

Redefining the term 'pro-life'

John Gehring | Feb. 5, 2010

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Commentary

Former President George W. Bush will receive a pro-life award this weekend (Feb. 4-6) from Legatus, an organization of Catholic business professionals. The group cites his administration's opposition to embryonic stem cell research; an executive order that barred federal funds from international family planning groups that offer abortions; and the appointment of "pro-life" Supreme Court justices.

The honor raises an essential question that should challenge both political parties. It also underscores the limits of labels: What does it mean to be pro-life?

For some, that question can be answered simply by evoking opposition to *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion. That ruling sparked a generation of political polarization and fueled bitter culture wars that reward the shrillest voices. The singular focus on abortion as the arbiter of what it means to be "pro-life" has also severely narrowed our national discourse about moral values in the public square.

While Bush spoke eloquently about the sacred dignity of human life, as governor of Texas he led the nation in state-sponsored executions. His presidency is remembered for a legacy that often undermined lofty rhetorical appeals to human dignity: preemptive war, torture, a reckless disregard for the environment and economic policies that left the poor poorer and the rich richer. It is not a proud record in defense of life.

The constant emphasis on abortion also fails to honor the broad spectrum of Catholic social teaching, which stresses a consistent ethic of life that's often referred to as a "seamless garment" where one life issue can't be easily separated from another.

Catholic teaching contains a rich and expansive vision that recognizes peace-making and caring for the poor, the unborn, the immigrant and our environment -- "promoting the common good in all its forms," as Pope Benedict XVI put it -- as all integral.

Catholicism, in other words, is not a single-issue faith, and no political party has a monopoly on moral values.

The labels "pro-life" and "pro-choice" often obscure more than enlighten. And neither political party can truly claim the "pro-life" mantle.

Democrats, in general, perform better on anti-poverty initiatives and protecting vital social safety nets, but often don't grapple seriously enough with the reality of more than 1 million annual abortions. Republicans, meanwhile, trumpet their pro-life bona fides yet fail to back up their rhetoric by fighting for robust social

policies that help pregnant women and vulnerable families.

The current debate over health care reform demonstrates the false choice between "pro-life" or "social justice" advocacy. Ensuring that women and families have access to quality health care can help make abortions less likely and save thousands of lives.

The abortion rate for women living in poverty is more than four times higher than for those earning 300 percent above the poverty line. At a time of economic crisis, any serious effort to prevent abortions must find comprehensive solutions to broader socioeconomic challenges.

A new generation must decide. We can stay mired in stale battles of the past and cling to easy labels, or chart a course that honors human life at every stage. I would be the first to applaud an award given to anyone who helps us achieve that elusive victory.

[John Gehring is director of communications for the Washington-based Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good. This commentary was written for Religion News Service.]

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