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This combination photo shows the participants in Georgetown University's online dialogue July

This combination photo shows the participants in Georgetown University's online dialogue July 14, 2022, on "The Consistent Ethic of Life after Dobbs: Directions and Challenges." Top row: Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas; Kim Daniels, Georgetown's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life; and Erika Bachiochi, Ethics and Public Policy Center. Bottom row: Kathleen Domingo, California Catholic Conference; Justin Giboney, AND Campaign; and Mollie Wilson O'Reilly, Commonweal magazine. (CNS screenshot/Georgetown University)



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Despite their pro-life bona fides, a five-member panel at a July 14 Georgetown University forum voiced their hesitancies with the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* v. *Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision that overturned the court's landmark *Roe* v. *Wade* ruling 49 years earlier.

"The Dobbs decision did not feel like any kind of victory, because I find myself concerned about its direct consequences in putting up barriers for reproductive health care for women, especially in Republican-controlled states and across the country," said Mollie Wilson O'Reilly, an editor-at-large and columnist at Commonweal magazine.

"I find myself discouraged looking back at the road we took to get to this point, at all of the choices that the Catholic movement has made along the way as ending abortion as a priority for political engagement," she added.

"We were happy to see the overturning of *Roe* v. *Wade*, but *Dobbs* made it worse," said Kathleen Domingo, executive director of the California Catholic Conference.

"The response has just been extreme," she added, "with people trying to almost double down on our promotion of abortion in California," and she counted 20 pieces of legislation introduced in the past month. "So, we definitely have some mixed emotions."

"I really thought that Roe was bad from a legal point of view and a moral point of view," said Justin Giboney, co-founder of the Atlanta-based AND Campaign, a Christian civic organization focusing on asserting compassion and conviction in the public square. But some of the triumphalism "coming from the right" over it being struck down "was reprehensible," he said.

The head of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas, said that "the *Roe* v. *Wade* controversy has eclipsed and drowned out other voices and issues that the church is concerned about: certainly the death penalty and here on the border -- immigration reform -- which affects real people, mothers who are expecting children, (the) mother who has children" and many more.

The panelists made their comments during a forum titled "The Consistent Ethic of Life after Dobbs: Directions and Challenges," sponsored by Georgetown's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life.

If it's a consistent ethic of life that is needed, argued panelist Erika Bachiochi, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, then "there are all sorts of policies we need to be pushing for." She put them under the umbrella of "family policy."

"There is a lot of movement and there are a lot of people who need convincing, but there is a narrative that the right will never do this. (But) the right, just like a pro-life movement, is a very diverse group of people who have different kinds of views," she said. "There is a lot of realignment happening among conservatives that I hope also happens on the left."

During the forum, both Bachiochi and O'Reilly revealed they had to have a "D&C" -- dilation and curettage -- procedure during a pregnancy.

O'Reilly, a mother of four, said her fifth pregnancy ended in a miscarriage that required an emergency D&C to resolve.

O'Reilly said that the experience made her more aware that "putting restrictions on when and whether that kind of health care is available to women," could create barriers for a woman "whose life is in danger."

Bachiochi said laws banning abortion make exceptions to save the mother's life.

"The rub is," O'Reilly said, "when you allow a doctor's or a hospital's judgment to be second-guessed. By definition you do if you say 'only in the case of an emergency.'"

"You set up a situation where there are all questions about who makes that determination?" O'Reilly said. "What do you have to prove to show this is a legitimate emergency? Who has to be consulted and how much time do you have to get that done?"

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Bachiochi said there is a lot of misinformation out there that says there aren't exceptions for miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy. "I think the misinformation out there is more harmful than the law themselves."

Flores said urged that "cultural wars" be substituted "by a cultural encounter where we're hearing what the issues are and trying to respond and for us, it is responding to the person and the dignity of the unborn child."

"It is hollow on both parties' part to talk about human dignity by excluding huge swaths about it," he said.

"In the United States, we have a way to exclude people from being considered as within that sort of circle of protection because of their humanity," the bishop said. "We do that to people on death row. In some instances, we do it (to noncitizens), 'Well, they are not citizens, but it is too bad and we can't do anything for them, so it is not our responsibility.'"

"It is excluding of any responsibility of the well-being of other people," he added.

During the forum, migration was a frequent topic, including the deaths of 53 migrants who had been smuggled by truck to San Antonio.

Among "politicians and elsewhere, 'this is the fault of Joe Biden and open borders, which is preposterous, because if we had open borders, people would not be sneaked across the border in trucks," O'Reilly said. "It is never looking at the human dignity."

"If you talk to the immigrant families, it is their instinct to protect -- protect their children who are subject to gangs, subject to being shot if they don't (join them)," Flores said. "This is all very real."

Echoing the parable of the good Samaritan proclaimed at Masses the previous Sunday, he added, "Who is my neighbor? They are hungry, they are thirsty. They need assistance, because they don't know where the bus station is."

"On the left, the numbers are there to be more sensible about the conversation" about dignity-of-life issues, Giboney said. "Unfortunately, the organization and the messaging isn't there."

Meanwhile, "there has been legislative malpractice when it comes to this (issue). On the federal level, for instance, Republicans attacked Obamacare; they promised to develop an alternative and never did it, because it was not politically expedient," Giboney said. "It is not pro-life. It is not pro-life that Medicare was not expanded in Georgia. We can't run from the recent history."

He added, "On the left there is a conversation that needs to be had, too, and we need to better articulate that every life has value -- even the unborn."

In California, "what the bishops want to do, what the Catholics want to do, is expand assistance to work on the public safety net," Domingo said, but lawmakers' current focus on abortion as a right makes that nearly impossible.

"We hear on the ground: Listen, it is really hard to raise families in California. Gas prices are skyrocketing, house prices are through the roof. ... The education system in California is terrible. They are looking for help to get by and raise their families well," she said.

"Access to abortion is a Band-Aid so legislators and other people can put their hands up and say, 'Well, we provided you an abortion. If you chose to have children that is on you.' That is not the society we want to live in."

Domingo queried, "If you're asking a woman to recognize the dignity of her unborn children, what are we doing to make her recognize her (own) dignity?"