disregard for life shows itself in direct assaults on human life such as abortion and capital punishment. There are less direct but equally senseless ways we undermine life, through violence, racism, xenophobia, and the growing inequality of wealth and education. We also seek justice in ensuring that pregnant women and mothers have the resources they need to care for their children and live full lives. These realities compel us to speak out in defense of life and human flourishing.

This is the 45th anniversary year of the Supreme Court decision that made abortion legal throughout the United States. Since the January 22, 1973, Supreme Court decisions in *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*¹, more than 55 million American lives have been ended by abortion.² Among all the justice issues we as a society should view with grave concern, abortion is a key social evil.

We approach this topic as pastors, scholars, social activists, and educators. There is no part of our ministry that is untouched by the devastating consequences of abortion and there is, therefore, no environment in which we find ourselves that does not have some role to play in addressing this complex issue. Pope Francis writes, "No one must say they cannot be close to the poor because their own lifestyle demands more attention to other areas. ... None of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and social justice" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 201). In the same way, the Society of Jesus today asks its members and collaborators to find ever new and creative ways to bring the protection of the unborn and solidarity with mothers in difficult situations into whatever mission they serve.

As we continue to engage on the topic of abortion, we wish to proceed in a way that rests on the following insights:

First, the foundation of the Catholic moral tradition is the dignity of the human person. The second key insight of Catholic moral life is that we are social beings and that solidarity matters. The social acceptance of abortion is a profound moral failure on both counts. It undermines the claim that every life is infused with God-given dignity, and it often pretends such decisions can be relegated to individual choice without having negative consequences on society as a whole. Sacred Scripture, the witness of early Christianity, Catholic social teaching, and the magisterium consistently teach that we cannot in good conscience ignore this tragedy.

Second, Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit history offer unique lenses through which to view the topic of abortion that should deepen our resolve to work in this area. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola are motivated from beginning to end by the laboring presence of God in creation and redemption. We are invited to co-labor, not because we are perfect, but because we are loved, and in recognizing God's love for us we cannot but act on it. Jesuits throughout history have lived out this insight to transform the world, and we are asked to do the same today.

Third, beyond the actual content of “what” we say in making a case against abortion, it is critical to pay attention to “how” our defense of the unborn takes place. As St. Paul reminds us, we must “speak the truth with love” (Ephesians 4:15). Success will not come through force of will; it will only come by changing hearts. Therefore, we must always keep watch over our own hearts and ensure they are filled with the love and hope needed for this holy work.

As our Jesuit brother and our Holy Father, Pope Francis highlights our concern: “Among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are unborn children, the most

defenseless and innocent among us. Nowadays efforts are made to deny them their human dignity and to do with them whatever one pleases, taking their lives and passing laws preventing anyone from standing in the way of this” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 213). May we always listen to the lives of the most vulnerable in our society and use our voice on their behalf.

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– Pope Francis





Section I: The Witness of Sacred Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching

The social teachings of the Catholic Church place the dignity of the human person at the center of all concerns for justice. Every human being, no matter how small or dependent on others, possesses infinite value. Sacred Scripture testifies how it pleased God to create human persons “in the image and likeness” of God (Genesis 1:26) and treats violations against the life and welfare of innocent people as offenses against the God who is the author of life. The Decalogue unambiguously declares: “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13). The prophet Jeremiah describes God’s love for the unborn: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you” (Jeremiah 1:5). The Book of Psalms offers this prayer of wonder: “You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb. My very self you knew; my bones were not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, fashioned as in the depths of the earth” (Psalm 139:13-15). The pro-life movement in the United States has always turned with special affection to the witness of John the Baptist, leaping for joy in his mother’s womb (Luke 1:41).

Although the Scriptures have almost nothing to say specifically about the topic of abortion in the modern medical sense (i.e., as a surgical procedure or pharmaceutical intervention), the books of both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures paint a reality that clearly rules out disregard for innocent human life. In the ancient world, the widespread way of dealing with “unwanted pregnancies” was the practice of “exposure” – leaving newly born infants out to die. Stephen alludes to this Greco-Roman practice in Acts 7:19 when he describes Pharaoh’s attempt “to expose” the Hebrew race. Only the courageous resistance of the Hebrew medical professionals, the midwives Shiphrah and



Puah (Exodus 1:15-21), prevented the implementation of this ancient equivalent of abortion. Further Christian reflection on the Incarnation and the value of human life led to an unequivocal rejection of abortion in one of the earliest teaching documents of the Christian community. The “Didache,” circa first-century AD, proclaims: “Do not murder a child by abortion or kill a newborn infant.”

Following the forceful declaration of the Second Vatican Council that “abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 51), recent popes have reiterated the importance of the respect for life as a fundamental category of Catholic social teaching, the most basic value upon which all other human rights depend, particularly in an age when the lives of “inconvenient” people, including the unborn, are disregarded.

Pope Saint John Paul II learned the power of solidarity while resisting Soviet oppression during his young adult years in Poland. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), he affirms that the virtue of solidarity is not a “feeling of vague compassion,” but rather a commitment to the fact that “we are all really responsible for all” (38). In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), John Paul exposes the “culture of death” that sets the foundation for “structures of sin” within our society (12). The “culture of death,” he proclaims, is at its roots “a war of the powerful against the poor,” particularly the unborn. In the 1994 “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” we find a clear affirmation of the right to life: “From the first moment of [his or her] existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person, among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life” (2270).

Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have been unified in their call for a “human ecology” and an “integral ecology.” In *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), Benedict teaches: “If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology”

(51). Human beings are an integral part of this gift of Mother Earth, and the exploitation of one leads to the exploitation of the other. In a striking passage on God’s love as the grounds of integral ecology, Francis presses us: “Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection” (*Laudato Si’*, 77). In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes “I want to be completely honest in this regard. This is not something subject to alleged reforms or ‘modernizations’. It is not ‘progressive’ to try to resolve problems by eliminating a human life” (214).

Recent popes have also challenged us to deepen our accompaniment with women who have made this “painful and even shattering decision” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 99). John Paul II places partial blame on “those who should have ensured – but did not – effective family and social policies in support of families” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 59). Francis likewise acknowledges a significant area of growth: “We have done little to adequately accompany women in very difficult situations, where abortion appears as a quick solution to their profound anguish” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 214). Both popes strengthen the teachings of the Catholic Church while urgently reminding Christians of their duty to provide better accompaniment to those in need.

Cardinal John O’Connor learned never to condemn from Servant of God Dorothy Day: “This is why I have never condemned a woman who has had an abortion; I weep with her and ask her to remember Dorothy Day’s sorrow but to know always God’s loving mercy and forgiveness.” Day always regretted her abortion, yet she stressed the tremendous power of God’s healing grace: “If you believe in the mission of Jesus Christ, then you’re bound to try to let go of your past, in the sense that you are entitled to His forgiveness. To keep regretting what was, is to deny God’s grace.” As the canonization cause of Dorothy Day moves forward, the church in America can learn from her profound commitment to the least among us and her trust in God’s healing mercy.

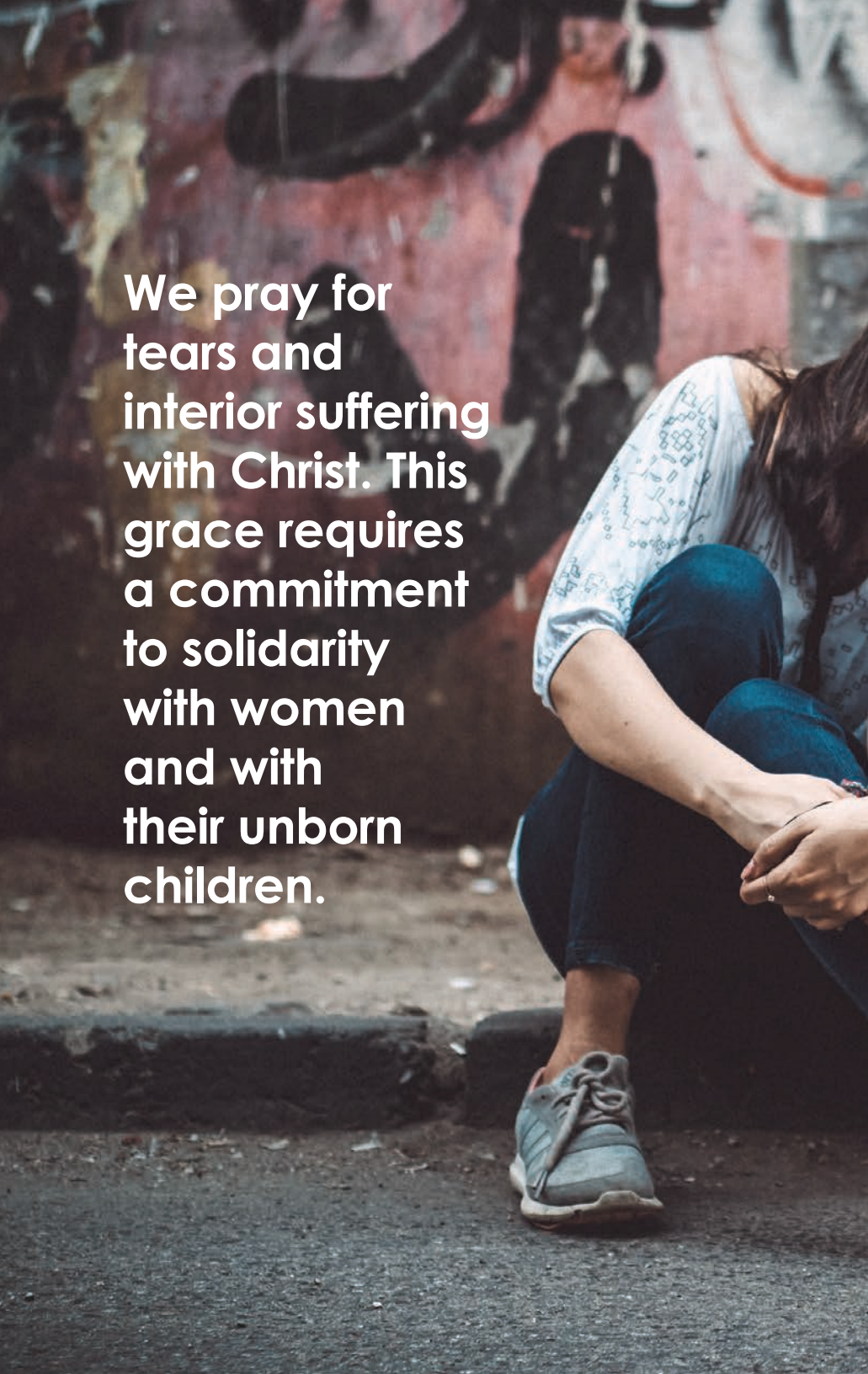
Section II: Our Jesuit Tradition

All that we do as Jesuits flows from our experience of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. It is therefore natural for us to seek insight for our work on this issue from the spiritual touchstone of our order.

One of the central graces in the First Week of the Exercises is the freedom that flows from repentance and the experience of God's mercy. This includes repentance for times when our individual and collective response to the tragedy of abortion has been inadequate. True freedom will result from this repentance and help us to see that we were each made to praise, reverence, and serve God. This spiritual movement of freedom is essential for the work of advocating for the unborn because abortion debates often revolve around "liberty" and "choice." These ideas are too often characterized as freedom from interference, but we know that true freedom always moves us from our own fears toward fullness of life.

In the Second Week of the Exercises, we learn to recognize the voice of Christ and ask for the grace to respond to his call with a full heart. Public debate on abortion exposes us all to many deceptive messages. Women may be promised the falsehood that abortion solves a problem. Society may be deceived into thinking that abortion is a choice women casually make. We must not listen to the voice that promises scapegoats or easy solutions to complex problems. Instead, we must incline our ears to Christ who has gone before us – healing all forms of brokenness, preaching liberation from all forms of bondage, and calling the most unlikely characters to work alongside him. He showed us a kingdom that included the least among us and calls us to continue building it today.

In the Third Week of the Exercises, we pray for tears and interior suffering with Christ. This grace requires a commitment to solidarity with women and with their unborn children. Their confusion is our

A photograph of a woman sitting on the ground, looking down. She is wearing a white patterned shirt and blue jeans. The background is a colorful mural with abstract shapes and figures. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

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confusion. Their pain is our pain. Their brokenness is that of Christ and of us as well. Like Mary, whose heart was pierced at the foot of the cross, we must keep vigil with all those affected by abortion and not be afraid to allow our own hearts to be pierced.

We continue in the Fourth Week of the Exercises by praying to rejoice with the Risen Lord and dwell in hope for all that is to come. We can be tempted to see working against abortion as a burden that we must bear. But the protection of life, like all good things, is most fundamentally the work of God. We are invited to join the divine laborer and to find joy in doing so. We also recognize at this time that all good things have been given to us by God, including life itself. We seek, therefore, to ensure all persons can return their fullest possible life back to God. That cannot happen if life is terminated as it is just beginning.

The Spiritual Exercises propel the retreatant into the world to labor with the Lord. The Exercises are replete with this theme: Christ calls us to labor with him as disciples (95); Mary and Joseph labor as parents (116); and God “labors for me” (236). From the very beginning, Jesuits have labored alongside the least. St. Peter Faber, Ignatius’ first recruit, wonders in his Spiritual Diary if he should not serve more “important people.” But then he realizes instead the superior “value of those works which, with a right intention, are devoted to little ones and those despised and rejected by the world.”

The history of the Society of Jesus is filled with preferential service of “those despised and rejected by the world.” One of Ignatius’ first apostolic ventures in Rome was Casa Santa Marta, a home for women whose tragic situation was ignored by society. St. Aloysius Gonzaga gave his life for plague victims in Rome. St. Alberto Hurtado was driven to rouse Catholics “lost in our dreaming ... untouched by the need for social solidarity!” Rutilio Grande called for the “transfiguration” of the people of El Salvador. His assassination was the seed of Archbishop Bl. Oscar Romero’s conversion to the poor. Bl. Rupert Mayer publicly proclaimed that “a Catholic cannot be a Nazi,” knowing full well the repercussions such a public stance would have on his life.

As followers of St. Ignatius, we now hear the call to champion this great justice issue of our time. On August 3, 1970, the *Chicago Tribune* reported on an interview given by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the Superior General who guided the Jesuits in the years after Vatican II. Arrupe had turned the Japanese novitiate into a hospital for victims of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. That bombing, Arrupe said, “looks like a symbol of another kind of explosion, which is much more dangerous. Nobody raises his voice for the hundreds of thousands, even millions of innocent lives that are doomed. I refer to planned and legalized abortion.” Arrupe’s insight drives home the critical task that stands before us. The Society of Jesus today exhorts its members and collaborators to find ever new and creative ways to bring the protection of the unborn and solidarity with mothers in difficult situations into whatever mission they serve.

Section III: Public Engagement

St. Ignatius wrote, “In our dealings with others, we ought to speak little but listen much, and when we speak, our few words should be spoken as if the whole world were listening.” In our public engagement on abortion, we must never forget that our first task is to listen. In particular, we listen to the stories of women for whom considering abortion is a lived reality. Our discussions of abortion policy must always be attentive to the human lives, especially women and their children, echoing in the background of all we do.

We see this work as extension of our ministry of reconciliation. Ignatius and the early Jesuits were deeply committed to the work of reconciliation, through hearing confessions and public dialogue on matters of faith. Recent General Congregations have also emphasized the importance of attending to the world’s wounds of sin and division. Therefore, at its best, work on this topic will not exacerbate discord,

but will be a healing balm for a broken society. Given the deep political divisions in our country, this may seem naïve. But as people of faith we know that true reconciliation is the only effective way forward.

The pluralism of the United States is a genuine blessing, but it also carries challenges for matters of public policy. We all work toward a more perfect union through vigorous public debate that is characterized by freedom of thought as well as mutual respect. Much of our shared political life is grounded in phrases from the Declaration of Independence, such as “the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” and from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, such as “the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all.” We know that these phrases have been unevenly applied to members of the human family. Therefore, we continue the quest to expand the universality of these claims.

A political context such as ours offers several temptations that we must avoid. One is a retreat from a corrupt world, preserving an illusion of moral purity. The second is moral relativism, which is another kind of retreat. Relativism advances the false claim that multiple conflicting positions about human existence can all be accepted as correct. The great American Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray suggests a process where we retreat neither from the world nor from the truth. Instead, we engage those who initially disagree with us, seeking to create an acceptable consensus by building upon those truths on which we can reach agreement, while continuing to persuade and educate those who disagree with our convictions. This process is “proposing, rather than imposing,” and we believe it is the only way to create sustained change in this area.

The fundamental challenge is that this work does not just require a change in policy, but a change in culture. We see great hope in the large number of individuals, especially young Americans, who are active in pro-life efforts. The March for Life continues to grow and

spread across the country. The annual Jesuit Mass for Life is filled with young and vibrant students and collaborators on fire for the gospel of life. Even more, the abortion rate in the United States is the lowest it has been since 1973.³

At the same time, there has been little change in public opinion over the last decade on the topic of abortion.⁴ We also see troubling signs as to where our culture is headed. Advances in genetic technology make it much easier to screen for disease and disability in utero. This can be a great gift if used prudently for treatment or preparing couples to care for their children once born. Yet it is also creating a situation that verges on eugenics, wherein persons deemed less than perfect are eliminated before they are even born.⁵ It is also increasingly easy to access pharmaceuticals that act as abortifacients. We take these realities as evidence that we must give those committed to this work more tools for engagement.

A regular criticism from abortion rights advocates is the narrow focus of the pro-life movement on abortion to the exclusion of life issues such as the death penalty, economic justice, access to health care, or warfare. Sadly, this criticism is sometimes valid. Effective advocacy will not dismiss this challenge, but will see it as an opportunity to broaden the coalition of individuals interested in shaping our culture to one that respects human life in all its forms. We have the best chance of effecting change on abortion if our pro-life narrative is consistent and comprehensive.

We are committed to narrowing the gap between the current civil law of our nation and the demands of the moral law as we understand it. Our long-term goal remains full legal recognition of and protection for the unborn child – from the moment of conception. In the near future, we cannot realistically expect complete agreement among all participants in the abortion debate. Our confidence in the persuasive power of well-articulated defenses of pro-life positions sustains us, even as we acknowledge the long struggle ahead.

Our common calling is to stand in solidarity with the unborn, the “least of our brothers and sisters” (Matthew 25:40), through prayer and political activism. It is our desire that Jesuits, along with their colleagues, will continue to offer a consistent message of respect for life, especially for unborn children.

We end this document as Ignatius ends the Spiritual Exercises, with a contemplation on God’s intimate indwelling in every human life. Ignatius writes, “I will consider how God dwells in creatures; ... how in this way he also dwells in myself, giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence; and, even further, making me his temple, since I am created as a likeness and image of the Divine Majesty” (235). May we, as Jesuits and as collaborators in Jesuit works, always perceive in every human life, from conception to natural death, the indwelling presence of the Divine Majesty.


[1] The United States Supreme Court, in a 7-2 decision, handed down two rulings legalizing abortion in America. The principle decision, *Roe v. Wade*, repealed all state laws prohibiting abortion. The companion case, *Doe v. Bolton*, extended the right to abortion to the entire nine months of pregnancy.

[2] National Right to Life. Abortion Statistics. Available: <http://www.nrlc.org/uploads/factsheets/FS01AbortionintheUS.pdf>

[3] Guttmacher Institute. Induced Abortion in the United States. Available: <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>

[4] Gallup. Abortion. Available: <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1576/abortion.aspx>

[5] de Graaf G, Buckley F, Skotko BG. “Estimates of the live births, natural losses, and elective terminations with down syndrome in the United States.” *Am J Med Genet A*. 2015 Apr; 167A(4): 756-67.



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