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Two-by-four therapy

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 16, 2009 NCR Today

Yesterday, the "Morning Briefing" contained a link to an article by Frances Kissling, in which she takes on the "common ground" approach to abortion in general and Chris Korzen, the executive director of Catholics United in particular. She writes, "I am very curious about what makes Chris tick; what he thinks and believes and how two people with somewhat similar politics and the same access to knowledge and information -- possibly an ethics professor in common -- could come to such different conclusions on critical social justice issues." These are the words of someone incapable of seeing the other side of an argument.

Well, it is not my place to speak for Mr. Korzen as to what makes him tick, but let me venture a guess. He, unlike Ms. Kissling, takes the church's unambiguous teaching seriously when it sees abortion as a social justice issue, a point reiterated by the magisterium as recently as last week's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. But, Kissling has made a career out of arguing both that the church should be silent on the issue and that a Catholic can, in good conscience, ignore the church's teaching.

I do think there is lots of room for differences of opinion about how Catholics can address abortion politically. The GOP articulates a clear pro-life stance but has done precious little to bring it about. The Democrats are entirely wrong on principle but the president seems sincere in his desire both to lower the abortion rate and to lower the vitriol in the culture wars largely occasioned by the abortion debate. Prudential judgment is needed to form an opinion about which strategy will best work, though let us remember that prudence is itself a virtue and an application of moral analysis, not a way to duck an issue, no matter how difficult.

Kissling finds herself in some interesting company. George Weigel and his neo-con friends likewise decry the "common ground" approach of both Korzen and the president. Kissling and Weigel both hold on to their beliefs no matter the fact that their goals are as elusive as ever. Kissling wants Catholics to stop caring about abortion except to defend the practice. Weigel wants Catholics to ignore the church's other social justice concerns (or adopt his quirky view of capitalism's salvific function) and support the GOP's approach no matter how unfruitful it is.

A friend of mine with a degree in psychology mischievously suggested an experiment called "two-by-four therapy." Hit yourself over your head with a two-by-four and when you stop, you'll feel better. Korzen has suggested American Catholics stop hitting themselves over the head with a two-by-four while Kissling and Weigel are still swinging. It is not difficult to see which strategy holds the most promise for creating an authentic culture of life.

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