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The Abortion Rate Drop Plateaus

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 11, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Ever since 1981, the abortion rate in America has been declining. Between 1973, when Roe v. Wade threw out all legal barriers to abortion, and 1981, the abortion rate had soared from 16 percent of all pregnancies to 29 percent. But, then something happened. The rate started to fall back, throughout the 1980s, throughout the 1990s, and then in 2005 it seems to have hit a plateau. That year, the rate fell to 19.4 percent and the next four years saw the rate hovering around the same total. In 2008, the rate stood at 19. 6 percent. You can read about this in today's Washington Post [1].

Of course, one abortion is one abortion too many. But, it is interesting to note that the abortion rate is currently not that much higher than what it was before Roe, 16 percent then, 19 percent now. Three percentage points is significant: This is not a poll, with a margin of error of 3-5 points. Each percentage point increase in the abortion represents tens of thousands of lost lives. In 2005, when the rate had fallen back to 19.4 percent, the actual number of abortions was 1.21 million.

The other qualifying factor that many people tend to forget is that before Roe, several states had already taken steps to liberalize their abortion laws, including the nation?s two largest states. In 1967, then-Governor Ronald Reagan of California signed the most liberal abortion law in the country. Reagan and his advisors were ambivalent on the issue, but Republicans in the state legislature were insistent. You read that correctly: Back then, the opposition to liberal abortion laws came almost exclusively from the ranks of the Democratic Party, not the GOP. And, in 1970, then-Gov. Nelson Rockefeller signed the Blumenthal Bill, which made abortion widely available in New York State. The reasons that abortion politics flipped parties is complicated, but you can read about it in my book, Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats.

The drop-off in the abortion rate over twenty-five years, and its apparent leveling off for the past few years, is not the result of any change in the legal culture. If anything, Rie has become more entrenched in the law. Certainly the concurring opinion in Roe of Chief Justice Burger, which stated that the decision was not an endorsement of abortion-on-demand, that opinion has been seen to be false. The mental health exception to state regulatory powers is a hole big enough to drive a truck through, and pro-choice groups have driven that truck for forty years. In America today, our legal culture permits abortion-on-demand.

There is another curious switch in abortion politics when it comes to explaining the causes for the drop in the abortion rate. Those on the left, averse to supply-side economics, in this case suggest that it is the availability of contraception that is responsible for the decline, which strikes me as a supply-side argument. Those on the right, normally busy worshipping at the pagan altar of economic Darwinism and the ?hidden hand of the market,? here are allergic to looking at the relationship of poverty with abortion.

What is most interesting to me is that the introduction of RU-486 has not changed the overall abortion rate. The use of the pill to abort a child increased in recent years, and 19 percent of all abortions are now achieved through the use of the drug. But, the overall rate has not gone up. That is a hopeful and surprising sign to me. I would have thought the ease of taking a pill would have made the choice of an abortion more acceptable in the

eyes of some women. When the patent for RU-486 runs out and the drug becomes much less expensive as well, we will see what effect that has.

Another key factor to consider is the availability of abortion clinics. Yesterday, I commended Archbishop Dolan for leading an interfaith effort to reduce the abortion rate in New York City, but the truth is that the numbers for New York are probably skewed because women from rural areas with no access to abortion clinics go to the Big City to get one.

There is now an effort in several states, and in the U.S. House, to defund Planned Parenthood. This is a very risky proposition. On the one hand, having fewer Planned Parenthood abortion clinics may make the incidence of abortion less likely by raising the cost for poor women. On the other hand, we do know that the drop in the abortion rate is largely the result of a drop in the rate of teen pregnancies, and many believe both greater access to contraception for teenage girls and a general acceptance of teen use of contraceptives as preferable to abortion are key factors in the lower abortion rate.

Another factor that will come into play in coming years is that the new health care reform law will equalize the cost of pregnancy and abortion. Currently, a poor woman without health insurance does not have much of a choice: Carrying a pregnancy to term can cost $10,000 and an abortion can cost $400 to $600. Once the new law is fully implemented, the costs of health care related to carrying the child will be covered by insurance. Additionally, new monies and programs for women facing crisis pregnancies should remove any economic incentive from the decision to abort.

So, as we get ready for the Right-to-Life March next week, even if you can?t come to D.C., take a minute to read up on these fascinating changes in our society, and ask yourself what you can do to help bring down the abortion rate further. Despite all the contending arguments about the data, and the often confusing data points themselves, one thing is obvious. The Catholic Church has been the principal advocate for the unborn, before Roe and afterwards. Year-in and year-out it is the Catholic Church that has said the practice of abortion offends against the human dignity that is at the heart of our beliefs about democracy and human rights. And, it is the Catholic Church that has led the way in providing alternatives to abortion for women facing crisis pregnancies. We have been joined by evangelical Protestants, conservative Jews, and others. But, the Catholic voice has been the clearest and most consistent: Abortion is a form of poverty, a poverty of love, greater than that known anywhere in the history of man, and no conscience should rest until the practice is seen in its true barbarity.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/11/AR2011011107331.html