

On Being Pro-Life in a Pro-Choice World

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Election Day has come and gone, and the electorate has made its choice. Senator Barack Obama will become the forty-fourth president of the United States on January 9th, 2009.

Pro-life Republicans, Democrats, and Independents have real concerns about this choice. It appears that life issues have taken a back seat during this campaign season, eclipsed by worries about foreign affairs, specifically the interminable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most recently, our economic crisis has claimed center stage, and helped to bolster the Obama win with its promise of change.

Nevertheless, the debate over the value of human life will not go away. In its simplest form, the discussion represents the clash of two deep-seated ethical traditions. On the one hand is the absolutist idea that all human life is sacred. On this view, abortion is morally wrong because it destroys human beings made in God's image. On the other hand is an ethical pragmatism that focuses more on the results. The context here is poverty, opportunity for the disadvantaged, and individual choice for the majority as components of human flourishing. Stated in ethical terms, the choice is between a divine-command theory based on Scripture and utilitarianism based on outcomes.

In reality, however, things are not that simple. If the sanctity of life is truly important, then value is attached to *both* the unborn baby and the pregnant woman, a fact that pro-life advocates have not always recognized. The scathing comment of former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders about the conservative "love affair with the fetus" is painful, though certainly true.

Nevertheless, another painful truth is that utilitarianism does not always protect the rights of minorities. Sometimes affirming the choices of the majority is simply morally wrong (recall the 1857 Dredd Scott Decision by the U.S. Supreme Court). In the pragmatic balancing act between competing rights, the pro-choice side has not always been persuasive in articulating why the privacy of a woman should trump the right to life of an unborn child.

In today's climate of a global economic recession, a rise in unemployment, and a drain on our resources from unpopular foreign engagements, it seems that the pragmatic bottom line is uppermost in the minds of most Americans. In all of this, the loser may be our tradition of a non-negotiable respect for human life and dignity.

As an example of where this might lead us, consider the United Kingdom, where Baroness Mary Warnock has a reputation as Britain's best-known moral philosopher. A secular humanist and utilitarian thinker, Lady Warnock does not believe that human beings in the womb are valuable or protectable. She has now turned her sights on the elderly, especially those suffering from dementia. Such patients, she claims, are a drain on the National Health Service, and should therefore consider ending their lives by suicide.

Even more outrageous is the story from Australia, where Dr. Bernhard Moeller, a German physician, has provided medical care for the rural community of Horsham for the past two years. According to the Associated Press, his application for a permanent immigration visa was denied – all this because his 13 year-old son has Down syndrome, which the government claims would be a drain on taxpayers for his education and medical care. Citizens in the region are devastated by the possible loss of their only internal medicine specialist.

I do not mean to imply that such extremes will necessarily occur in this country, but we may see more subtle denigrations of human dignity. We should resist such a trend, especially when the mood of the country seems to favor ethical pragmatism.

Today more than ever we need honest, respectful dialogue. This seems so hard to achieve during a political campaign, which sometimes just seems to be about taking sides. Now that the election is over, we need to get down to the hard task of true conversation among equal moral agents.

We should avoid pejorative language that divides (“religious fundamentalist” and “godless liberal” come to mind), and seek to find true common ground. For example, both sides of the debate would agree that abortion is unfortunate and difficult, and would like to see it become more rare. Furthermore, 30% of all abortions are coerced in some way, a statistic that everyone should find troubling. And certainly legislation that improves access to health care and health education should be a common priority.

So may God bless, protect and guide President-Elect Obama. Heaven knows that he will inherit a host of difficult conundrums that do not admit of easy answers. Along the way, those of us concerned about the issues of life should be faithful to remind him and the newly constituted Congress of two things: the dangers of unfettered ethical pragmatism, and the inherent value of all human life.