

Engage Obama or fight him?

Dennis Sadowski | Catholic News Service | Jun. 1, 2009

WASHINGTON -- While agreeing that abortion is unacceptable, two pro-life professors disagreed on whether it is appropriate to engage President Barack Obama on the issue of abortion or to insist that it be outlawed in order to protect the dignity of the unborn.

During an 80-minute discussion May 28 at the National Press Club, Robert George, professor of jurisprudence and director of the James Madison program in American ideals and institutions at Princeton University, and Douglas Kmiec, professor of law at Pepperdine University, expressed divergent views on how to approach the Obama administration.

The president has promised to keep abortion legal, but has pledged to support policies that ultimately would reduce the number of abortions nationwide.

Positioned as a discussion rather than a debate, the event was moderated by Mary Ann Glendon, professor of law at Harvard Law School and former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican.

Kmiec, who supported Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign and wrote a book explaining how a pro-life Catholic could back the Illinois Democrat despite his abortion stance, opened the program, saying the new administration's promise to fund abortion alternatives and its proposals for new social and economic policies would sooner reach the ultimate goal of fewer abortions.

Joining with the Obama White House to address the common good would be the more prudent step for Catholics, Kmiec explained.

He cited several policy areas -- ending the war in Iraq, reform of the health care system, environmental stewardship and ending economic disparity -- in which the Obama administration's views parallel those of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Because of those stances, it becomes imperative to engage the Obama White House in areas of common understanding to reduce abortion rather than to refuse to sit at the table while insisting on full adherence to church teaching, Kmiec said.

"We must be careful to observe the proposition that it is wrong to make the perfect the enemy of the good. It is wrong to make justice the enemy of love and, quite frankly, it is wrong not to recognize the good heart and the possibilities for genuine respect for life in someone coming from a point of view that is not necessarily the ones we ourselves have indulged in the past," Kmiec said.

However, George, even while acknowledging that he and Kmiec hold the same views on life issues, challenged the Pepperdine professor saying that if Obama truly wants to seek common ground, he would support several key policies that would discourage abortion.

In particular, George pointed to proposals to ban partial-birth and sex-selection abortion; end abortions during the second and third trimesters; require comfort care for a child who survives an attempted abortion; provide financial support for pro-life clinics that assist women in need; and enact waiting periods, informed consent laws and parental consent laws.

He said all of the proposals have been rejected by Obama administration officials.

"The president and his administration will not join us on the common ground of discouraging women from having abortions or even encouraging them to choose childbirth over abortion," George said.

Pointing to the naming of supporters of legal abortion to key policymaking jobs throughout the Obama administration, George charged that the president's strategy has changed to enact the Freedom of Choice Act provisions step by step rather than in one major piece of legislation.

The act, known as FOCA, would revoke most pro-life laws at the state and federal level. It has not yet been introduced in the 111th Congress. Obama has said it is not a legislative priority.

George suggested that the president holds two separate standards on the value of life. One, he explained, upholds the dignity of pregnant women while the other disregards the fundamental dignity of life in the womb.

"The question is on which issues will we support the president's direction and on which will we challenge him because he is heading in the wrong direction," George said.

"Those pro-life Americans who voted for him and support him should not object when we speak out for the most vulnerable and defenseless of our fellow human beings even when that means severely criticizing the president's policies," he said. "They should stand on common ground and join their voices with ours."

As part of his presentation, Kmiec took a few minutes to criticize bishops who he said use "intimidation" to attempt to force Catholics in government to comply with church teaching on abortion. He said acts of intimidation -- enacted by denying holy Communion to supporters of abortion -- solve nothing.

"The denial of Communion is intimidation," Kmiec said, referring to his own experience of being refused the Eucharist by a priest in the Los Angeles Archdiocese during the 2008 election cycle because of his support for Obama.

"Let me tell you that to be separated from the body of Christ, even once, is intimidation," he said.

"I suggest that is not either an effective nor a Catholic approach," he added.

He later received an apology from the priest.

The forum was sponsored by The Catholic University of America's Columbus School of Law in conjunction with a daylong program that commemorated 25 years of U.S.-Vatican diplomatic relations.

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