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Why the hot-button issue of abortion isn't the only issue

by Gratia L'Esperance

Commentary

Stances on abortion are often more about power struggles and less about concern for the babies or the mothers. It is tempting for Roman Catholic leaders to say, "Support Republicans because they say they are pro-life; do not support Democrats because they are pro-choice."

Such a simplistic litmus test is not what our Catholic social teaching is about. Giving the lie to the rhetoric of both parties, neither has actually achieved very much in reducing abortions. The numbers peaked in the U.S. during the Reagan and first Bush administrations, then declined somewhat during both the Clinton and George W. Bush years, according to statistics from the Guttmacher Institute and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In a nation so divided on this issue, no either/or solution seems wise, practical or politically possible. Even if the Supreme Court's *Roe vs. Wade* decision were overturned, this would simply send the policy choices to the 50 state legislatures.

I am tired of hearing candidates and elected officials use the issue of abortion for political gain. I am sick of hearing some bishops threaten excommunication for the sin of abortion and ignore heinous crimes against those that are already born. I am alarmed at hearing people shout from either end of the spectrum, "You don't care about the babies!" "You don't care about the women!" I care about the common good of all and the practical means to promote it.

I urge people to consider the summary of the "Platform for the Common Good" developed at the Common Good convention in July 2008. It helps us look at all the important issues facing us.

Here is a perspective that all sides could collaborate on: What social policies would effectively reduce the demand for abortions?

One way to achieve this is to build up our meager support for women before and after they have their babies. A sister who has 37 years of experience as a nurse stated that not one of the many women she has counseled would have chosen an abortion if there were another realistic choice.

Tragically, it is possible to abort people's lives at any stage by our individual choices and our public policies:

- The nation's abortion rate is well over the 2,261 per day reported for 2008 by the Centers for Disease Control (California, Maryland and New Hampshire did not provide reports); Catholic women account for 31.3 percent. Worldwide, the number is estimated at about 115,000.
- 30,000 children die every day worldwide from preventable causes.
- Health care and support are inadequate for many pregnant and parenting women, putting them and their children at risk.
- The delusion continues that war is an effective means of settling conflict. Wars have aborted lives throughout human history and have intensified in the last century; they continue in Iraq and Afghanistan and in genocidal conflicts on several continents. The rape of women is deliberately used as a weapon of war to destroy their societies and heap humiliation on their family members and communities.
- The death penalty carries serious flaws, especially the risk of executing the innocent.
- Poverty is an overwhelming burden in every land, despite a variety of efforts and the emphasis that many faith traditions place on concern for those who are poor. Chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel shows Jesus blessing those who respond with practical concern and condemning those who are indifferent.
- Huge debts burden poor nations, and now our own local, state and federal governments are unable to serve people's legitimate needs. For example, the fact that the welfare grant in New York state has not been raised since 1991 has steadily increased our poverty rates.
- The meltdown of our economic systems, the result of greed for profits, has hurt most those who are already poor and has added to the numbers of homeless persons with numerous foreclosures.
- The unsustainable rate of consumption by the affluent puts other people and our whole planet at risk.
- The global lack of basic health care for all, including about 50 million Americans without insurance coverage, forces people to forego medical treatment and raises death rates and health costs.
- Our immigration policies have forced desperate people into crossing through desert areas where many have died. Raids by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement have disrupted families, separated children from their parents and terrified legal immigrants. Our immigration system is broken and we fail to acknowledge the desperation of migrants who seek survival.

All these and other deadly social realities have been allowed or even promoted by elected officials of both parties.

[Gratia L'Esperance is a Sister of Mercy. She serves on her congregation's Justice Team as a member of The Interfaith Alliance of Rochester, N.Y. and volunteers at the Mercy Community Services health outreach center. She helped organize a local version of the Nuns on the Bus tour Oct. 16.]

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