

# The story of Helen Keller and the sanctity of life



Many decades ago, a great American heroine was Helen Keller, an author and thinker. She was born in 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. She was a perfectly healthy baby, but, when she was 19 months old, disaster struck.

Medicine was not yet at a stage enabling doctors to diagnose what happened to her, but she had a severe fever, thought now to have been a brain infection, and she was left totally blind, stone deaf and unable to speak a word.

For all practical purposes, she was doomed to live the life of an animal, and probably she would live a long time. She recovered from the fever and returned to perfect health, aside from her impairments.

Her desperate parents consulted the best doctors in the country. None had an answer. She lived until 1968, and she never spoke a word, heard a word or saw light. Blessedly, her life was productive. Her father hired a teacher of the blind from Boston, Annie Sullivan, daughter of Irish Catholic immigrants, who perfected a method of communication whereby she taught Helen Keller by making signs in the palm of Helen's hand.

Helen Keller, with Annie Sullivan translating every lecture, using signs in Helen's hand, went on to attend, and to receive a degree from, Radcliffe College. She was a superb writer. Her opinions at times were controversial, but all were astounded by, and admired, her triumph over her disability.

What if? What if her parents, seeing the terrifying result of her illness, had decided that she had no hope for a life of

quality? What if her father, 45 when she was born, thought that he might die while she was still young and his ability to provide for her would end?

What if her father and mother decided that they simply were unable emotionally or otherwise to cope with a situation as overwhelming as that of their daughter? Were they not entitled to unburdened lives themselves?

What, therefore, if they had decided just to kill her, to end her misery, and to remove the problem from their lives? Of course, they never dreamed of such a thing, but if they had ended Helen's life, the law would have handled them for murder, Helen's hopeless infirmity notwithstanding.

American law always has revered human life. Helen Keller was a human being who deserved the right to live.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled June 24 that [abortion is not a constitutional right](#). It has given the people of the individual states the opportunity of deciding [how best to respect the human right to life](#). Many states are moving toward eliminating, or severely restricting, abortion.

Others are going the other way. People loudly are protesting the court's action in removing from the law the notion that abortion is anyone's right, and their arguments rest on the supposition that it denies the mother of the unborn her own rights.

The unborn loses its life. The unborn is guilty of no crime. The unborn, as a human being, has human rights, and no science says that the unborn is not a being unto itself, not a part of the mother or of the father.

While the ruling of the Court is decisive, under our constitutional form of government, the debate, and dissension, here will not end. Arguments will continue, likely in many places for a long time.

How should Catholics view this debate, and how should they respond to questions about the Church's quite clear position that abortion is gravely wrong? What about rights? Whose rights?

Catholics simply should note that the ultimate and inevitable consequence of abortion is the destruction of a human life, the subject of which is innocent and unable to speak for, or to defend, itself – namely, the unborn.

Remember the story of Helen Keller, and of her parents, and the option that her parents never even considered for a second.

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