Opinion

News



A woman in Houston looks at a picture of her ultrasound at Houston Women's Reproductive Services Oct. 1, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)



by M.T. Dávila

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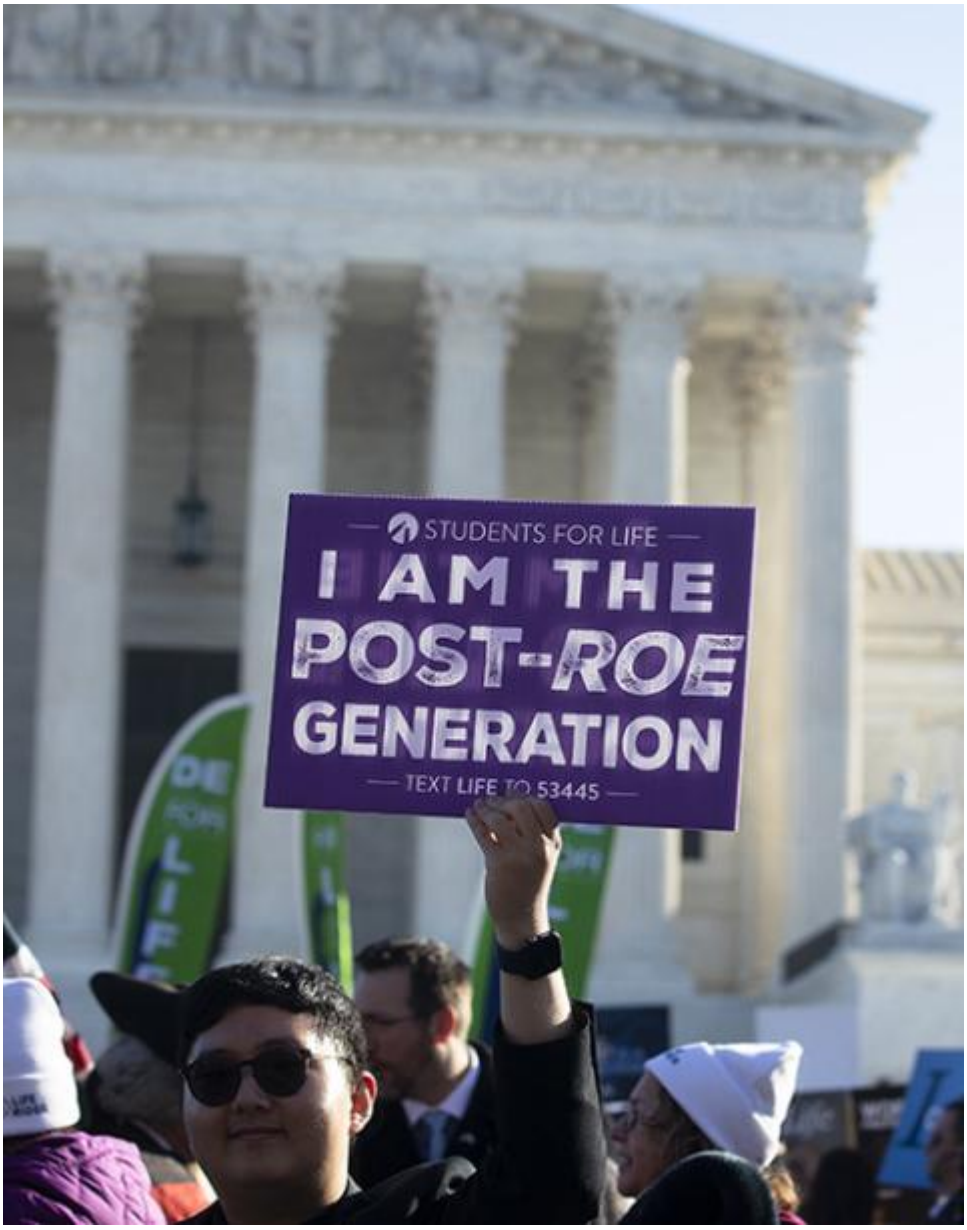
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The U.S. Supreme Court's oral arguments on the *Dobbs* v. *Jackson Women's Health Organization* case has many across the nation predicting that this will be the decision that undoes *Roe* v. *Wade* as well as the 1992 decision in *Casey* v. *Planned Parenthood*, effectively returning the abortion question to each state legislature. The Dobbs case seeks to uphold a Mississippi law that bans abortions after 15 weeks of gestation. Were the Supreme Court to uphold the constitutionality of the Mississippi law, it would undo key provisions of the *Roe* and *Casey* decisions, rendering federal protection of abortion rights moot.

Though a decision on *Dobbs* is not expected until summer 2022, many states whose legislators are majority Republican are already readying themselves to push legislation that will ban abortion altogether or in almost all cases. Less evident is whether states with majority Democrat legislators are ready to ensconce their states' abortion rights into state law, as Massachusetts has already done.

Of particular concern is the preparedness of the Catholic Church in the United States for a post-*Roe* world. During the most recent meeting of the U.S. bishops' conference , only days prior to the SCOTUS discussion on *Dobbs*, various members of the leadership of the U.S. church offered their vision for the months to come. Overall, their proposals were comprehensive, mindful of the dignity of women and young mothers, understanding that overturning *Roe* only sends the issue back to the states, and that the states' responses would be varied, developing over time.



A pro-life advocate is seen near the U.S. Supreme Court Dec. 1, 2021. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

The bishops interviewed emphasized that the mission of the church to "surround mothers with love" goes to the heart of the matter because it seeks to provide women with real alternatives to abortion through various forms of concrete support, rather than focus on the legal battles. It was heartening to hear the bishops talk about these efforts as necessary at a national level and in every parish.

Walking with Moms in Need, a program from the outgoing chair of the bishops' Pro-Life Committee, Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, urges the

completion at each parish of an inventory that locates available community resources and services. The data should then be assessed and gaps identified so that each parish can respond accordingly to their local needs in ways that will directly impact the lives of women who will see themselves affected by the legal developments from this decision.

For the California Catholic Conference, for example, preparing for a post-*Roe* world would include, on the public level, prioritizing budget funding to provide support to poor families and pregnant women. Such efforts might include child tax credits, extended paid family leave, initiatives to build generational wealth, and secure housing, jobs and benefits. Echoing Walking with Moms in Need, local parishes, often a point of contact with a woman or a family seeking help, are encouraged to address practical issues by providing meals, child care and a listening presence.

What is proclaimed from the national leadership of the church doesn't always make its way to the parish level. The inconsistency across dioceses in managing the initial phase of gathering input from the faithful for the synod serves as an example. Any national project to support women and families as articulated by Naumann's program is largely dependent on individual parishes carrying out a central strategy to respond to local needs, which may well increase in a post-*Roe* context.

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While "surrounding mothers with love" is certainly essential to addressing crisis pregnancies, there are a number of national-level advocacy efforts the church can and must engage in that will impact the lives of women much more effectively:

First, advocating for universal health care/Medicare for all. This ought to be the easiest piece of this proposal, seeing as Catholic social teaching considers health care a human right. This incredibly partisan issue becomes controversial among Catholics when the church perceives its right to religious exemptions violated when proposals for universal care include procedures and forms of treatment that the church considers contrary to the divine plan, human dignity and the common good.

Yet providing universal care to mothers and young families is one of the most important contributions we could be making to improve the prospects for a woman in a crisis pregnancy. But so far, the church has spent more energy and resources resisting the birth control mandate and trying to legislate a broadening of religious exemptions than it has spent advocating for robust and consistent health care for all.

Second, building collaborative bonds across various actors with diverse and sometimes opposing viewpoints. Many agencies, movements and activists share the church's concern for the welfare of women and children, families (especially migrant and refugee families), the environment, racial justice and other challenges to human dignity. Some church leaders refuse to sit at the table with groups that might hold viewpoints that directly oppose church teaching, fearful of creating scandal, ambiguity or confusion about these teachings. We cannot hold to these absolute boundaries when discrete collaboration around certain projects for the common good — especially as it concerns women in crisis pregnancies and throughout their challenges as mothers — is a possibility. We must be willing to call the pro-choice advocate our friend and ally as we both seek to improve the prospects for women everywhere. Pope Francis highlights these kinds of conversations and collaborations for the common good in *Fratelli Tutti* as part of what makes the political project a unique form of Christian love.

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Third, allowing for adoptions by same-sex couples and single parents. While the law has sided with religious organizations wanting to claim religious exemption from having to entertain adoption requests by same-sex couples and single persons, such a move does a great disservice to all kinds of families. Adoption remains one of the pillars of the U.S. church's pro-life strategy. But these are rarely simple or trouble-free transactions. Expanding the category of suitable potential adoptive parents willing to commit to the well-being of a child and understanding the complications of the process, at the moment and in the years to come, can only serve to ensure that more crisis pregnancies end up as completed births with children raised in nurturing families.

Fourth, revising the theology of the body and gender essentialism. We find ourselves at a turning point with respect to gender norms and cultural expectations, and how these may or may not accurately reflect the experience of people regarding sexuality, gender expression and family life. Gender essentialism that lays the reproductive burden almost entirely on women fails to understand the development of female identity in recent history. We can no longer cling to the essentialist claim that women's nature is primarily maternal as a key argument to proclaim every pregnancy a blessing, and therefore welcome and wanted. Crisis pregnancies happen. Not every pregnancy is a blessing, even as we proclaim that every human deserves the right to life. Clinging to gender essentialism has stunted the church's ability to understand this reality and hinders the building of a theology of the family and an ethic of birth control that more accurately reflects the self-understanding of people who have the ability to reproduce.

These four proposals might strike some as toeing the gray areas of Catholic morality on sex, gender, health care and the family. I believe, however, that in these gray areas we draw much closer to those who will, and in fact have always been, most impacted by the procreative process: women, girls, children.

The church must get ready for a post-*Roe* world, declaring solidarity with those who bear the physical burden of reproduction and gestation, and boldly engaging national and international alliances that may have been considered impossible before now. A careful consideration of the common good requires such preparation and reorientation.

This story appears in the **Theology en la Plaza** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 21-Feb 3, 2022** print issue under the headline: Four ways the church can get ready for a post-Roe world.