Opinion
NCR Voices



Rep. Susie Lee, D-Nev., speaks at a campaign event in this Jan. 12, 2019, file photo. (AP/John Locher)



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In a preview of things to come, U.S. Rep. Susie Lee of Nevada and Bishop George Thomas of Las Vegas published op-eds in the Las Vegas Sun on the subject of abortion last week as likely to be misunderstood as not. The back-and-forth leads me to issue a heartfelt plea to all who plan to write on this topic: Be precise and be generous.

If, as expected, the U.S. Supreme Court overrules *Roe* v. *Wade* and turns the issue back to the states, we can expect pro-choice Catholic politicians and their bishops to take to their local media to debate this already fraught and complicated issue. So it is worthwhile looking at these two opposing op-eds to see how they might have been more clear and, just so, more helpful.

Rep. Lee argued that the U.S. Senate should codify *Roe*. "We don't know what this new year holds for our nation, but we do know it is crucial for us to take control and codify *Roe*'*s* legacy before it is too late," she writes.

I am never exactly sure what anyone means when they say they want to "codify *Roe* ." The essential holding in *Roe* was that women have a constitutional right to an abortion, but no statute can confer a constitutional right. Any federal legislation is likely to be challenged on federalism grounds, and that challenge would likely win.

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"I voted for the Women's Health Protection Act because politics doesn't belong in the doctor's office and should have no bearing on an individual's health care decisions," Lee affirms.

That is the same argument Republicans made when opposing the Affordable Care Act, for example, falsely claiming the government would prevent people from choosing their own doctor. Call me silly, but when your political opponents use the exact same logic and language, shouldn't you question that logic and language?

What likely provoked the bishop's concern was when Lee wrote:

> *As a Catholic, I have a deep understanding of the moral dilemma that the choice to have an abortion presents. At the same time, the choice to become a mother is an extremely personal one, and that choice should stay between a woman, her family and her doctor. When extremists insert themselves into this decision, they refuse to recognize women's bodily autonomy, potentially put them in life-threatening circumstances, and often coerce them into having a future that they neither wanted nor prepared for.*

I wouldn't say her understanding is that deep. The choice of whether or not to take an innocent human life is not that big a moral dilemma in Catholic theology. Whether in the womb or in war, Catholics believe it is wrong to take an innocent human life — and not merely because it is one of the commandments. Everything about our Catholic, sacramental worldview invites us to be pro-life. This is not just about morals. It is about a disposition toward all of reality, a fundamental stance towards human life as a gift from God.

If Lee had said she supported the church's teaching on the inviolability of human life, but did not think that teaching could be easily legislated in a pluralistic democracy, at least not in our pluralistic democracy, that would be one thing. Legislation is complicated and the church does not teach that everything that is immoral should also be illegal, although protecting innocent human life is not so easily abandoned on behalf of other personal or social goods.

Instead, she cites her religion and then moves on to repeat libertarian talking points you would expect from Planned Parenthood. Lee's decision to bring up her religion, and then not actually wrestle with it, is disturbing because it clouds what is not very cloudy: the church's teaching against the taking of fetal life.

My colleagues are tired of hearing me say it, but it is exactly on point: In an issue as foundational as this, just because a Catholic has a thought does not mean it is a Catholic thought that has been had.

Bishop Thomas, in his op-ed was at pains to make sure people understood the congresswoman was not speaking for the church. He said Lee "articulated a position that stands in stark contrast to the hallowed moral teaching of the Catholic church."

Thomas noted that Lee never once mentioned the consequences of her stance for the unborn children who have been lost to abortion. It is this absence of any

solidarity for the unborn that is most disturbing among pro-choice advocates.

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The bishop then invited Rep. Lee and all Catholics, not just politicians, to think again about their stance on this totemic issue. "It is my sincere hope that Catholic politicians and Catholics at large take this moment to look deeply into their own hearts, and re-examine the church's moral conviction on the inviolability and dignity of human life."

That is my sincere hope also, but as we get closer to the Supreme Court's decision, that hope is seeming more and more remote.

"If a politician from the Diocese of Las Vegas finds himself or herself at odds with the church's teaching on the sacredness of human life," Thomas continued, "I ask him or her voluntarily to refrain from the reception of Holy Communion while holding public office. I place the onus of that decision upon the individual politician's shoulders, and not on the backs of Pastors or Eucharistic Ministers."

We all should ask ourselves: Am I really in communion with the church when I hold tenaciously to a point of view that is so fundamentally at odds with not only the church's moral teaching but with the church's entire worldview?

It is not an easy question for any of us. I wonder how many conservative politicians who demonstrate indifference to the death of innocent migrants ask themselves that question before heading up to the altar to take Communion? I wonder how many people who deny climate change— which is now as much of a pressing life issue as abortion and only an obscurantist would say otherwise — approach the Communion rail without any compunction?

Bishop Thomas' op-ed would have benefited from an addition. Bishops need to witness to the consistent ethic of life when they write about abortion — or the death penalty or war. The church, almost alone in this confusing and confused culture, is morally consistent in its defense of human life across the range of public policy issues. That fact cannot go unmentioned without the bishops looking like they are

taking sides in a partisan divide.

More problematic was a related interview Bishop Thomas gave to the Sun. According to the reporter, Jessica Hill, "Thomas said he 'absolutely' believed Biden should refrain from receiving the sacrament as well."

If Thomas said that, he is wrong. No one, not even a bishop, can tell what Biden's conscience tells him.

But that is a big "if," because earlier in the same piece Hill wrote: "Thomas joins the legions of other Catholic leaders nationally who have blurred the lines in the separation of church and state in calling for Catholic lawmakers in support of abortion rights to not participate in communion."

There are no separation of church and state issues involved about the discipline of the church regarding admissibility to the sacraments. So Thomas may not have usurped the conscience of the president as the reporter suggested.

What we do know for sure is that this discussion will only intensify as we get closer to the Supreme Court's expected June decision. After that, the discussion will likely shift to all 50 state legislatures. At that point, a glaring challenge manifests itself: After almost 50 years of prophetically witnessing to the need to see *Roe* overturned, what kind of legislation, exactly, do the bishops want? It is a more difficult, a more prosaic, challenge than some are willing to admit and it will help if the bishops are very, very precise in their language and in their analysis.