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Texas Abortion Battle: Part II

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 18, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I wrote [1] about my hopes and my worries regarding the Texas abortion restriction bill, and similar measures bring adopted in other states. Today, we look forward, asking how the pro-life movement might improve its chances of achieving not just a legislative victory in a half dozen states, but a real shift in attitudes that might bring more humane laws to the whole country, and do so in a way that those victories are sustainable.

After his election victory in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt asked Frances Perkins to be his Secretary of Labor. Perkins said she would only agree to take the post if the President would commit to certain policies she thought necessary. He signed off immediately on some of those policies but when Perkins got to what we now know as Social Security, Roosevelt paused. He told her that he was committed to the idea, but that the country was not ready for it and that Perkins would have to barnstorm the country making the case for Social Security before he would propose it to Congress. She did, and two years on FDR proposed the Social Security Act, it passed, and the country has been better for it ever since.

As I mentioned yesterday, the temptation to enact a whole slew of laws when one has a majority in both houses of a state legislature is enormous. But, it runs the risk of getting ahead of public opinion in the way FDR perceived, and consequently, invites a backlash. This is especially so on an issue like abortion which is a decisive, sometimes exclusive, issue, for a sliver of voters, but not for the vast majority of the electorate who vote on economic and other issues, not abortion.

I also pointed out that it would be better not to have a bunch of proposals lumped together, which only feeds the narrative that these laws are ?an assault on women.? On individual issues, the electorate is more likely to weigh the merits. It turns out that 80% of Americans support restricting abortion in the third trimester. Whatever else it is, it is hard to label a position supported by 80% of Americans as extreme, the way pro-choice advocates always label any effort to restrict abortion, and despite the fact, noted by Melinda Henneberger and others, that most Western European countries have much more restrictive laws on late-term abortions than we do and the women of Western Europe do not appear to feel that their rights have been trampled upon.

?Trampled upon.? This is the kind of language one hears in the abortion debate precisely because that debate is so often driven by organized pro-life and pro-choice advocates who work full-time on this issue, and who feel any modification, one way or the other, amounts to a trampling of something. They have a strange symbiotic relationship: They certainly fundraise off each other, and they fight every issue as if it was a Last Stand. The debate about abortion in their eyes is always a zero sum game. More than anything, I hope there is a way to break the choke-hold these groups have on the discussion, that a way can be found to shift the debate from its current zero sum approach to a strategy that seeks to find common ground that is sustainable.

The fundamental challenge facing the pro-life movement is that its strategy is too often dictated not by the desire to persuade those who are ambivalent, but by the need to preach to the choir and keep them writing checks to support pro-life organizations. Just as redistricting has created a situation in Congress in which members of both parties have no incentive to compromise because their only real threat to re-election is a primary challenge, both the pro-life and pro-choice movements are driven by their most extreme members.

Have you noticed that there is a kind of coherence to the advocates for both sides, provided you accept their unstated assumptions, but when a pro-choicer is on MSNBC or a pro-lifer is on Fox, no one ever challenges those unstated assumptions. This may be good for ratings. It may be good for ginning up more contributions. It is not good for getting our nation?s abortion laws to be more humane and to do so permanently. That requires persuasion.

The ?all-or-nothing? orthodoxies both sides demand do not lend themselves to ambivalence, yet that is how most Americans feel about abortion. I suspect the reason that many people oppose late term abortion is that they feel an affinity with what is clearly a child. But, they may not feel a similar level of affinity with a six day old colony of cells. But, they will never come to appreciate the gift of life from the moment of conception unless we first act upon their extant appreciation for the gift of a twenty week unborn child. There is much to be said for incrementalism as a means for broadening the scope of people?s sense of affinity.

The pro-life movement also must be less tied to the Republican Party. Those same Republicans in Austin and Raleigh who may be doing the right thing on abortion are doing the wrong things on many, many other issues. I am not just saddened, I am angry when Texas Gov. Rick Perry was invited to speak to the National-Right-to-Life convention in June the day after he sent another inmate to his death. It is time to bring back the ?seamless garment? approach once advocated by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, but squashed by Cardinal Bernard Law. Advocating a consistent ethic of life does not water down our commitment to ending the horror of abortion, it makes us less prone to charges of hypocrisy, and it has the most important virtue of being true. There are many threats to human life in our culture, and we should identify them all as such.

The pro-life movement must be principled above all else, it must speak more often and more concretely about how it plans to help women facing crisis pregnancies, it must champion people like Henneberger who is not afraid of nuance and, just so, is capable of actually entering into discussions rather than shouting matches with those who view this issue differently. To be clear: We ? we Catholics ? all know what the moral law dictates. But how to enflesh the moral law in civil law is a more complicated proposition, and not just on this issue. Why not engage those people like Henneberger whose commitment to unborn life is consistent and courageous given the editorial circles she inhabits! I spoke with her yesterday and asked if she had ever, even once, been contacted by any bishop and invited to speak with him about her views. Not once.

I also wish to call out the Catholic Left on this issue because Henneberger?s voice is too often a lonely one. You do not need a doctorate in moral theology to recognize abortion as an on-going horror in our country. Yet, how easy it is for us to ignore it, to make excuses that the issue has been hijacked by extremists. The words the Holy Father spoke about immigration at Lampedusa could be equally applied to the silence of the Catholic Left in recent weeks on the abortion issue. He said, ?We are a society that has forgotten the experience of weeping, of ?suffering with?: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!? Has the Catholic Left lost the ability to weep over the millions killed by abortion? Have we developed what Pope Francis called ?the anaesthesia of the heart?? I fear we have.

This is a shame because it endangers our souls, of course. It is also a shame because it makes our calls for justice in other areas of life ring a little hollow ? if we can make room in our hearts for the undocumented, how can we not make room for the unborn? I use the word ?shame? advisedly because ? let?s be honest hear ? we Western, sophisticated liberals ? we don?t like to feel shame. We do not like to admit that we have developed anaesthesia of the heart. But, precisely because the Catholic Left does care about immigrants and those on death row, their voice is needed in the fight to make abortion unthinkable. Because we on the Catholic Left recognize that the abortion issue involves two lives, not just one, we are unqiuely placed to address the ambivalence people feel. The Holy Father at Lampedusa chose as one of his texts the story of Cain and Abel and asked the world ?Where is your brother?? Some of our brothers and sisters are still in the womb. It is time the Catholic Left stop making excuses. It is time the Catholic bishops start enlisting the aid, and listening to the ideas, of the

Catholic Left. It is time for the pro-life movement to reclaim the ?seamless garment? and think about changing the culture not just the laws. ?Where is your brother?? is a question that should haunt us all, and it is past time we began looking for better answers than those we have been proffered by those who currently lead the pro-life movement.

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