Opinion

NCR Voices




People carry a banner past the U.S. Supreme Court while participating in the 49th annual March for Life in Washington Jan. 21, 2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Jim Bourg)



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It didn't take long after former president Donald Trump sidestepped on his opposition to abortion for pro-life leaders to step up to the plate and remind him that the moral stakes of this issue are non-negotiable.

Maybe not so much. Frank Pavone, the defrocked head of Priests for Life, "thanked" Trump for his statement opposing a national ban on the procedure at a particular point in pregnancy. "As I said in my remarks recently at Mar-a-Lago, Donald J. Trump has been, and will be again, the most pro-life president our country has seen," Pavone said in a press release. "He has not wavered on any of the pro-life positions or executive actions he has taken (including depriving the abortion industry of federal funds), or judges he has appointed, and we will again see such progress in a second term."

Pavone needs to rename his organization: Ex-priests for Life in the Red States.

Kristan Hawkins of Students for Life called Trump's waffling "a step in the right direction." In a press release, she continued: "Unlike President Biden, President Trump begins his remarks on abortion celebrating 'the ultimate joy in life' — children and family. That kind of love and support for the bedrock of society, the family, will be a welcome change in the White House."

Does she give Trump credit for being on his third wife?

Donald Trump, flanked by US flags

Former President Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, gives a statement on abortion policy in this screengrab obtained from a video released April 8. (OSV News/Reuters/DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT 2024 handout)

In the climactic scene of the movie "A Man for All Seasons," Sir Thomas More learns that Richard Rich, who has just perjured himself, has been named attorney general for Wales. More delivers one of the most devastating rebukes: "For Wales? Why Richard, it profit a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world … but for Wales!"

To Pavone and Hawkins, I ask: "But for Trump?"

Not every pro-life organization or leader was so feckless. The Susan B. Anthony List issued a statement saying it was "deeply disappointed" with Trump's stance. And his own former vice president, Mike Pence, called it "a slap in the face."

Trump said he thought the issue should be left to the states. That was Monday, April 8. After the state supreme court in Arizona reinstated an 1864 law banning abortions except to save the life of the mother the next day, Trump shuffled yet again. "Yeah, they did," Trump said about the court's judges when asked if they went too far. "That'll be straightened out, and as you know it's all about states' rights." Will he straighten that out before or after he straightens out the war in Ukraine? Asked if he would sign a national abortion ban, he said, "No."

That phrase, "states' rights." Where have we heard that before?

Ross Douthat, at The New York Times had a fine piece that argued Trump's rise to political power is part of the reason for the diminished support for the pro-life cause:

> If you set out to champion the rights of the most vulnerable human beings while promising protection and support for women in their most vulnerable state, and your leader is a man famous for his playboy lifestyle who exudes brash sexism and contempt for weakness, people are going to have some legitimate questions about whether they can trust you to make good on your promises of love and care.

This is a related, but different, charge of hypocrisy from the more standard one, and the difference is significant. The consistent ethic of life challenges Catholics, and all people of goodwill, to grasp that championing the rights of all vulnerable persons strengthens the argument for championing the rights of the most vulnerable. Regrettably, many people do not see an issue that is inescapably and profoundly personal like abortion on the same plane as issues like immigration or the death penalty which do not necessarily affect them or those close to them personally. The hypocrisy that Douthat highlights touches on the personal and sexual.

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There is a deeper problem, however, that Douthat does not really address, and that is the reduction of the pro-life cause to a political and legal movement in the first place. The early Christians conquered the Roman empire by the power of their witness, not by the witness of their power. In the post-*Dobbs* era, the pro-life movement has conspicuously and rightly focused on the need to support pregnant women, especially women facing crisis pregnancies. The pro-life movement would have been far more persuasive, and successful, if that focus had come first, if we had focused on building a culture of life more than overturning Roe.

The conversion of hearts needed to precede the change in law. By aligning itself with Trump, the pro-life cause finds itself in a long line of people and causes damaged irreparably by hitching their bandwagon to the former president. He has brought nothing but grief to business associates, workers, former Cabinet secretaries, the conservative movement, the nation, and now, to the pro-life cause.