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The trouble with being more than just pro-life

by Patrick O'Neill

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A balloon is seen in front of the U.S. Capitol during the annual March for Life on Jan. 23. (CNS photo/Gregory L. Tracy, the Pilot)

Commentary

GARNER, N.C. -- In the predawn hours of Jan. 23, my wife, Mary Rider, and I roused our four youngest children out of bed to meet a bus that would take us to Washington, D.C., for the March of Life, the annual event that calls for an end to abortion. Two of our other daughters made the same trip with their Catholic high school in Raleigh, Cardinal Gibbons High School.

The trip marked our third family trip to the nation's capital in less than a month. During a Holy Innocents retreat in the days after Christmas, two of my daughters, Veronica, 15, and Annie, 11, joined a die-in in front of the White House to protest U.S. drone attacks on civilians. After a cardboard drone facsimile touched them on the head, my daughters fell to the ground on Pennsylvania Avenue to play dead with others.

On Jan. 11, following another trip (this time on a biodiesel bus with a composting toilet), my family marched from the White House to the U.S. Supreme Court to protest the 10th anniversary of the opening of the prison on Guantanamo Bay, where scores of detainees have been tortured, held indefinitely and denied due process.

It was a busy few weeks of protesting for the things we believe in. We bring our children to protests because we are obligated as Catholics to raise our little ones with an understanding of justice and to instill

in them a sense of personal responsibility to be part of the effort to create a more peaceful and just world. The rub for us comes from the fact that we embrace a consistent ethic of life, a belief in the sanctity of life from the womb to the tomb. Like the national group Consistent Life, we stand opposed to abortion, war, capital punishment, euthanasia, poverty and racism.

From the perspective of many of our anti-abortion friends, we are flawed in our views because we muddy the waters with so many issues, detracting from the single-issue political effort to overturn Roe vs. Wade. Among our progressive friends, there's a lot of head-shaking about how such nice people could be so misguided in wanting to deny women the right to choose what to do with their own bodies. It's not a fun place to be because folks on both sides of the aisle give us grief, and ironically, neither side gives much credence to the deeply rooted sincerity of our "seamless garment" position.

At a special March for Life Mass in the basilica, Diocese of Raleigh Bishop Michael Burbidge said he hopes abortion "will be inaccessible, illegal and impossible." While I want to see abortions decline, I do not share my bishop's view regarding the possible criminalization of abortion. If abortion were outlawed, what would happen in the case of a woman who became pregnant as a result of rape or incest? My pro-life views are strong, but in those cases, I support a women's right to choose. I can't tell an abused or raped woman to follow my moral dictates. She can take the matter up with God.

True change on any moral issue must come from the heart before it can ever be enforced by the legislatures and the courts. Outlawing abortion would result in the same madness that came to our nation in the wake of Prohibition. Access to abortion would still be available, but less safe, and a criminal ban on abortion would open up a countless questions about enforcement: How would such a law be prosecuted? Would we jail women who seek abortion? Jail those who provide abortions? Would a woman seeking information on abortion be subject to conspiracy charges? What would be a reasonable criminal penalty? These are just a few of the knotty questions that would have no simple answers. Reducing abortion should start by enacting programs that provide support for mothers overwhelmed in problem pregnancies. To be pro-life means to support mothers and children throughout the life process.

Recently, I was talking to a Catholic anti-abortion mother whose kids attend school with my children about our trip to the March for Life. Immediately, she started to harangue me because I don't vote pro-life (i.e. Republican). An Obama-hater, she can't imagine how I could have voted for Obama in 2008. To her, I am a phony pro-lifer. I don't abide by her single-issue argument that abortion is the "only" pro-life issue. (In fact, I don't recognize anti-abortion advocates as "pro-life" if they support all sorts of postpartum killing.)

In this moment in history, modern warfare and perhaps global warming represent threats to creation so grave that we might end the human experiment on earth. All of God's creation is imperiled by the madness of human excess as we invent and use more and more diabolical weapons. Sadly, many -- if not most -- of my anti-abortion friends don't believe global warming threatens the planet and most stand in support of U.S. militarism. Killing is the problem, and abortion is only one component of the problem.

In addition, when Obama was elected, I took some of my kids to his inauguration. It was a beautiful day to ride the Metro subway and stand in the freezing cold with thousands of jubilant African-Americans, many of them the descendants of slaves, who came to celebrate an unimaginable moment in history -- the election of a black president. I was proud to share in that jubilation with my African-American sisters and brothers, even if Obama's policies disappointment me in so many ways.

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Things are also bad when I speak about my abortion views among my progressive friends. At a recent meeting of the Garner Peace Committee, a group I co-founded, I gave a plug to Consistent Life's upcoming March national conference. Later, I received a phone call from a peace committee member telling me I was out of line to mention the conference at the meeting and that I should have had a disclaimer to let folks know my comments did not reflect the views of the Garner Peace Committee. (It was only an announcement, so I saw no need to issue a disclaimer, and besides, everyone at the meeting agrees with almost everything the conference will address: opposition to war, capital punishment, poverty and racism as well as abortion and euthanasia.) In addition, this friend and I frequently attend events with people who disagree with us on all sorts of issues, but we still join them in marches.

"Now I know the difference between a fetus and a baby," he scolded me. Maybe not.

The fact that abortion is one of the most contentious moral issues of our time proves it is far more complicated than either side admits. Despite the view of many that an anti-abortion position is de facto anti-woman, the truth is scores of women oppose abortion, march against it and do not see the right to end the life of the child growing inside their wombs as a right they want to embrace. The hardcore pro-choice side fails to acknowledge this obvious truth and instead portrays all abortion opponents as anti-women.

Advances in medical science are also making it harder for the pro-choice folks to deny the reality that abortion stops a beating heart. Major medical centers now offer neonatal care that can save the lives of tiny second-trimester "wanted" babies, while those same hospitals engage in the gruesome partial-birth practice of dismembering third-trimester "unwanted" babies that could survive outside the womb if they had simply been wanted. This could explain why many people asked about their view on abortion quickly say they are personally opposed to abortion, but reserve the right of others to access them. Abortion just makes most people a bit uneasy. As the father of a wonderful, cheerful and loving 6-year-old with Down syndrome, I was shocked to discover that as many as 90 percent of babies with Down syndrome are aborted in the United States because the mother received a positive prenatal diagnosis for Down syndrome. Abortion in this case is a form of selection that rejects human beings that are "imperfect."

And anti-abortion forces are usually made up of conservative Republicans who also oppose the very social programs that would make it easier for women in problem pregnancies to choose life. They march against abortion but see little reason to work for a better quality of life for mothers with children born into poverty and who face other indignities. This is the worst kind of hypocrisy; to wag an accusatory finger at a pregnant woman and fail to assist her in a time of need.

Rather than call each other names or claim to be unequivocally right, I think we'd be better off if we took another look at the entire spectrum of pro-life issues. All great movements for social change have come about through the willingness of people to be open-minded and willing to see the viewpoint of those who hold different opinions. If you do, you just might find yourself heading to Washington D.C. with a bus full of new friends.

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