

Wuerl: 'Conceptually possible' not to support Roe v Wade ban

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 11, 2008



In the following interview by NCR senior correspondent John Allen with

Washington Archbishop Donald Wuerl, the question at hand was whether a Catholic, in good conscience, could vote for a candidate not committed to overturning Roe v. Wade?

Allen spoke to Wuerl in Rome, where he is attending the Synod of Bishops on the Bible. The complete interview, with links to more synod coverage, is [Interview with Archbishop Donald Wuerl](#) [1].

NCR: Speaking of engaging the issues of the day, as you and I speak we're 25 days away from election day in the United States. What should pastors across the country be saying in the pulpits?

Archbishop Wuerl: I think one of the things that all of us need to recognize is that in a democracy, in the United States, every single person bears responsibility for what happens in the country. We may be multiple levels removed from final decisions, but every one of us bears a responsibility. When you vote, you vote as conscientiously as you can, and then you can say before God, "I did my best to see that this country is moving in a direction that's in conformity with your gospel." I think the big challenge is to convince all of our faithful people that each one of us has a responsibility.

Lots of pastors don't want to touch politics in the pulpit because it's so divisive. You live in Washington, D.C. so I imagine it's tough for you to steer clear of politics. What's the trick to doing it right?

One of the things we did as a conference of bishops is to produce the "Faithful Citizenship" document on forming conscience. I think that's an excellent document. What it says is that the role of the bishop is to teach. We present what the gospel says, what it means in terms of today, but the translation of that teaching into action belongs to the lay person. It belongs to people with responsibility for the "transformation of the temporal order," as the council put it. That's their responsibility. It's the task of the faithful. I think we've done a good job in "Faithful Citizenship" of saying, "These are the things you need to be aware of," but the transformation of this culture is not going to depend on us.

So the top note is taking seriously the lay role for the transformation of culture?

Yes, while listening to what the church has said on all of these issues, multiple issues. At the head of that list of

priorities, as 'Faithful Citizenship' says, are the life issues. I believe that's what we're going to be judged by historically, down the road. I think one hundred years from now, people are going to look back and wonder how it was possible that we could have had a culture that builds into it the wholesale destruction of unborn life.

On the life issues, especially abortion, one feature of the '08 election is the emergence of high-profile Catholics making the case that it's possible to be pro-life without seeking to overturn Roe v. Wade. Does that position make sense to you?

What the church is saying is that you must defend human life, that you cannot destroy innocent human life. That's what the church is saying, and it goes back to the very beginning of the church's proclamation. How you best achieve that is a political decision.

To be coherent with the faith, a Catholic does not necessarily have to support the reversal of Roe v. Wade?

I think that's a decision that you have to weigh in light of what are the other practical alternatives. Today, what are those practical alternatives? That's what has not been presented.

Does overturning a specific piece of legislation, or, in this case, a court decision, fall into the category of prudential judgment?

Except that here, this prudential judgment is up against something that is profoundly intrinsically evil, so you begin to cross the line.

Some Catholics believe that abortion is profoundly intrinsically evil and must be combated, without believing that criminalization is the best way to accomplish it. Is that at least conceptually possible?

Yes, it's conceptually possible. But when you get into the realm of politics, the realm of translating the need to preserve life into the circumstances of our day, what is conceptually possible and what is pressingly obligatory now begin to become two different things. That's why there is so much confusion. I don't think you can make things black and white, I don't think you can separate or rule out the grays.

Part of what makes this difficult to talk about is that many Catholics saying it's possible to be pro-life without supporting a legal ban on abortion are doing so to support Obama, so immediately the debate focuses on him. It's hard to separate the larger issues from people's reactions, either positively or negatively, to this one candidate.

That's true, but I also think that in the long run, it doesn't necessarily make as much sense to say, 'Let's not work for overturning Roe v. Wade, because there may be some other alternative.' If you put it into the bigger picture, I think one hundred years from now people are going to say, 'How could they have allowed that to happen?' It's similar to someone saying a hundred years ago, 'We shouldn't work to overturn slavery, because there may be other ways to resolve these tensions between the states.' At a certain point, you have to come to the issue itself.

To put the question in its sharpest form, is overturning Roe v. Wade an article of the Catholic faith?

No, but it is one of the most clearly aligned practical ways to stop what's happening.

Seeking a legal ban on abortion is, however, a political strategy, not a point of doctrine?

Here, a lot of that meshes. It is the firm teaching of the church that you cannot take that life, you simply cannot do that. It's an innocent life, and when you do that, you cannot claim to be innocent and participate in it.

So if you want to make the argument that a legal ban is not the right way to go, you better have an awfully persuasive alternative?

You would have to have some way to appeal to the political process to bring an end to abortion. As you know, Bob Casey Sr. has made the case that the American people were grappling in conscience with this issue [before the Roe v. Wade decision]. The prohibition of abortion, particularly after the first trimester ? although people were not put in jail ? was a moral consensus in this country. The Supreme Court simply wiped that away. It wiped away the political consensus of the American people, in favor of something now we're trying to get back to. Maybe that politician you're speaking about, who's going to come up with a solution to this, would say, ?We did have a step in the right direction when we had a consensus that at least abortion past a certain period of time couldn't happen.? That's not where you want to be, but it's where we were, and it's better than where we are now.

It was a judicial fiat that brought us to where we are, and that's why it just makes such good sense politically, and conscientiously, to say, ?Get rid of that.? That's what caused the problem, Roe v. Wade. Get rid of that, and you now have a playing field upon which the arguments can be heard. My frustration is that the arguments for and against abortion really aren't being heard, in terms of the reality what actually takes place in an abortion.

To reiterate, is it possible to be pro-life without seeking a legal ban on abortion?

The question is, can you translate your faith conviction that taking innocent, unborn life is always evil into practice in any other way?

As you know, some Catholics and others argue that a legal ban would not reduce the abortion rate, but simply make abortions more dangerous. Instead, they advocate steps such as better pre-natal care, more funding for adoption services, reducing the poverty rate among women ? which, they contend, would do more to address the circumstances that often lead women to consider abortion in the first place.

Even if Roe v. Wade were overturned and abortion were prohibited, we're still a step away from putting people in prison. We simply stop the practice in hospitals, in medical centers, wherever the practice is taking place, and you revoke the licenses of people who do it. So, it seems to me there's a way you can right what is wrong without putting people into prison.

You're going to find a range of voices on this question. Of course, this brings us back to forming conscience. It's out of one's conscience, weighing all these issues, that one has to vote. Politically right now, existentially, if Roe v. Wade is not overturned, is there any other possible strategy that's going to work? That's the question with which we've got to grapple.

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