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The Problem with NRLC

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, as part of the Q & A segment on this blog, I published an election analysis by Douglas Johnson, the legislative director of the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC). I have read and re-read his submission and hope you did too. I should add that in the emails back and forth between Mr. Johnson and myself, I have been delighted to find him possessed of a robust sense of humor and a keen mind and I look forward to the day when we might share a coffee or a drink in person.

I do not intend here to highlight why I think his analysis of the election results is wrong, but one example will suffice. Those pro-life Democrats who voted for the health care legislation went down to defeat because they were from swing districts, with substantial conservative voters, whose reasons for voting against the Democrats this year were many and varied. I do not believe that a vote for a health care bill with abortion-restrictions strong enough to satisfy the NRLC would have made a difference. Supporting the President on health care reform was reason enough to earn these members the ire of a decidedly anti-Democrat electorate.

But, Johnson's commentary illustrates to my mind what is wrong with the pro-life movement today. The NRLC is a single issue group. So are environmental groups. So are some unions. So are tax-cutting groups. That is how it works in Washington. You care about an issue and you focus on it like a laser, you rate congressmen based on how they vote on your issues. You fundraise based on your one issue. You educate the voters on your one issue.

There is nothing, per se, wrong with this. I do think that as Catholics we should be profoundly concerned about abortion and we should try to change the political landscape to make it more receptive to that concern. Nor do I object to the prioritization given to abortion over other life-issues, although I do entertain reservations about doing so. (I also entertain reservations about not doing so.) Abortion is not in

itself a foundational concern: Respect for human dignity is the foundational concern. But, abortion is the greatest, most direct, and most obvious threat to that dignity. That does not mean there are not other threats, of course. Poverty is an offense against human dignity as well. The death penalty is an offense against human dignity. War is an offense against human dignity. Still, if you believe abortion is more of an assault on human dignity than these other concerns, I can not disagree. I do wonder, however, if the failure to acknowledge, consistently, that abortion is part of a larger problem in the culture helps or hinders the effort to make ours a culture of life.

The main problem with the NRLC approach, as clearly evidenced in Johnson's comments, is that when you get involved in politics, it is easy to fall into the zero-sum calculations that characterize partisan political life. Consider Johnson's comments on Kristen Day, the head of Democrats for Life. Johnson and Day agree on about 98 percent of the life issues that motivate them both. But, Johnson is almost hateful in his harsh comments about Ms. Day. You can attribute this to the narcissism of small differences, but I think it is more likely that the corrosive animosity of partisanship has prevented these two from working together. Politics is not just about winning. Indeed, if the politics of abortion since the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision demonstrates anything, it is that politics must be about persuasion or nothing will change. Democrats win, Republicans win, and there is very little change. I can not point to a single line in Johnson's commentary that appears designed to persuade anyone that does not already agree with him. That is a problem.

Johnson's commentary also shows another, related, problem with single issue groups. They develop strange, symbiotic relationships with their opponents. You can take his commentary, reverse the politics, and it would mirror exactly the kind of commentary put out by the National Abortion Rights League after they won an election. Both groups feed off of each other. Remember the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA)? This began as a fundraising device of pro-choice groups in the 1980s but last year became a fundraising device for pro-life groups. There was never a chance then or now that the bill would be passed, but it served the same function for both groups at different times, raising money, alarming the base, engaging in the kind of fruitless back-and-forth that has done nothing for the unborn.

As I say, the NRLC is entirely within its rights to pursue its agenda and to follow the standard DC practices for advancing that agenda. But, here is where I part company. Our Catholic concern for the dignity of the human person is not just a single issue. It is not like other issues. It is a transcendent issue. When it gets drawn into the muck and the mud of DC politics, it becomes easy to forget that. Pro-life advocates must always ask themselves: Are these words of mine hateful? Am I being generous in my estimation of the motives of others? Am I being loving? Perhaps for other causes and other issues, such questions are strange or irrelevant or bizarre. But, on this issue, so immune to political resolution, it is important to make sure that we accord to those with whom we disagree all the respect and love and consideration we can muster, because their human dignity, too, demands nothing less.

Changing a nation's politics is tough business. Changing a nation's culture is even more difficult. This week, my pro-life heart was wounded twice, by the decision in Connecticut to impose the death penalty on a man who committed a truly horrific crime but who is still a man, and by the news that a late-term abortion doctor will be opening a clinic in the D.C. area. Both events make my heart heavy. I confess that I do not know how to change our politics or our culture to see how these two acts are affronts to everything that I believe is beautiful and holy and humane about our civilization. Maybe the NRLC's methods will yield better results than I anticipate but I do not see how. I am betting that NARAL raised more money after the election results became known than NRLC did. That is how politics works: There is always a counter-push.

How do we change our politics and our culture? Where do we look for an example of how to proceed,

how to proclaim the Gospel of Life in a culture that diminishes human dignity in so many ways? Will harsh, political condemnations really change America into a culture that celebrates life? I doubt it. But I do not doubt that St. Francis of Assisi changed his culture when he first reached out and kissed a leper.

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