Opinion



Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, at the general assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life at the Vatican Oct. 5. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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In reading conservative reactions to Pope Francis and some of the reforms he has begun, it becomes clear that for many of our co-religionists on the right, they thought that they owned the Catholic Church and that their interpretations of its doctrines were the only valid interpretations available. Even some Catholics on the left were too ready to accept, for example, that St. Pope John Paul II was who George Weigel said he was, even though John Paul II was an enormously complex figure and certainly more complicated than Weigel and his neo-conservative allies portrayed him to be. A more egregious example is Paul Kengor, who was recently on EWTN to discuss his new book *A Pope and a President*, in which he explained that John Paul II and Ronald Reagan really shared a virtually identical worldview. It would have been laughable if it was not so sad.

Last week, a young man named Joel Gallagher, a doctoral candidate in systematic theology at the Catholic University, staked his claim to be the authentic interpreter of Catholic doctrine (and much else), taking to the pages of Crisis magazine to argue against any attempt to broaden the list of concerns that can appropriately be labeled as "pro-life." He fretted that the Pontifical Academy for Life (PAV) and its president, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, is doing precisely that.

Gallagher writes:

> Inarguably, migration, arms control, poverty and the environment are important to the life and mission of the Church, but they are "not," nor have they ever been, properly part of the Church's pro-life mission for good reason. To include them as such conflates the philosophical foundation of each issue and inevitably, and perhaps intentionally, confuses the faithful and destroys the logically, unifying element of the PAV. The reasons why we must defend innocent life from the moment of conception is different than why and "how" we must care for God's creation and the poor, or welcome the stranger into our home (or lands). The effort to include these issues in the pro-life mission of the Church is a foul language program that the political Left has instituted for years in American politics that aims to highlight the supposed hypocrisy of political conservatives and to coerce or shame conservatives and the relatively uninformed, centrists into supporting their own polices and philosophical positions. In this effort, the Left has either destroyed language or irrationally and artificially redefined terms. This is an assault on organic language development that occurs naturally through human living and interaction.

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"Foul language program" versus "organic language development" is one way of describing what is going on within Catholic circles. But I doubt Archbishop Paglia is really a tool of "the political Left" or that he is trying to subvert an organic development of language. And it is not enough to assert that the reasons for defending innocent human life are different from those for defending God's creation: One must make an argument; but instead of argument, all we get is more epithets hurled at the left, political and religious.

Gallagher notes that Paglia is not the first prelate to become a party to this abuse of language. "This campaign was energized by Cardinal Bernardin's 'seamless garment' argument and has gained new spokesman with the appointment of Cardinal Cupich," he writes. "At best, it appears to be a covert attempt to convince traditional Catholics to support an expanded menu of "pro-life" policies and positions, and at worst it aims to shame them into doing so."

Bernardin explicitly tried to unify the church's members around what he perceived as their shared moral concerns about life, even though they saw different threats to life as more pressing. It was in the effort to unite Catholics, and create a more accurate moral framework for discussing policy, that Bernardin articulated his belief in a consistent ethic of life that included opposition to nuclear war as well as opposition to abortion, to encourage Catholics to place the claims of faith, and the internal logic of the Gospel, ahead of their partisan agendas. Evidently, according to Gallagher, it was all political artifice.

Further, according to Gallagher, the Left's manipulation of language — something he not once recognizes coming from the conservative side of the ledger — goes beyond the expansion of the concept of what it means to be pro-life. He writes:

> How about a few more changes in language from the Left? Advocates of gun control morphed into opponents of gun violence, because who would be in favor of the latter? Gay marriage became marriage equality, because equality is virtuous. Euthanasia or assisted suicide is now "death with dignity," because who would deny that everyone deserves to die with dignity? Being opposed to illegal immigration is now just simply anti-immigrant, because apparently calling your opponent a bigot has political capital. And illegal aliens are now euphemistically called "undocumented workers" to minimize their criminal status. Forcing a person or organization to subsidize contraception, perform a tubal ligation, perform an abortion or provide an abortion referral are all subsumed under "women's rights" or "reproductive rights" because it is apparently politically advantageous to claim that your opponent is waging a war on women. A "hate group" is any group or person who believes that marriage is a union between one man and one woman, but only after Joe Biden persuaded Barack Obama to publicly "evolve" on his position. And finally, global warming morphed into climate change so that nearly any change in weather patterns, phenomena or climate can be used as evidence for man-made climate change.

It is a more than obvious truth that politicians of all varieties try to find words that will help shape people's attitudes in ways that will help them achieve their political goals. This is not news. Still, it is an interesting list Mr. Gallagher has assembled, no? It is not a list that seems derived from any moral theology textbook I have ever

seen. No, this is drawn from Republican Party talking points. I note in passing that while "illegal aliens" as he calls them may have entered the country unlawfully, which is a misdemeanor, being in the country without proper documentation, for example, if you overstay your visa, is not a crime. But why be precise if you want to label all of "them" as "criminals"?

There are those on the left who similarly start with their political checklist and then go in search of religious buttresses for their already-arrived-at positions. But how many times must it be said: Religion should be a prod, not merely a buttress, and it should prod us to think more critically about the moral stakes of the issues we face as a polity.

The rationale for expanding the list of concerns that are properly termed "pro-life" is a simple one: Climate change kills, too. Unlimited access to assault weapons kills. Poverty kills. Unjust migration policies kill. That may not matter much to Mr. Gallagher and his friends on the right. But Bernardin and Paglia are not wrong to suggest that consistency requires us Catholics to consider the full range of threats to human life and to defend against them all.

Gallagher invokes St. Pope John Paul II's articulation of the "Gospel of Life." He may be interested to recall this passage from a document issued by the U.S. bishops in 1995:

> In our country, the modern, technological, functional mentality creates a world of replaceable individuals incapable of authentic solidarity. In its place, society is grouped by artificial arrangements created by powerful interests. The common ground is an increasingly dull, sterile, consumer conformism — visible especially among so many of our young people — created by artificial needs promoted by the media to support powerful economic interests. Pope John Paul II has called this a "culture of death."...The New Evangelization, therefore, requires the Church to provide refuge and sustenance for ongoing growth to those rescued from the loneliness of modern life. It requires the promotion of a culture of life based on the Gospel of life.

That was issued when John Paul II was still gloriously reigning. The bishops saw the "culture of death" in broader terms than an exclusive concern with abortion laws and in vitro fertilization. Why can't Gallagher? Because he is not interested in church

teaching, he is interested in politics.

More disturbing than the actual arguments in Gallagher's essay, such as they are, is the tone of grievance. He speaks as a man who has been robbed, but robbed of what? No one, certainly not Paglia, has told this young man he is wrong to be concerned about abortion. Gallagher takes a particular, and easily recognizable, religious stance: How dare anyone take a more comprehensive view of what constitutes a threat to human life than his narrow list of concerns! It is the stance of those who asked how Jesus dared to heal on the Sabbath. Back then, the aggrieved were called Pharisees. And they still are.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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