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'Dear Bishop: Please become a credible pro-life advocate'

by Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea

*Editor's Note: Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, a clinical psychologist, was the only mental health professional to address the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at their seminal 2002 Dallas meeting on the sexual abuse crisis, and she was one of the clinicians speaking about sexual abuse to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men that year. Frawley-O'Dea is co-author of *Treating the Adult Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, and co-editor of *Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims*.*

She recently wrote the following open letter to her bishop.

Most Reverend Peter J. Jugis, JCD
Office of the Bishop
Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte
1123 South Church Street
Charlotte, North Carolina 28203

Dear Bishop Jugis:

On Sunday, September 21, I took my ten-year-old daughter and my seven-year-old daughter to the Obama Rally in downtown Charlotte. As we waited for over an hour to enter the rally area, we were confronted with anti-choice protesters, many of them self-identified as Catholics, occupying two corners of Elizabeth Street. The very large posters they held depicted what they claimed to be aborted babies. If these photos are real, they show dilation and extraction abortions. The implication, however, was that all abortions resemble the grotesque posters held by the protesters. There was no way to shield the many

children waiting in line from viewing these posters. Other signs held by the protesters announced that Obama supported the murder of children and that abortion kills "children." (Interestingly, almost all the protesters were men. Sigh.)

My youngest child was cranky and unwilling to sleep Sunday night. When my husband and I took her into our room, she screamed inconsolably for a long time. I asked her if she were frightened and she nodded her assent. I asked her if she were upset by something on TV; she shook her head, "no." I asked her if something at the rally frightened her and she nodded in agreement. I asked her if she felt too small in the crowd, if she felt crowded in, if she was bothered by all the noise -- she shook her head in the negative. Finally, I asked if the baby posters scared her. She began to cry, nodding yes, and curled into fetal position.

I explained to my little Sally that people who are trying to offer a simple solution to a complex problem sometimes try to scare people into believing what these people want them to believe. I told her the posters were meant to frighten and shock and I explained that good, decent people do not try to win arguments by scaring others, especially little children. I assured her that Barack Obama has two little girls whom he loves dearly and I told my sweet and innocent daughter that Senator Obama would never try to hurt her or any other little children. Having screamed for over an hour, she was asleep in thirty seconds.

Let us please review some facts:

89% of all American abortions occur during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy when no life could possibly be sustained outside the womb; 0.2 percent take place 21 or more weeks into a pregnancy, thus representing dilation and extraction abortions. The most common reasons for abortions after 20 weeks are 1. the fetus is already dead in the womb; 2. the fetus has developed anencephaly and will die within five days of birth, and 3. the fetus has severe hydrocephalus, with a skull up to 250% its normal size and therefore dangerous for the mother to continue to carry. Why then are anti-choice posters only demonstrative of the least common, most gruesome abortion procedure?

Fifty percent of abortions are performed on women under 25, 59% of women seeking abortions are women of color, and many of them are living below the poverty line. (Twenty-seven percent of women receiving abortions in this country identify themselves as Catholic.) Seventy-five percent of women having abortions cite their concern for others who already depend on them, 75% say they cannot afford a (or another) child - a fact supported by the demographics of abortion, and one half cannot face single parenthood or are in a problematic

relationship.

As a clinician who has worked for almost 30 years with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, I have personal experience with over 40 women who have had an abortion. Many of these pregnancies derived from self-destructive behaviors associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder associated with my patients' earlier abuse. Most of these women later married and had children to whom they were wonderful mothers. They all had first trimester abortions. Two examples:

Advertisement

Clara (pseudonym) was sexually abused by two brothers. Her mother, misdiagnosed as schizophrenic, spent most of Clara's childhood lying on the couch smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. Clara became the female head of the household at age nine. In her late teens, Clara and her boyfriend conceived a child. They married and she gave birth to a daughter. Shortly thereafter, her husband became a cocaine addict and began to beat Clara. She, in turn, was a resentful and emotionally neglectful mother. She eventually got up the courage to leave her husband; Clara and her daughter moved in with her parents. One night when her folks were out of town, Clara's husband broke into the house. He was high on coke, Clara was frightened for herself and their daughter so she submitted to his sexual overtures in order to placate him. Another child was conceived. Overwhelmed and ashamed, Clara aborted the fetus at 6 weeks. Fast forward several years. Clara, having worked well in her therapy, finished her BA, obtained a Master's Degree in Special Education, and became a loving mother to her first child. She became a highly respected special ed teacher, married a school psychologist, and gave birth to a beautiful daughter to whom she is a loving and effective mom.

Cindy (pseudonym) was brutally sexually and physically abused by her father from ages 5-13. When she began treatment, she was underemployed, chronically suicidal, involved in an affair with a married man the same age as her father, and regularly sliced her arms and thighs with shards of broken glass. She made two serious suicide attempts early on in therapy. Early in her treatment, she conceived a child with her lover who made clear to her that he would not be available to her or the child. Cindy aborted at 7 weeks. Fast forward about 15 years. Cindy has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, is married, and has two children, one a special needs kid with whom she is infinitely patient and loving.

Neither of these women took their abortions lightly and both would make the same decision again. Both were Catholic. I could tell many similar stories. Abortion stories are never as straightforward as antichoice

protesters would like the public to believe and, often, the aborting mother has been traumatized in various ways or is so poor that she is living with chronic and varied trauma. At this point, the Catholic Church should be more than a little sensitive to the damage created by early trauma, especially sexual abuse, having been instrumental in what Cardinal Keeler called the "soul-murder" of tens of thousands of young people.

Each day of every year, almost three children die in America from child abuse and neglect. In 2006, over 44% of these children were under one year old; 78% were under 4 years old. Most abusive or neglectful parents are under 25, depressed, living below the poverty line, and lacking a high school diploma. Where are the Catholics carrying posters showing toddlers covered with burns, infants with their heads bashed in on radiators, pre-schoolers dead amidst their own excrement with undernourished bodies? Where is the demand for better intervention with at-risk families?

John McCain has supported a war that is generally recognized as illegitimate and waged by a President who lied to get it going. McCain is open to new wars. Over four thousand of our children have died in this war, to say nothing of tens of thousands of our Iraqi brothers and sisters. The suicide rate among soldiers in Iraq is the highest of any war in our history. Returning veterans are plagued with crushing injuries, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and a propensity for domestic violence. Where are the Catholic protesters holding posters of our soldiers twisted, heads split open, legs and genitals blown off by car bombs, torsos covered in blood? Where are the signs that Bush and McCain are killers of the young? Where are the signs exhorting McCain to support rather than vote against a new GI bill? Why is abortion the only child-care problem the Catholic Church finds worthy of posters and protests? Why can you not take a more comprehensive protective stance towards children? Why do you seem to care more for the unborn than for the born?

Barack Obama has suggested that people from every point on the abortion debate spectrum meet on common ground to reduce the number of abortions in this country. Expanded availability of contraceptives, sensible sex education, expanded resources for women who wish to carry to term and either keep their babies or place them up for adoption, real intervention in poverty, especially for women -- all are ways to reduce the incidence of abortion. (By the way, sociologist and sexual abuse expert researcher David Finkelhor of the University of New Hampshire, shows that there has been in decline in child abuse since 1994, in part because there are fewer unwanted pregnancies due to increased use of contraceptives and access to abortions. Wanted children are abused after birth much less frequently than unwanted children.)

I am not a supporter of all abortions. I would like to see fully funded

first trimester abortions available to anyone. Second trimester abortions, in my opinion, should be available only to women who were raped or incested, whose lives are endangered, or who are carrying a damaged child that they simply do not have the emotional, financial, or spiritual resources to care for. Third trimester abortions should be allowed only if the mother's life is in clear and urgent danger. At the same time, I think hysterical and misleading protests that border on the obscene are sinful and divergent from the honesty, integrity, and ultimate compassion of Jesus of Nazareth.

Surely, the Church could redirect their ostensibly pro-life advocates to use more representative advertising, to refrain from *ad hominem* and distorted attacks on politicians, and to expand their efforts in directions that support the life of ALL of God's little ones. The Catholic Church would have a heck of a lot more credibility if it seemed as concerned with protecting the born as it does with shaming women who choose to end pregnancies they are not equipped to confront. In the meantime, you can add my daughter to the list of children traumatized by activities sanctioned by the Catholic hierarchy.

Sincerely yours,

Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea

Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, Ph.D.

cc: all diocesan clergy

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