Opinion
NCR Voices



A pro-life activist and a supporter of legal abortion square off with megaphones in front of the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington June 24, 2023, the first anniversary of the court's 2022 ruling in *Dobbs* v. *Jackson Women's Health Organization*. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)



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Last week, 30 Catholic members of Congress signed a "Renewed Statement of Principles" to reaffirm their support for abortion rights on the anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Dobbs* v. *Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision, which overturned *Roe* v. *Wade* and *Planned Parenthood* v. *Casey*, the two prior cases that established a constitutional right to an abortion and governed what limits could, and could not, be placed on abortion.

The statement was deeply confused about the principles at stake. It is the latest entry in the post-*Dobbs* derangement syndrome that has afflicted many people on the left.

Many of us on the Catholic left have defended voting for Catholic legislators who felt compelled to support abortion rights even though we, as Catholics, must oppose the procedure. The most critical argument has been that in a representative democracy, other important issues may matter more at any given moment and that politics is about compromise and negotiating over what is possible.

Taking a page from history, and an entirely different topic, who can stand in judgment over Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill for making an ally of an evil man like Joseph Stalin? The circumstances of the time demanded it. Politics is like that, and many Catholics, myself included, resented it when bishops left their lane and tried to tell us Catholic voters for whom we could vote.

This statement of principles, however, makes the same mistake as those pro-life bishops who previously expected no compromise on abortion from Democratic politicians: It leaves its politics lane and ventures into the bishops' lane. It claims that their support for abortion rights is rooted in their Catholic faith.

"Today, as Catholic Democrats serving in the House of Representatives, we are proud that we are part of the faithful pro-choice Catholic majority — 68 percent of whom supported the legal protections for abortion access enshrined in *Roe* and 63

percent of whom think abortion should be legal in all or most cases," the members of Congress state. "Our faith unfailingly promotes the common good, prioritizes the dignity of every human being, and highlights the need to provide a collective safety net to our most vulnerable."

"Our faith" includes — and has always included — the child in the womb within the category "every human being" and, therefore, as possessed of human dignity. As well, it is hard to imagine a human life that is more vulnerable than an unborn child in a political culture that frames what has long been considered a tragedy as a fundamental right.

"As Catholics, we believe all individuals are free to make their own personal decisions about their bodies, families, and futures," the statement reads, which begs the question: Whose body is the unborn child's? This is a more complicated question than either the pro-life or pro-choice extremists allow, as Boston College Professor M. Cathleen Kaveny has shown.

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But that's just the problem. In the immediate post-*Roe* era, Catholics in the public square wrestled with the complications. For example, you may agree or not with the stance adopted by New York Gov. Mario Cuomo in his famous speech "Religious Belief and Public Morality: A Catholic Governor's Perspective" delivered at the University of Notre Dame in 1984, but at least his speech did not read like a manifesto from Planned Parenthood.

In the post-*Dobbs* era, subtlety and complications are not permitted. The letter from the members of Congress really does read like something that could have been issued by Planned Parenthood.

This aversion to complication extends beyond the halls of Congress. Oddly, those most allergic to complications are those who invoke it repeatedly.

Earlier this year, the activist organization Faith in Public Life hosted a dialogue with four prominent Catholic women, one journalist and three theologians. All the theologians — Manhattan College's Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Catholic Theological Union's* Kimberly Lymore and University of San Diego's Emily Reimer-Barry — spoke about the complexity of issues surrounding reproductive health care. How strange,

then, that none of the theologians could come up with anything other than a libertarian public policy stance on abortion?

Apparently, the complexity posed by the possibility that another human life is present in the moral equation is not worthy of consideration in the post-*Dobbs* conversation.

For example, Imperatori-Lee said, "I think the law is too blunt an instrument to deal with the complexity that is pregnancy and childbirth, and the results of childbirth which for many women include long-term chronic problems."

Laws can be made more or less blunt. Discretion can be left to moral agents and health care providers in certain fraught circumstances.

Poverty is a pretty complex problem too, and programs like food stamps have not succeeded in guaranteeing everyone in our wealthy nation is well-fed. Do we scrap food stamps? No, we try to improve it.

On abortion, however, only a legal regime that allows abortion at any stage in pregnancy, for any reason, is considered "just."

To be sure, we need to listen to women. We need to attend to their experiences. In the wake of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, experience is rightly deemed a *locus theologicus*, but it is not the only such locus. An experience is not an argument, and the absence of argument in many abortion discussions, including the Faith in Public Life dialogue, is quite remarkable.

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I will stick with Pope Francis on this issue — as on most. In his recent discussion with young people on Hulu, when asked about abortion, the pope replied, "Is it valid to eliminate a human life to solve a problem? You'd go to a doctor. So, is it valid to pay a hitman to eliminate a human life to solve a problem? ... We should call a spade a spade. Staying by [the woman's] side is one thing, but justifying the act is something

else."

I do not like his reference to the doctor as a "hitman," but I agree entirely with his insistence that abortion is seen, in many cases, as a solution to a problem. When that solution involves taking a human life, of course there is a role for law and for robust moral opposition to that solution except in very particular and dire circumstances.

Unfortunately, in the United States today, the post-*Dobbs* political climate has pushed both blue and red states to adopt extreme positions compared to the pre-*Dobbs* legal landscape. The idea that it is time to find a workable compromise has not emerged and I am not sure when, or if, the desire for a compromise will develop.

Still, it is noteworthy that some Republicans have begun to embrace policies that will address the complexities of the issues, including helping families be able to afford child care, and there has been no equivalent movement among Democrats. And the Catholic left has not covered itself in glory this past year.

We need to find a way to deepen the discussion, but no one, including me, seems to know where to start.

**Editor's Note: This story has been updated to correct the name of this school.*