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# Pro-life leaders: Tiller's murder may hurt our efforts

Chaz Muth Catholic News Service | Jun. 5, 2009

WASHINGTON -- There is growing concern that the May 31 murder of a Kansas abortion doctor in his church may tarnish the image of the pro-life movement, at a time when it appears a slight majority of Americans have embraced the cause.

Leaders in several pro-life organizations also said public proclamations that the doctor who performed late-term abortions "got what he deserved" and "reaped what he sowed" by people who "claim to be pro-life" advocates don't help the movement.

"Statements like that hurt the cause," said Shaun Kenney, executive director of the American Life League. "When we cheapen our own principles, we do ourselves a tremendous disservice."

Dr. George Tiller, 67, of Wichita, Kan., was fatally shot while serving as an usher at the city's Reformation Lutheran Church during Sunday morning services, according to The Associated Press.

Pro-life groups and the U.S. Catholic bishops quickly denounced the murder, saying that such violence is contrary to their respect for all life, from conception to natural death.

They also are concerned the event will cause the public to perceive the pro-life movement as violent and intolerant, less than a month after American polls show the cause enjoying its highest-ever favorable percentages.

A poll conducted May 7-10 as part of the annual Gallup Values and Beliefs survey found that a majority of Americans (51 percent) described themselves as "pro-life" with respect to the abortion issue, while only 42 percent said they were "pro-choice."

It marked the first time since Gallup began asking the question in 1995 that more respondents said they were pro-life than pro-choice, and was a shift of 7 to 8 percentage points from a year earlier, when 50 percent said they were pro-choice and 44 percent said they were pro-life.

Some pro-life activists have said they fear that kind of support for their cause will fall off if people associate the movement with violence.

The same Gallup poll also showed a drop in respondents identifying themselves as pro-life in 1999, several months after Dr. Barnett Slepian, an abortion doctor, was killed in October 1998 just after returning home from his synagogue in Buffalo, N.Y.

The man accused of shooting Tiller -- Scott Roeder, 51, of Kansas City, Mo. -- was charged June 2 with one count of first-degree murder, and a Kansas judge June 4 ordered him to be held on a $5 million bond, according to published reports. The AP also reported that criminal justice officials have accused him of threatening two people at the church and additionally charged him with aggravated assault.

Tiller -- whose Wichita clinic is one of just a few in the nation where abortions are performed after the 21st week of pregnancy -- had been a target of abortion opponents since the 1970s. He was shot in both arms by a protester in 1993 and his clinic was bombed in 1986.

Roeder's family members and friends have said in television interviews following the murder that he had become increasingly upset with legal abortion and the doctors who performed the procedure.

Some advocates for legal abortion have said the angry rhetoric from extreme fringes of the pro-life movement -- such as calling abortion doctors murderers -- may have contributed to Tiller's death.

"Now his slaying has transformed him into a martyr for the cause of abortion 'rights,' and has smeared by extension all those dedicated to defense of unborn human life," said a recent editorial in Our Sunday Visitor, a national Catholic newsweekly based in Huntington, Ind. "In no insignificant way, Tiller's assassination -- in a church of all places -- is a blasphemy against the pro-life cause."

Joe Scheidler, national director of the Pro-Life Action League, also pointed out that no babies were saved by Tiller's murder, because there are others in the medical profession who will continue to perform abortions.

Though Randall Terry -- a high-profile anti-abortion crusader and a Catholic -- said he didn't agree with the shooting that ended the doctor's life, he did call Tiller "one of the most evil men on the planet," and that "he reaped what he sowed."

This kind of language does not help the pro-life cause, Kenney told Catholic News Service.

"Abortionists are not evil people," said Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kan. "What is the point of working for legal reform for our public policy on abortion, if you accept the premise that it is acceptable to disregard the law and kill another human being?"

Though public perception about the pro-life movement is a concern for the U.S. bishops, it's not what is driving their mission to end abortion in America, said Deirdre McQuade, assistant director for policy and communications at the bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities.

The U.S. bishops have been clear, however, that violence against abortion doctors is contrary to Catholic teaching and that incendiary language about abortion doctors isn't helpful, McQuade told CNS.

Calling the murder of abortion doctors indefensible in their 2001 "Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life," the bishops wrote that "it is an offense against God's command: You shall not kill. It also unjustly stigmatizes the pro-life movement in the eyes of many Americans as being violent and intolerant. We abhor and condemn such violence unequivocally."

McQuade acknowledged that work in the pro-life movement can be difficult when faced with setbacks, but that supporters must be patient and never take the law into their own hands.

"The frustration can drive you crazy if you are not grounded in God's grace, mercy and love," she said. "People who are saying (Tiller's murder) is a justifiable act are causing more confusion. We have to be consistent in our message, and reaffirm our commitment to the protection of all human life."

This latest killing of an abortion doctor -- no matter how harmful it may be to the pro-life cause -- provides people in the movement with an opportunity to reassess how they rally their supporters, Kenney said.

"It does force us to re-evaluate our values and how we express ourselves, with peaceful and nonviolent

resistance," he said. "We are presented with an opportunity to look at how we conduct ourselves in the public square."

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