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Gosnell's Guilt - And Ours

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Distinctly Catholic

Everything about the trial of Kermit Gosnell was gruesome and horrific. It was difficult to read the stories, hard not to turn away from the television screen when the photos were displayed. This was the culture of death at its worst.

The trial was also telling. In the wake of *Roe v. Wade*, Daniel Callahan wrote these words in the pages of *Commonweal*, words I have quoted before, but which remain as haunting as when they were first written. Sadly, now, they are also prescient:

"I am willing - no, well prepared - to grant her that right [to an abortion] under law," Callahan wrote. "I only ask that the society that grants this right be prepared to look with unblinking eye at just what it is doing, not deceiving itself for one moment about even one aspect of what a granting of that right does...[I predict] in the best 1984 tradition, a reconstruction of history. This is done by creating a highly charged mythology of male repression, or religious persecution, or puritanical fanaticism (i.e., whichever cue serves best at the moment to induce popular frenzy)...and, not incidentally, values are reconstructed by making the value of a potential human life being dependent upon being wanted by its mother."

These past few weeks, we, as a culture, preferred to blink. We preferred to deceive ourselves that the horror in Philadelphia was somehow isolated and extreme, and by this I do not mean to suggest that other abortion doctors commit the kinds of deeds Gosnell committed, although there is evidence that is the case. I mean, instead, that the killings in Gosnell's clinic were not extreme in a country that permits late-terms abortions, and they were not isolated from the hundreds of thousands of abortions that happen every year.

The blinking and self-deception were most obvious among the pro-choice organizations. They could not

bring themselves to admit that if what Gosnell did had happened ten seconds earlier, with the baby still in the birth canal, it would not be homicide but a legally protected right. They could not bring themselves to admit that a culture that permits the killing of children inside the womb has a hard time making a credible case against killing children outside the womb. Certainly, the de-personalization that abortion entails was reflected in Gosnell's reported comments and acts. This man may have been a monster, but there were many people playing the role of Dr. Frankenstein in this sad saga.

But, we in the pro-life community must also ask ourselves some questions too. We are right to hope that Roe v. Wade will some day be overturned, but we must also acknowledge that if Roe is overturned and nothing else happens, the country will be littered with clinics like Dr. Gosnell's where, freed from oversight, operating clandestinely, women as well as children will go to their deaths. Unless we commit ourselves to meaningfully supporting every woman who faces a crisis pregnancy, until our culture finds a way to present women who choose life as heroines and champions, we can never make abortion unthinkable even if we can make it illegal. And, if it is thinkable and illegal, there will be hundreds of Gosnells.

In the days ahead, the case will turn to the sentencing phase. Dr. Gosnell faces the death penalty. My disagreements with Robbie George are many, but I can only applaud the essay he wrote at First Things pointing out why we in the pro-life community must make the case that Dr. Gosnell should not be put to death.

Yesterday, I wrote about abortion in a different context. And I mentioned the fact that my mother chose to go to Mt. Sinai hospital rather than St. Francis hospital for my delivery because she had a five year old daughter back home and if anything were to go wrong, she, for entirely unselfish reasons, wanted a hospital that saved the mother not the child. I said that while I was grateful there were no complications, had my mother been confronted with the choice, and made the choice to have a direct abortion, it would have been the wrong choice. My friend Mark Silk has commented on this issue as well, and he rightly points out that there is something instinctively natural about the idea that the mother's life should be preserved at all costs. I would agree if we change the "all" to "most." It goes without saying that when a mother dies in childbirth, a great tragedy has occurred. It is also a great tragedy when a young mother is killed in an avalanche or a tornado or an automobile accident. But, when the means used to avoid this tragedy is the direct, intentional killing of another human life, that turns the tragedy into a sin and, I believe, a crime. Even if it had been my mother. Even if it had been for the best of intentions. Yes, these are difficult cases, excruciatingly difficult choices, but it is precisely in such difficult cases that it is so easy to do something truly dreadful, even with the best of intentions.

There was not much difficult for the jury to determine in Philadelphia. They reached the necessary conclusion that what Gosnell did constituted first degree murder. But, our whole culture should weep that such a thing can happen. And more than weep. We must ask ourselves how deeply we have drunk the cup of Orwellian self-deception that Daniel Callahan predicted we would offer ourselves. We must ask ourselves if our suspicion of "slippery slope" arguments, which are arguments it is right to be suspicious of, is properly an absolute suspicion, if there is not something to the idea, and that we saw that something in all its ugliness in the trial of Dr. Gosnell. The "slippery slope" argument has a certain currency when the situation in question, the development of a human life, is itself a continuum from conception onward.

We must ask ourselves why so few hospitals want to perform abortions at all ? it is not that hard to understand unless you work for NARAL, is it? It is difficult psychologically to go from a morning spent trying to save a prematurely born child to destroying a child before it is born in the afternoon.

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Dr. Gosnell was found guilty, but there is plenty of guilt to go around in creating the culture of death that Gosnell epitomizes. Many people were shocked by Gosnell's crimes, but those crimes are little different from what happens every day in hundreds of abortion clinics. We can continue to turn our gaze away, continue to find euphemisms for what is going on. And, we in the pro-life community and the Church must ask ourselves what we are doing to create a culture of life capable of making abortion unthinkable. That starts with appreciating the life and dignity of the mother facing a crisis pregnancy and making sure she has the resources ? financial, spiritual, social ? to choose life, recognizing that she, too, is a victim of the culture of death.

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