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by NCR Staff

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In an analysis for NCR, John Gehring asked Catholic moral theologians, Catholic health care ethicists and Catholic women who view themselves as pro-life what they think about the more extreme anti-abortion restrictions now making headlines. Following are reader responses that have been edited for length and clarity.

Jesuit Fr. James Bretzke's comments caught my eye.

Bretzke points to the stark language often used by Pope John Paul II, who spoke about a "culture of life" pitted against a "culture of death," as an unhelpfully simplistic way to evaluate the range of complex issues that always surround pregnancy and abortion. A generation of conservative U.S. bishops appointed by the late pope, he noted, have embraced that apocalyptic framing.



If anything, I think that John Paul's language is more relevant and necessary than ever before. The casual acceptance of pro-choice extremism by the Democratic Party is, without a doubt, an expression of the culture of death. At the same time, if we really want to get justifiably apocalyptic, we should look to the normalization of the mass death of born persons that has occurred in the United States. Over a million people here have died here because of our government's mass infection COVID-19 policy. If that isn't the triumph of the culture of death, I don't what is.

One million people are dead, yet this enormous death toll is received with widespread indifference, including in churches. Now, I know that Americans only get interested in death outside of our borders when the media tells them to, but if you had asked me pre-COVID if Americans, including even in the church, would shrug off one million deaths in the United States I wouldn't have believed you, but there it is.

An unholy matrimony between John Paul's "culture of death" and Pope Francis' "throwaway culture" has taken place before our very eyes, and it's the most evil thing to happen in America in my lifetime. So let's keep that apocalyptic "culture of death" language and apply it where and when it's needed.

JEFFREY JONES

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Issues of reproductive health are indeed complex and are rarely taken seriously by the so-called "magisterium" (which, by the way, describes a function and not a person).

With regard to the issue of abortion, I would like to offer a thought raised by Jesuit Fr. James Bretzke with respect to why women have abortions. There are, of course, many reasons but I would like to draw attention to one reason that many Catholics might not think about. There are several reasons why a woman or couple may wish to avoid pregnancy, ranging from ill health to poverty. Then, a couple could decide that they have enough children and wish to devote their efforts (and financial resources) to parenting the ones they already have. There are also life and work situations that can be inappropriate for having children such as bringing aid to undeveloped or disaster areas, perhaps even engaging in missionary work. Avoiding pregnancy when situations, either temporary or permanent, warrant it is part of what is called responsible parenthood.

The problem here is that many Catholics feel that they are severely hampered in practicing responsible parenthood because they are limited to using either complete or periodic abstinence in order to avoid pregnancy. They have been taught not only that every form of contraception is wrong but that it constitutes a "serious sin."

It is time for the church to admit that the teaching — including the suggestion that using contraception was a serious sin that needed to be confessed — was inaccurate. It is not the traditional teaching of the church and it needs to be put aside. Until the church does that, it will not be able to formulate a comprehensible sexual and conjugal ethics.

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Our country has wrestled with the abortion issue long before the *Roe* vs. *Wade* ruling in 1973. That seminal date is seen, wrongly in my opinion, as the beginning of the anti-abortion movement. It is, however, the beginning of a political movement embraced by far too many in the Catholic hierarchy as a mechanism to define who is or is not Catholic in their estimation.

The history of the pro-life movement is replete with examples of issues which should be consistent with a culture of life but instead shows itself in many cases to be misogynist, racist or xenophobic. The additional arguments which some pro-life advocates advance would curtail those aspects of the social safety net, such as Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act which are fundamental to enabling a woman to choose life and maintain her health.

When the bishops embrace confrontation with all politicians who are Catholic about their personal acceptance of all church teachings about what being pro-life means they will then have credibility when they argue that we vote "pro-life." Ignoring certain of their favored office holders, who happen to represent the political party which their own benefactors support, while ignoring their advocacy of capital punishment underscores the dissonance many feel about how pro-life these clerics are in fact. Additionally, the bishops must not just give lip service to immigrant rights, strengthening the social safety net, etc. but must confront all Catholic office holders about the church's teachings.

Our clerics need to manage to put more energy into challenging every issue which belies many politicians' claims to be pro-life. While they assert only one teaching as preeminent and use that issue to divide the congregation, they will not be able to credibly make political arguments that could in fact lead us to a consistent culture of life.

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