Opinion

News



Pro-life advocates in Chicago are seen Jan. 11 during the city's March for Life. (CNS/Chicago Catholic/Karen Callaway)



by Michael Sean Winters

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January 22, 2020

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Friday, tens of thousands of people, mostly Catholics, will stream into our nation's capital for the annual March for Life. It is a grim irony, and implacable evidence, of the strange times in which we live that the pro-life movement simultaneously has never been closer to its stated goal of overturning the Supreme Court's decision to make abortion a constitutional right and never more threatened in its moral integrity and political efficacy. Regrettably, the Catholic left, with notable exceptions, appears largely unequal to the moment as well.

I question the moral integrity and political efficacy of the mainstream pro-life movement for a simple reason: By lashing themselves to President Donald Trump, they have morally and indelibly compromised their cause. The Susan B. Anthony List announced it will launch a $52 million campaign to reelect the president and help the Republican Party hold on to its majority in the U.S. Senate. Marjorie Dannenfelser, the group's president, did not voice any concern about the unborn children waiting with their pregnant moms at the border, denied entry by a racist president who has turned his back on our nation's proud history of welcoming immigrants. She did not explain how the president's denial of climate change has retarded efforts needed to help the thousands of pregnant women in Bangladesh who are experiencing higher rates of miscarriages due to climate change. Nor did she explain why she thinks the theme of this year's march — "Life Empowers: Pro-Life is Pro-Woman" — is a thought that can be entrusted to a man whose misogyny is legendary.

The U.S. Supreme Court now possesses a 5-to-4 majority opposed to the constitutional logic of *Roe* v. *Wade*, the 1973 decision that established the right to abortion as a constitutional right. (Now that has been accomplished, is there *any* reason for a Catholic to vote for a Republican?) If the pro-life movement were smart, it would actually ask the high court to overturn their 1992 decision, *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania vs. Casey*, but uphold *Roe*. It was *Casey* that shifted the standard for upholding a law from *Roe*'s trimester framework to the new standard of whether or not a law placed an "undue burden" on a woman seeking an abortion. *Roe* placed the U.S. squarely within the legal orbit of most

developed countries, permitting abortion in the first trimester, allowing regulation of the procedure in the second and granting states the authority to ban the procedure entirely in the third trimester, excepting situations where the life of the mother is at stake. As a political and legal resolution of the issue, I do not believe we can do better. Overturning *Roe* would throw the issue back to the states where abortion-on-demand would become the law in more states than not.

It was the effort to distinguish abortion from all other issues, to prioritize it at the expense of other life issues, to declare it "preeminent," that has allowed for the alliance with Trump. This strategy has demonstrated the moral inadequacy of isolating it, or any issue, at the expense of all others. It is absurd to hear Texas Gov. Greg Abbott proclaim himself to be "pro-life" while presiding over the state with more executions than any other and being the first to sign up for barring refugees from entering the state. It is this kind of counter-witness that not only harms the pro-life cause but causes it to lose credibility in the eyes of the majority of Americans who remain ambivalent about abortion.

I have grown tired of restating the obvious fact that the issue of abortion has been co-opted by the extremists on both sides of the issue. Like all special interests, the leaders and staff at the Susan B. Anthony List, like the leaders and staff at Emily's List, have a financial interest in keeping the fight going, not in resolving it. They cannot conceive of compromise, demand total adherence from those politicians they support and so the culture wars continue. No candidate from either side has demonstrated the courage needed to break free from these groups and reach the broad center of the electorate.

You would think that the morally compromised position of the anti-abortion extremists would make this a perfect time for the Catholic left to plant its flag and make its stand. The Catholic left has long identified with, and been supportive of, the consistent ethic of life, the "seamless garment" stance first articulated by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. Strangely, just when that stance's political viability seems to have caught up with its moral integrity, some on the Catholic left seem to be abandoning the fight.

In recent weeks, in conversations with many people, smart people, thoughtful people, I have noticed an unwillingness to wrestle with the consequences of our Catholic belief that the taking of innocent human life is always wrong. For example, one of the problems with the extremists has been their unwillingness to admit

distinctions. Admittedly, drawing distinctions when dealing with a phenomenon like pregnancy that occurs along a continuum is always fraught and can appear arbitrary. But there is a difference between drawing necessary distinctions and making excuses. I am not sure I can define that difference precisely, but to quote Justice Potter Stewart in a different context, I know it when I see it. And so do you. You can tell an excuse is in the offing when a friend argues that the human body washes out thousands of impregnated cells for every one that is implanted: The issue of human agency is key here, no? Or are we to compare an earthquake with a bombing?

Or when someone argues that abortion must be allowed because an abortion can cost as little as a few hundred dollars but the cost of prenatal care is over $10,000. That is an argument for Medicare for All, not for more abortions. Indeed, all the arguments that revolve around the economic impact on a woman's career are powerful arguments for changing our labor laws to make them more just, but not for the drastic remedy of intentional taking of human life, a remedy that leaves the perpetrators of unjust economic arrangements unpunished.

One friend told me that I would never be in a position of having to decide to procure an abortion or not, so I really had no business telling any woman what to do. Of course, I welcomed the conviction of Gen. Ratko Mladic for war crimes, even though I am not a Bosnian and have never been a general. I am not a burglar and have never been burgled, but I am opposed to burglary. In those instances when a woman friend has contemplated having an abortion, I have done what I can to be supportive. That is simple decency. Being supportive is a moral good. Having an abortion is not.

The introduction of distinctions and nuances clarify, they do not confuse, the moral stakes. No less an authority than St. Thomas Aquinas treated abortion as manslaughter not murder, a kind of recognition of the increasing moral claims as a person advances along the continuum of development from cell to zygote to embryo to child. He never said it was morally permissible. On the other hand, pro-choice activists are quick to insist that the preborn child is a part of the woman's body, which is undoubtedly true. Yet, is there no moral significance in the fact that the preborn child is the only part of a woman's body that has a different DNA? Indeed, they tend to simply avoid the possibility that there is any moral significance to the sonograms they see on refrigerators. It is the same kind of denial of what science increasingly demonstrates that we witness with climate change deniers.

As a Catholic Christian, the only privileged hermeneutic belongs to the witness of the Scriptures and to the magisterium. I do not like it when pro-life activists cite scriptural verses as proof texts. Jeremiah 1:5 begins, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" and Psalm 139 echoes the idea, but proof texts are never convincing. The fact that one side of an argument is not convincing does not, ipso facto, make the other side cogent.

What is convincing, what is undeniable, is that the whole theme of the Scriptures is that God has bestowed the gifts of life and love upon sinful mankind, sometimes we humans spurn that gift and go astray, and the Lord calls us back. If abortion does not constitute the spurning of a gift, and a most precious gift, I am not sure what does. Catholics may differ on what legal solutions exist for the problem of unwanted pregnancy, we can admit that the moral gravity of the act is diminished by a variety of circumstances, but I do not see how a Catholic can ever adopt a libertarian stance on abortion any more than we can adopt a libertarian stance on climate change or economic justice. That, for me, is one of the absolutes in this discussion.

Here is another absolute: No one, man or woman, has any right to judge a woman who is considering an abortion or who has procured one. We can only sympathize even while we acknowledge it is wrong. We do this all the time. Let us take an example that seems appropriate given Bernardin's starting point, that the U.S. church was the only societal actor that opposed *both* abortion and nuclear weapons. No one can read a history of World War II and not sympathize with Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb. The generals predicted the loss of a million American lives if forced to invade the home islands of Japan, and the loss of many more millions of Japanese civilians. The death tolls in Iwo Jima and Okinawa were astounding. The fire-bombing of Tokyo, like that of Dresden, killed more people than would be killed at Hiroshima or Nagasaki. The atom bomb might shock the Japanese leaders into suing for peace, which in fact it did. Yet, the decision to drop the bomb was wrong, period, even if any one of us might have made that same decision were we in Truman's shoes. For the Catholic, the fact that something is wrong in no way permits us to refuse sympathy, just as our sympathy in no way demands we pretend that something wrong is really right.

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Last year, at the Catholic Theological Society of America meeting, University of San Diego professor Emily Reimer-Barry delivered an address entitled, "Another Pro-Life Movement is Possible." It is remarkable that Reimer-Berry begins by discussing violence, by which she means patriarchal violence, without actually acknowledging the violence of surgical abortion. Still, I agree with about 90% of what she says about the hypocrisy of the pro-life movement.

However, this passage marks her talk as fatally flawed:

> *Clementine Ford describes feeling relieved after her abortion, and then celebrating the birth of her son with complete joy when she was ready to parent. "I look at my son every morning and marvel at the progress he's making on his journey to becoming an aware human. ... He is the child I was waiting for. ... Abortion is part of his story as much as it is mine. Abortion is what made his life possible, but my life too.*"

I can sympathize with Ford, but she is defending having chosen one child over another. There was a movie about such a choice, but it was the Nazis who demanded the choice be made. The fact that this example made it into Reimer-Berry's talk and there was no general outcry is astonishing. How can we continue to defend the consistent ethic of life and then abandon our commitment to the life of the unborn? That would make us as hypocritical as the pro-lifers who support the death penalty. This is what I mean by the Catholic left suddenly losing its bearings.

I cannot — and this year I would not — join the marchers on the National Mall in Washington on Friday. Many large-hearted souls will be there whose consciences have led them to attend. Still, the organizers have become blind to the damage they have done to their own movement. I do not celebrate an Alabama law that makes no allowance for women who have been raped. I do not celebrate a president who daily exhibits himself to be immoral or amoral or both. I do not celebrate the addition of Supreme Court justices who will vote to undermine workers' rights, defend corporate rights and oppose the kinds of regulations we need if our pro-life commitment to preserving the planet is to become real. That said, I challenge the Catholic left as well not to abandon the cause of defending life. The century just concluded witnessed more insults to the dignity of the human person and more intentional killings of human beings than seems imaginable. It is time to insist on a better way, a way that affirms life, all life, including those developing in the womb.

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

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