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Cardinal O'Connor Pro-Life Award goes to Bush

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

The awarding of the Cardinal John J. O'Connor Pro-Life Award by Legatus, a group of Catholic business professionals, to former President George W. Bush, is a graphic display of the limits of language and the degree to which our religion has become politicized.

The award, according to a posting by the Catholic News Agency, is given "for his work in advancing he pro-life cause."

Unless the language is inconsequential, those opposing abortion have limited, at least in this application, the term "pro life" to that cause alone. It would be one thing if Bush were being awarded for his "anti-abortion efforts," for he probably did more practically -- in opposing embryonic stem cell research, barring federal funds from use for abortion related projects abroad and appointing two ultra-conservative, anti-abortion Supreme Court justices -- than any president in recent memory to advance federal opposition to abortion.

But he also engaged the country in two open-ended wars, one of them precipitated on false pretenses; he imprisoned people without charge, legal representation or hope of being released and without judicial processes in place; his administration approved of torture and rendition flights where suspects were basically kidnapped and returned secretly to third countries where they were tortured.

As governor, he presided over a state that led the nation in the number of executions since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. Its system of justice was repeatedly shown to be notoriously deficient in defending suspects.

George Bush was not a pro-life president.

Nor was Bill Clinton, and not only because of his abortion policy, but because as president he continued relentless bombing of Iraq and imposed the most severe sanctions in history on that country. The sanctions were blamed directly for the deaths of more than 500,000 children under the age of five over a period of less than a decade.

I don't recall ever seeing a release from Legatus, the Knights of Columbus, or any of the other "pro-life" groups who so readily pump out releases regarding abortion, on the slaughter of Iraqi innocents. Not during the Clinton era and not during the bombings and chaos of the Bush II era. The phrase "pro life" has been minced into an unrecognizable form.

Nor do I remember any releases from such groups when George Bush the elder commenced a war at a time when almost no one saw it as anything other than an attempt to retain access to resources, the oil of the Middle East. Few cried publicly for the dead children or the aborted fetuses of Iraqi mothers who had to live through those bombings.

The release says that Cardinal Francis George of Chicago and Archbishop Timothy Dolan will be among a "host" of speakers at the event. Perhaps the cardinal, so critical in other circumstances of the secularization of the culture and so wary, in other regards, of relativism, will address how this award mimics the most crassly secular elements of the culture by diminishing "the cause" of protecting life to a single, highly politicized issue. Maybe he'll also point out how the award relativizes the language into meaninglessness.

Or he might simply admit, as he's reluctant to do in other matters, that politics is an often dirty business without convenient, straight lines. He might admit that it is especially messy in a pluralistic democracy and that in such circumstances advancing a good often means holding one's nose and putting on blinders against the attendant evil.

Pro-life is a big phrase, and it has deep resonance in many Catholic circles. It is hardly fulfilled on either side of the political aisle. Its meaning should be protected, not cheapened.

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