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Why We March

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 24, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Today, thousands of Americans will participate in the March for Life, protesting the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that obliterated virtually any and all legal protection for the unborn. The March testifies to a simple fact: Those of us who care about the unborn are not going away, our concern to see our laws reflect our values is undiminished, and we shall never acquiesce in the legal abandonment of the unborn.

I do not believe that this March ? or the goal it seeks, the overturning of Roe ? is a sufficient pro-life strategy. I wrote about the danger our continued focus on the law entails last year in an article for NCR [1]outlining a different approach. Two weeks ago, when Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York reiterated the Church?s commitment not only to the unborn but to those mothers who feel compelled for any reason to see abortion as a solution to their unwanted pregnancy, promising the financial and social and personal resources of the Church to help such women keep their children. I believe such witness does more to witness to our commitment to life, and more to convince our culture to reconsider its embrace of legal abortion, than the March does. Still, we are right to March. Why?

Since the rise of the counter-culture in the late 1960s, Americans? attitudes towards many things have changed. Pre-marital sex carries precisely zero stigma in our culture. Casual drug use is considered a personal issue, certainly no impediment to one?s social standing, despite the fact that Americans? appetite for drugs has brought misery and murder to Mexico, Colombia, Panama, and other Latin American countries, to say nothing of the violence unleashed by the drug trade here at home. Social acceptance of gay rights has grown steadily with every year. But, the number of those Americans who continue to oppose abortion has remained steady. I suspect that this steadiness in opposition to abortion is partly the result of the fact that ultrasounds have dramatized for all what we Catholics have consistently held: That is a baby in that womb. I believe, too, that every year we move away from the horrors of illegal, back alley abortions has lessened the danger of any return to the pre-Roe era. (And, those horrors cannot be dismissed by those of us who truly wish to aspire to a consistent commitment to life!) But, part of the reason is that every year, in good weather and bad, thousands of Americans march in the streets of Washington and say, ?No, abortion is wrong and any law that says otherwise is an unjust law.? History is littered with causes that come and go, but only those causes that advance justice endure.

If Roe were overturned tomorrow, I suspect that many, indeed most, states would codify some degree of legal abortion. Overturning Roe is no panacea and would not bring about the eschaton. No one should want to return to the days of back alley abortions, and the country has no infrastructure to support women facing crisis pregnancies. Sadly, many of those who are pro-life also share a political opposition to the kind of government programs that would erect such an infrastructure, starting with those who last week voted to repeal the health care reform law. That law included more than $250 million for programs helping women facing crisis pregnancies. Can anyone who truly claims to be pro-life think it a good thing to unfund those programs?

Law, however, instructs and teaches and forms values. And, currently, our laws say that an unborn child is of no consequence and no concern. A puppy has greater rights than an unborn child. Abortion clinics in many states

are exempt from any and all regulation, but your local veterinarian is not. The intellectual and moral inconsistency of our nation?s abortion laws is obvious for all who have not been blinded by our culture of convenience and protean self-assertion. Today?s March for Life is a protest against that intellectual and moral inconsistency.

The March is also an invitation to those of us who range ourselves on the side of the unborn to consider what kind of abortion laws we do seek. This is something we too infrequently do. There will be signs today that read ?Abortion is Murder,? but, in fact, in most jurisdictions, abortion was considered manslaughter, not murder. What, then, do we want our abortion laws to look like? Does anyone think women who procure abortions should go to jail? If they are mere murderers, of course they should, but if you want to help the pro-choice cause, you can start by advocating such a punishment. And, what, precisely, would we do to prevent illegal abortion mills from coming back if abortion was merely made illegal? These are difficult questions, and I do not pretend to have the answers. But, it is embarrassing, and a mark of unseriousness, when we are asked what kind of laws we wish to see enacted and we have no answer.

But, I cannot conceive of any legal regime that would be worse than the one we have today. Abortion-on-demand is an affront to common sense and common decency. Even many of those who do not wish to see abortion made illegal in all situations nonetheless agree that it should not be used as a form of birth control or as a means of selecting the gender of one?s children. Happily, another law that has changed values and attitudes, the Americans With Disabilities Act, has made it less likely that many Americans would see fetal abnormality as a legitimate reason for an abortion, though in 1973, that was one of the most approved reasons for allowing abortion in public opinion polls. But, as long as there are no criteria, no restrictions, nothing in the law to stay the arbitrariness of the decision to abort, we are right to march.

The March for Life is a powerful witness to our belief in human dignity. It is not enough. More must be done. But, we are not wrong to March. We are not wrong to remind ourselves and our fellow citizens that Roe is an offense to human dignity and human decency. We are not wrong to hope for better laws. We are not wrong to raise our voices on behalf of the unborn.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/news/justice/time-rethink-antiabortion-strategy