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Democratic Party abortion platform discussion excerpts

by NCR Staff



Douglas Kmiec, chair and professor of law at Pepperdine University:

I have been involved in this issue my entire professional career, as Ronald Reagan's constitutional lawyer and as head of the office of legal counsel for the Department of Justice. I had numerous occasions to write and to strengthen the briefing that was filed when we asked the Supreme Court of the United States to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. One of the things I think is most significant about this platform is that it recognizes that there is more than one way to discourage abortion. We have been at the business of trying to find the elusive fifth vote on the Supreme Court for 30 years. We haven't found it and even if we do find it, overturning *Roe* would not save a single life, but instead merely return the question to the state. While that would be important, it is not intended and never was intended to close the American mind or, for that matter, the Catholic mind to different or alternative ways to discourage abortion.

One of the most important things about what the Democratic platform does is that it incorporates some of these alternative ways, alternative ways that for far too long have been closed to the Catholic imagination,

if you will, because of the way in which the abortion discussion has been conducted. It has been conducted in a way that says unless you deal with Roe, you can't talk about anything else. Well, in fact, that's never been true. The church has always indicated that the social teaching of the church - providing for a family wage, providing for decent health care, providing for decent shelter, providing for the conditions that enhance the human person - are essential to making sure that no person, no woman, no expectant mother feels compelled or coerced to make the tragic choice of taking the life of her own child. So it is significant to the Democrats, because of, course it is a great expansion for them. It is however also significant for Catholics insofar as it reaffirms a much larger sweep of the alternative ways to address abortion.

It is, I also agree, significant for women because the Supreme Court of the United States has wrongfully said that their social and economic participation in the American economy depends upon their access to abortion, which really puts things backwards. It basically says that women must sacrifice their children to be full participants in the economy, when it's the economy that ought to restructure itself to accommodate the interests of family, which we all know is so vitally important to the sustenance of our culture. So this is a historic moment and a historic platform that does much for the Democrats, for Catholics and for women. And while it still falls short of the Catholic ideal, so does, of course, the Republican posture. And as Lisa Cahill said, we live in this world and we pursue the art of the possible and as we move to protect even a single life, we've done a good thing.



Dr. Lisa Cahill, J. Donald Monan, S.J., professor of theology, Boston

College:

It's really a privilege to be on this panel and to have the chance as both a Catholic and a feminist to talk about common ground on abortion rather than just conflict over abortion. And I just have three kind of simple related points, and the first is that health care education, income support, and adoption ? to Catholics these are pro-life issues and moral issues.

They're common good issues. So as a Catholic and a feminist, I'd say it's not only about women's choice, they're common good issues. It's not only about entitlement programs, but it's about the goal of enabling all women with their children to be full participants in our society, that women are full and equal and they can contribute, raise their kids and have healthy families if they have the support.

The second thing is that the U.S. bishops last fall published a statement called Faithful Citizenship, it's a voting guide, and they state specifically there that many of these issues that impact on abortion, such as hunger and poverty, lack of health care, racism and all kinds of other social conditions ? they name those things specifically ? that these are not optional for Catholic voters, they are part of the agenda of human life, and they must not be neglected. So there's a strong Catholic basis for affirming much of this platform.

Finally, even John Paul II in his encyclical, Gospel of Life, stated "that whatever the abortion law might be, there is still an obligation and a prerogative to work in all kinds of ways to protect the unborn and to protect women and families using the art of the possible. So I think the Democratic Platform statement, from a Catholic perspective, is an excellent example of the art of the possible, achieving common ground and also aiming to improve the common good.



The Rev. Jim Wallis, Founder and CEO of Sojourners:

I think the language of the platform on abortion is a real step forward. The platform committee really reached out to leaders of the evangelical and Catholic communities and elsewhere and I think it's some sorely needed common ground on abortion. The common ground that we need is to reduce the need for abortion, and people on both sides of the question could come together on that common ground. ...

And the platform also provides for those women who want to make a decision to take their child to term. It strongly supports that decision and it provides the necessary support — health care, income support, adoption services — so this enlarges the field of decisions that people can make. For those who don't feel comfortable in affirming the choice to terminate the pregnancy, they can make the decision to have the child and this platform supports them as well as the woman's right to choose. So it really broadens the sweep of decisions here. So this makes room for people who have moral convictions about abortion. ?

[I]t also links the issue of abortion to poverty, and that's very important to a lot of us. Low-income women have often needed much more support if they're going to have the option of taking their child to term. The data is clear: Many abortions are chosen because low income women don't feel they have choices.

There isn't coercion here, there's support for a woman to make a decision to bring her child to term. And that's important along with a woman's right to choose. So I think there's common ground here we've needed for a long time. And I think a lot of people are going to find their convictions represented here.



The Rev. Joel Hunter, senior pastor, Northland Church, Orlando, Fla., and author of A

New Kind of Conservative:

From my perspective as a conservative evangelical, Barack Obama's campaign and the Democratic Party have taken a historic and courageous step toward empowering women for an expanded range of choices and saving babies lives by supporting mothers whose will and conscience tells them to carry their babies

to term, they have broken through the narrow traditional barrier that focused only on a woman's right to choose and abortion. They now support in writing and in legislation a woman's right to choose life by offering her practical help in options ranging from prenatal care to healthy adoption.

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Pro-lifers of both parties can now support Sen. Obama on the basis that more lives will be saved than if they had just taken a moral stand hoping to overturn Roe v. Wade. Now cynical partisan profiteers will find fault with the tone of this plank, no doubt. But knowing the struggle that went into the insertion of the new language, I am very encouraged that Democrats have widened their public support of mothers who choose life. And that comes from a registered Republican.



Chris Korzen, executive director, Catholics United

We believe there are two primary reasons why Catholics should look favorably on this development. The first is that Americans are deeply divided over this issue. We know from a Pew religious landscape poll this year that 51 percent of Americans feel that abortion should be legal in most cases and 43 percent feel it should be illegal in most or all cases. But at the same time, Americans will unite behind common ground solutions that address the root causes of abortion. There was a Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good poll out of Pennsylvania this year that asked likely voters to choose [among multiple choices] the abortion reduction measures they would most likely support. Sixty-seven percent chose sex education ? 51 percent supported services that support at-risk mothers by providing quality pre-natal and post-natal care and child care and nutritional assistance, 50 percent supported increased awareness in support of adoption. Only 29 percent chose making abortion illegal.

So Americans are divided on this issue and will support common ground solutions aimed at the root causes.

The second is that we know that abortion reduction measures that are aimed at the root causes actually work. A Catholics United study from 2006 looked at data from Kansas. It found that in counties with low unemployment, higher access to health care and more Head Start centers there was a measurably lower incidence of abortion. And a forthcoming study by Catholics in Alliance for Common Good, which casts a much broader net across the country finds a similar connections between availability of support for families and male employment and low abortion rates.



The Rev. Tony Campolo, Eastern University and member of the Democratic Platform

Committee:

Those of us that have a pro-life commitment are pleased that some language has been put in that we encourage. It's less than we want but it's a great deal more than many people expected. Let me say that in the end, the interpretation of the platform is in the hands of the candidate, Barack Obama. He will have a chance to speak to this issue when he, along with John McCain, take to the platform at the Saddleback Church in California. He will be undoubtedly asked about his understanding of the platform position on

abortion. It is important for him to do on that occasion what he has done on other occasions. He has defined this as a moral issue, an issue of conscience. ?

This is not simply a pragmatic social issue of economic dimensions. It's a moral issue. And what we are waiting to hear from Brack Obama is that he, as he has said on other occasions, sees this as a moral issue, an issue of conscience.

Studies indicate that up to 70 percent of abortions are economically driven. Without proper hospital care, without raising the minimum wage, without proper day care, prenatal and postnatal care, without maternity leave, women who are poor feel driven to have abortions. We can reduce abortions dramatically, maybe between 50 to 70 percent if we address these concerns. And what we are really doing, all of us on this call, are calling upon the Republican brothers and sisters to join us and to participate in reducing abortions in America. We have done part of the job. They have to, in fact, say, ?We want the same kind of concerns addressed. We want the economic factors addressed.? They have been reluctant to do that in the past. I am hopeful and prayerful that they will do this in the future. So as a member of the platform committee, I feel the committee worked hard to give language that gave evangelicals and Roman Catholics the sense that they could participate in the Democratic Party without a compromise of their convictions.

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