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Pro-Life: Culture War or Not?

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I called attention to an article at the Catholic News Agency which discussed both your truly and Melinda Henneberger, saying that we were "reluctant combatants" in the culture war and that we were engaged in "soul searching" on the issue of abortion. Both of these claims were wrong, and wrong at several levels.

First, I do not think any fair reader of this blog, or of Henneberger's columns, would conclude that either of us is reluctant to address the issue of abortion. I write about it frequently, examining the politics of the issue and expressing my horror at the practice. Henneberger has written about the Gosnell case extensively, addressed the issue of abortion in multiple columns, and described last year's Democratic National Convention as "Abortion-palooza." Wherein does anyone discern "reluctance"?

Second, it is telling that the writer, Mary Hasson, thinks that if one is opposed to abortion then, de facto, you are a combatant in a "culture war." This is true, profoundly true, but not in the manner intended. As Hasson's article makes clear, her understanding of this culture war is primarily a political battle. She calls out those Catholic Democrats who supported President Obama's election and/or re-election, especially those who argued that the term "pro-life" must include a wider array of issues than merely a politician's stand on abortion. Hasson thinks this was naïve at best.

Hasson discounts Obama's rhetoric about finding common ground to lower the abortion rate, which was on frequent display in 2008, and again at his commencement address at Notre Dame. Instead of taking up the President's offer to seek common ground, many bishops talked about the President like he was a dog at the time of that Notre Dame speech, so perhaps he can be forgiven for thinking the pro-life community was not interested in finding common ground and, concluded, he had better abandon the search for

common ground and double down with abortion supporters. Politically, this turned out to be the correct decision. At the time of the HHS mandate controversy, Democrats effectively talked about a "war on women," which wasn't true, but a lack of truthfulness rarely diminishes the power of a phrase to whip up the base. For example, President Obama is not, in any meaningful sense, engaged in a "war on religion" either, but that phrase was used to whip up the base on the other side of the political ledger too. But, how will we ever affect a change in the politics of this issue if we bite any out-stretched hand?

The abortion debate continues to get reduced to politics and, just so, is stuck in stalemate. Pro-life activists denounced Cardinal Joseph Bernardin when he articulated his "seamless garment" approach to life issues, and they continue to insist that any attempt to resurrect that approach will diminish what they think is the value of a single-minded focus on abortion. The political effects of that strategy should be obvious. Reagan served two terms. The Bush family lived in the White House for three terms. What improved? A few marginal changes, but nothing that would really amount to a step forward toward the goal of an America free from the scourge of abortion. The "politics only" and "abortion only" approach has demonstrably failed.

There are not many pro-life Democrats, and we are getting fewer it seems at times, at least in terms of those elected to office. But, the fact that we believe beginning the debate with a focus on abortion reduction, rather than vainly seeking a legal change, is not sign of a lack of disgust at the procedure, nor reluctance in trying to combat it. The fact that we think a "seamless garment" approach will more likely yield the changes of hearts needed to affect a change of cultural norms and political will, is not an abandonment of the "culture war" but the proposal of a different strategy to win the culture war, in part by noting that advocates for the sanctity of life in the womb and an end to the destruction of unborn life should perhaps find a better word than "war" to characterize their commitment to life.

The reason to adopt the "seamless garment" strategy remains as compelling today as it did then, perhaps more so. I do not believe the President is a bad person. He is obviously an intelligent person. How, then, did he come to see abortion as something liberating? Why does one still hear the ridiculous argument that because a man cannot get pregnant, he is not entitled to an opinion on the legality of abortion, as if one needed to be a burglar or to have been burgled to voice an opinion on the legality of burglary? People dig in, even to ridiculous positions, when they feel defensive. And the "culture war" approach is sure to keep everyone on the defensive. I suspect that very few pro-choicers will be convinced of the truth of our arguments if we just shout "baby killer" a little louder. But, might not we begin to erode the surety of the pro-choice arguments if a bishop were to sit down with the pro-choice, presumably Democratic, legislators in his diocese and say, "I applaud your commitment to the dignity of the undocumented workers so much. How I wish we could get you to see as well the dignity of the unborn child." If, instead of issuing snarky press releases attacking pro-choice politicians, what would happen if the pro-life community actually met with those who, say, support ending the death penalty and ask them how they can embrace the dignity of those on death row and not the dignity of those in the womb.

The seamless garment approach actually holds out the potential to change the culture. Not easily. Not at once. There are strong and organized groups committed to protecting a woman's right to an abortion. In many jurisdictions, a Democrat who decided to step away from NARAL on a key vote would face the same threats a Republican faces from her base if she votes for a tax increase.

Which leads to the last false claim in the CNA article. I am not "soul searching" on the issue of abortion. But, once upon a time I did. I grew up hearing the pro-choice orthodoxy and I did not question it at first. I remember as a freshman in college arguing that this issue was governmental intervention, that if a government can tell a woman she cannot have an abortion, what is to keep a government from telling a woman she must have an abortion, as in China? I now recognize the superficiality of that argument. But,

over time, and moved by the on-going witness of the Church, I came to re-examine my blithe dismissal of the abortion issue, and I changed. I changed, ultimately, because of the grace of God, who makes all conversions possible. But, I changed, too, because of the soul-searching I did in the 1980s on account of Cardinal Bernardin's seamless garment approach. It worked with me, and I believe it can work with others. At least it is worth a try.

For me, then, and I suspect for Henneberger, the soul searching was done some time ago. Now, we do brain-searching. How do we, as committed pro-lifers, try to change the culture, not go to war, but to convince and persuade the culture that this procedure we surround with euphemisms is a horrific thing? How do we, as committed pro-lifers, demonstrate our solidarity with the vulnerable women who face a crisis pregnancy, letting them know that there are other and better choices than the abortion choice? How do we get those who already embrace the rights of the undocumented and the cares of the unemployed and the dreams of the underprivileged to extend their zone of empathy to include the unborn? The answers to these questions are needed and they do not require soul-searching on my part. Perhaps, the leaders of so many angry pro-life groups, whose hatefulness is often deployed, and whose political successes are so slim, should do the soul-searching and ask themselves if they are willing to abandon the 'war' so that they can actually do a better job protecting human life.

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