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Thank you, Todd Akin

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NCR Today

If there were a more outrageous comment than Rep. Todd Akin's (R-MO) recent statement to a St. Louis television station about women and rape, I don't know what it is. But upon much reflection, I am grateful for his remarks. That may sound a little contradictory, but bear with me.

Last month, Akin, who is also the Republican Senate nominee in Missouri, said the following:

"It seems to be, first of all, from what I understand from doctors, it's really rare. If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut the whole thing down."

As a woman, I was and am utterly incensed by this statement on so many levels. It is one thing to understand intellectually that there are members of Congress who do not believe that abortion restrictions should include exceptions for rape, incest and the health of the mother. It is quite another to come face-to-face with a man's honest (this was not a misstatement) opinion that does not even remotely resemble scientific fact.

And there has been a backlash. This happens when extremists utter public threats to knowledge and rationality. How can we not react with outrage to such an uninformed, scientifically incorrect, and even misogynistic view?

But. But. Can we take a deep breath?

There should be a public response to a comment like Akin's, and it came quickly from Democrats and Republicans alike. Republican leaders denounced his remarks, some even calling for him to resign from the House and drop his Senate campaign.

Many of these leaders are pro-life but do not hold such extremist views. But as Joan Walsh has pointed out, Akin is not alone. It's just some of us haven't fully realized that until now.

This kind of public rhetoric should alarm both pro-life Democrats and Republicans. These kinds of remarks (and beliefs) hurt any and all work toward common ground on divisive issues like abortion and reproductive rights. In my opinion, such extremists do not belong in public office. But this is a democracy, and people elect those who they feel will best represent them. But let's hope all the facts are on the table before they do so. The Akin episode has been an eye-opener.

Republicans are concerned Akin will have a negative effect across the board on the election. Democrats have responded by elevating the public discourse on women's rights to control their own health care choices to a higher level than perhaps ever before. I have spoken with several Catholics who support President Barack Obama and his commitment to the "least among us" but are turned off by what they feel is an "in-your-face" approach to reproductive health issues post-Akin.

In 2008, many Catholics worked very hard to support candidate Obama and his promise to find common ground on divisive issues. Aside from abortion, his policy portfolio was arguably more representative of church doctrine than his opponent's. And as president, he has fought and succeeded in enacting much that is at the core of Catholic social teaching: enacting health care reform; making tough and unpopular decisions to save the country from depression and end unscrupulous financial practices; fighting against cuts to programs supporting the poor and vulnerable; improving income supports for low-income individuals; pushing for higher education access for young adults who might not be able to afford college; enacting much-needed and common-sense immigration reform for young people; fighting for tax cuts for the wealthiest rather than suffering by those who can afford it least. The list goes on. He has not been perfect. But the administration must work with Congress, and though many members have fought heroically against stalemate, Congress is more polarized and stuck than ever before.

And what about the president's promise to work for common ground? This administration has gone further than many may realize in establishing common ground on perhaps the most divisive of social issues, abortion. With the passage of the Affordable Care Act, a little-noted and almost miraculous *agreement* in this culture war occurred. An amendment that supports vulnerable pregnant teens and women, introduced by pro-life Sen. Bob Casey *and* pro-choice Sen. Amy Klobuchar, passed and was funded. This section of the ACA, renamed the Pregnancy Assistance Fund by the Health and Human Services Administration, was funded at \$250 million over 10 years, and thus far has awarded grants to 17 states. I have spoken with some of the people implementing these programs. They are on-the-ground programs, doing good work, allowing teens to finish high school and get parenting help, young women to finish college, find child care, protect themselves from abusive partners, and more. The next round of funding takes place next year. This says nothing of the numerous ACA reforms that are helping newborns and children, particularly those in poor families.

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It would be tragic if an extremist like Todd Akin and the response to his outrageous and irresponsible public statements were to obscure or even derail this kind of common-ground work. There is rhetoric on both sides of the aisle about the need for cooperation and bipartisanship. It's not always easy to discern when and where it is actually happening, but it truly is the only way forward. Citizens have a choice to make in November, and it's a critical one, given the different futures painted by the respective candidates.

Akin's comments are a potential fly in the ointment for both parties in this election. But like all controversies, Akin has offered us an opportunity to go deeper into the facts. Regardless of your political affiliation, Akin has done us all a favor. Extremist rhetoric, distortions and polarization have no place in public discourse or elections. Citizens need the facts, plain and simple, to make informed decisions. The issues are complex and require hard work to get to the truth. Thanks for the reminder, Mr. Akin.

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