

LINKAGE AND THE LOGIC OF THE ABORTION DEBATE

Address for Right-to-Life Convention

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I first wish to express my appreciation for the opportunity to address this Convention of the National Right-to-Life Committee. I take the chairmanship of the NCCB Committee for Pro-life Activities as a very serious responsibility and a significant opportunity for service. I am convinced of the total personal commitment of each of our bishops to the philosophy and program of the pro-life movement. I am also equally convinced that the heart and soul of the movement is the personal dedication of all those who are represented at this meeting.

I thought it might be most useful for me to set forth in this address a general perspective of where we stand in the struggle against abortion, the struggle to protect the life of the unborn. It is now eleven years since the Supreme Court decisions which legalized abortion on request; there are lessons to be learned from this decade. In light of this experience, we can also examine our present choices and establish our future direction.

I. The Past: Witness for Life

An examination of the past decade generates both sadness and pride. Sadness -- perhaps moral dismay is a better phrase -- is a product of evaluating the abortion policy set in place by the 1973 Supreme Court decisions. Pride is the justifiable product of evaluating the efforts of thousands of volunteers who are committed to reversing the present national policy and re-establishing

respect for the right to life as a national policy and practice.

First, the implications of Roe v. Wade bear examination. In order to grasp the dimensions of the present challenge we face, it is necessary to describe the depth of the problem created by the 1973 Supreme Court decisions. The decisions were radical in nature and systemic in their consequences. They were radical since they overturned in one stroke an existing political and legal structure which treated any form of abortion as an exception to normal practice. The end product of Roe v. Wade was to establish a political and legal framework with no restraint on abortion. Many of us sensed then, and all of us can be sure now, that public opinion was not at all in favor of a policy opening the floodgates to 1.5 million abortions a year. Some radical decisions are justified morally and they are necessary politically, but the Court decisions on 1973 were neither justified, necessary nor acceptable to large segments of the American public.

The Court's decisions were systemic in the sense that they changed not only a given law, but they established operating presumptions in medical practice, social service agencies and administrative policy which legitimated and facilitated access to abortion. The result of the decisions was to change the structure of this society's approach to abortion. What the decisions did not change was the substantial, broad-based and solidly grounded view of American citizens across the land that abortion on request is not a satisfactory way to address the real problems individuals and families face in this delicate area of respecting unborn life.

It was this deeply felt personal opposition to abortion which crystallized the public policy position of the pro-life movement. There has undoubtedly been a strong Catholic core to this movement, but it has cut across

religious and political lines, as is evidenced by the participants in this convention. It is this pro-life constituency which is an authentic source of pride for anyone associated with it. At a time when grass roots coalitions are often talked about, the pro-life constituency has a claim second to none in demonstrating local support. At a time when citizen apathy is a serious public problem, the pro-life movement has mobilized men and women personally, professionally and politically in opposition to abortion. At a time when the moral dimension of public policy on a variety of issues is in need of a clear statement, the pro-life movement has cast the political issue in decisively moral terms. Finally, the movement has been not only political but pastoral. It has joined its public advocacy with practical efforts to provide alternatives to abortion.

For all these reasons, I maintain that the witness to life in the past decade has been a cause for hope and pride. The lessons learned in the decade of the 1970's prepare us to analyze our choices in the 1980's.

II. The Present: Shaping Public Choices for Life

The effect of the pro-life movement has not been limited to its inspirational quality; there has been a specific political impact. Eleven years after the Supreme Court decisions, and after a string of other legal actions reaffirming the Roe v. Wade philosophy, the pro-abortion philosophy has not been accepted by millions of Americans. In brief, the legal status of abortion still lacks public legitimacy. The political debate which ensued shows the nation radically divided on the state of public policy on abortion.

Normally, the force of existing law provides legitimacy for policy. Keeping the question open for reform and reversal of existing policy is a

significant political victory. It is a tactical success. It should not, however, be mistaken for total success. Nonetheless, it provides space to move the nation toward a different future on abortion.

Creating space to change law and policy is a pre-condition for what must be accomplished. It is imperative in the 1980's to use the space creatively. In working to change national policy on abortion, I submit that we must cast our case in broadly defined terms, in a way which elicits support from others. We need to shape our position consciously in a way designed to generate interest in the abortion question from individuals who thus far have not been touched by our witness or our arguments.

Casting our perspectives broadly does not mean diluting its content. Quite the opposite. It involves a process of demonstrating how our position on abortion is deeply rooted in our religious tradition and, at the same time, is protective of fundamental ideas in our constitutional tradition.

Speaking from my perspective as a Roman Catholic bishop, I wish to affirm that the basis of our opposition to abortion is established by themes which should be compelling for the Catholic conscience because they are so centrally located in Catholic moral and social teaching. The basic moral principle that the direct killing of the innocent is always wrong is so fundamental in Catholic theology that the need to defend it in the multiple cases of abortion, warfare, and care of the handicapped and the terminally ill is self-evident. This is why one cannot, with consistency, claim to be truly pro-life if one applies the principle of the sanctity of life to other issues but rejects it in the case of abortion. By the same token, one cannot, with consistency, claim to be truly pro-life if one applies the principle to other issues but holds that the direct killing of innocent non-combatants in warfare

is morally justified. To fail to stand for this principle is to make a fundamental error in Catholic moral thought. But the moral principle does not stand alone; it is related to other dimensions of Catholic social teaching.

The opposition to abortion is rooted in the conviction that civil law and social policy must always be subject to ongoing moral analysis. Simply because a civil law is in place does not mean that it should be blindly supported. To encourage reflective, informed assessment of civil law and policy is to keep alive the capacity for moral criticism in society. In addition, the Catholic position opposing abortion is rooted in our understanding of the role of the state in society. The state has positive moral responsibilities; it is not simply a neutral umpire; neither is its role limited to restraining evil. The responsibilities of the state include both the protection of innocent life from attack and enhancement of human life at every stage of its development. The fact of 1.5 million abortions a year in the United States erodes the moral character of the state; if the civil law can be neutral when innocent life is under attack, the implications for law and morality in our society are frightening.

These themes drawn from Catholic theology are not restricted in their application to the community of faith. These are truths of the moral and political order which are also fundamental to the Western constitutional heritage. The opposition to abortion, properly stated, is not a sectarian claim but a reflective, rational position which any person of good will may be invited to consider. Examples can be used to illustrate the convergence of our concerns about abortion with other key social questions in American society.

The appeal to a higher moral law to reform and refashion existing civil law was the central idea that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. brought to the civil rights movement of the 1960's. The pro-life movement of the 1980's is

based on the same appeal. Pro-life today should be seen as an extension of the spirit of the civil rights movement. Similarly, the Baby Doe case has proved to be a meeting ground of principle and practice between civil rights and pro-life advocates. The common ground is as yet not sufficiently explored, but there is significant potential for development in this area.

Civil rights are the domestic application of the broader human rights tradition. The right to life is a fundamental basis of this tradition. By standing for the right to life in our society, we stand with all who argue for a strong national commitment to human rights in our domestic and foreign policy.

A final example of convergence is pertinent to your program today. Father Bruce Ritter has caught the imagination and interest of broad sectors of American society with his defense of human dignity in the face of sexual exploitation. The themes of the pro-life movement, promoting a sacred vision of sexuality and support for the family, coincide with Father Ritter's courageous and compassionate witness to life.

III. The Future: A Strategy for Witness to Life

It is precisely because I am convinced that demonstrating the linkage between abortion and other issues is both morally correct and tactically necessary for the pro-life position that I have been addressing the theme of a consistent ethic of life for Church and society. The convergence of themes concerning civil rights, human rights and family life with the abortion issue is simply an indication of deeper bonds which exist along the full range of pro-life issues.

The proposals I have made on the linkage of issues are, I submit, a systematic attempt to state the vision which has always been implicit in a

Catholic conception of "pro-life." A Catholic view of the meaning of pro-life stresses the interdependence of life in a social setting, the way in which each of us relies upon the premise that others respect my life, and that society exists to guarantee that respect for each person. The interdependence of human life points toward the interrelationship of pro-life issues.

This interrelationship can be illustrated in precise, detailed moral arguments, but that is not my purpose in this address. I would simply appeal to a principle which I suspect is also an element of your own experience. It is the need to cultivate within society an attitude of respect for life on a series of issues, if the actions of individuals or groups are to reflect respect for life in specific choices. The linkage theme of a consistent ethic of life is designed to highlight the common interest and reciprocal need which exist among groups interested in specific issues -- peace, abortion, civil rights, justice for the dispossessed or disabled -- each of which depends upon a basic attitude of respect for life. The linkage theme provides us with an opportunity to win "friends" for the life issues. Just as we insist on the principle of the right to life, so too we must recognize the responsibility that our commitment places on us. Building bridges to people working on specific life issues demands respect and kindness toward these potential allies. An atmosphere of trust and understanding can do a great deal to promote the goals of the pro-life movement.

The consistent ethic seeks to build a bridge of common interest and common insight on a range of social and moral questions. It is designed to highlight the intrinsic ties which exist between public attitudes and personal actions on one side, and public policy on the other. Effective defense of life requires a coordinated approach to attitude, action and policy. The consistent ethic theme seeks to engage the moral imagination and political insight of

diverse groups and to build a network of mutual concern for defense of life at every stage in the policies and practices of our society.

The need for such a common approach is dictated by the objective interrelationship among the life issues. The strength of the Catholic contribution to such an approach lies in the long and rich tradition of moral and social analysis which has provided us with both detailed guidance on individual moral issues and a framework for relating several issues in a coherent fashion.

If we pursue a consistent ethic systematically, it will become clear that abortion is not a "single issue," because it is not even a single kind of issue. It is an issue about the nature and future of the family, both in its own right and as a basic unit of society. It is an issue about equality under law for all human beings. And it is an issue of life or death. For this reason, developments in all these areas may not always be the direct responsibility of each person in the right-to-life movement, but they should always be of intense interest to all. Whatever makes our society more human, more loving, more respectful of the life and dignity of others, is a contribution to your struggle; for the more committed society becomes to justice and compassion, the more incongruous will be its toleration of the killing of the unborn child. And whatever promotes respect for that child cannot help but promote respect for all humanity. With that in mind, I urge you to recommit yourselves with renewed energy to this cause. Where humanity is threatened at its most defenseless, we have no choice. We must stand up on its behalf.