

Bishops' narrow anti-abortion effort hurts pro-life cause

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Another presidential election cycle is nearly ended, and once again the Catholic bishops in the United States have sadly distinguished themselves for the narrowness and, in too many cases, barely concealed partisanship, of their political views.

Cycle after cycle they have promulgated the same message: Abortion trumps all other issues and the only credible approach to fighting abortion is voting for candidates who express a wish to overthrow *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion.

We have persistently criticized the American bishops on this page for such a limited political strategy. For more than a quarter of a century they have generally used whatever political capital they might have in attempts to deliver the Catholic vote to whomever is making the most agreeable promises that year.

Year after year, however, the bishops get little in return for their antiabortion political endorsements, while often aiding in the election of politicians who have little regard for the rest of the church's social agenda.

The abortion rate has been going down steadily in America, from a high of 29.3 abortions per 1,000 women ages 15-44 in 1981 to 19.4 abortions for the same demographic through 2005, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

No one has the definitive answer on why the rate is decreasing. Depending on political persuasion and which side of the debate one falls on, the possible reasons range from more emphasis on abstinence programs to better education and more funding for prevention of pregnancy. Undoubtedly, one unquantifiable element is continuing education about the reality of abortion and the sacredness of life that has persuaded some to bring pregnancies to term.

No one, however, is suggesting that politicians promising to overturn *Roe* had any influence on a woman's choosing to bring a child to term.

The point is significant, especially this year when highly credible voices in the Catholic community have been successful in reframing a Catholic approach to the abortion issue. Legal scholars Douglas Kmiec and Nicholas

Cafardi, who have unimpeachable antiabortion credentials, among others have advanced compelling arguments regarding the futility of using a legal ban as a political litmus test.

Kmiec, who worked on briefs attempting to overturn *Roe*, said earlier this year when explaining his support for Democratic candidate Sen. Barack Obama: "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 states. 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."

Republican candidate Sen. John McCain has found favor among many bishops by agreeing with their conviction that *Roe* should be overturned. If that conviction is the sole guiding criterion, the choice becomes easy.

This year, however, Democrats have added a plank to their platform promising to enact programs aimed at reducing abortions by attacking some of the root causes, especially among the poor and minorities. It is distressing to witness so many members of the hierarchy eagerly dismissing the possibility of an alternative approach.

Indeed, the Guttmacher Institute reports that although the overall abortion rate is declining, "research has found that unintended pregnancy and abortion rates are "increasing among poor and low-income women." The report advises that, "Policymakers at the state and federal levels should be asking themselves what can be done to help poor women and women of color prevent unintended pregnancies and achieve better health outcomes."

Instead of a thoughtful discussion of the political options, the Catholic community has been overwhelmed by shouting from the most extreme ideologues and partisans. Among the bishops it is easy to spot "and hear" the most imprudent. There are exceptions, of course.

It is the extremes, however, that drive the news and the general impressions of the Catholic community. No one among the bishops has had the courage to stand up to such misuse of office and distortion of the documents that the bishops themselves have promulgated over several decades.

Bishops who hold that a legal ban is the only approach to the abortion issue, as one observer put it, damage the church and the pro-life cause.

Certainly the conduct of many of the bishops this election cycle has diminished the significance of abortion and undermined the importance of the rest of the Catholic social agenda by turning the abortion issue into a partisan rallying cry. Their conduct further erodes the legitimate authority of an already beleaguered episcopal conference.

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