

## Cong. Akin & the Pro-Life Cause

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 22, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Congressman Todd Akin's comments about rape and his position on abortion have dominated the news cycle for 48 hours. They clearly struck a chord within the political world, but the note struck goes deeper than mere politics. If this was just about politics, Republicans would be defending one of their own rather than running from him and asking him to step aside in his bid for the Senate seat in Missouri. And, this reaction contains, I believe, important lessons for anyone in the pro-life movement.

Although the issues have been conflated, Akin's comments touch on two quite distinct issues. First there was the crazy talk about "legitimate rape" and his belief that a woman's body knows how to "shut down" the biological consequences of rape. Today's more extreme members of the GOP believe all sorts of crazy things and, yes, I believe there is more craziness on the far right than on the far left because the theology is often so bad on the far right and it is merely non-existent on the far left. The far right tends to be more crazy and the far left more philosophically superficial. This particular meme, that a woman's body is able to "shut down" the biological consequences of a rape, has been around in certain right wing circles for decades. You find other, similarly crazy ideas coming from conservative pulpits: That Katrina was punishment for a gay rights celebration, that 9/11 was punishment for America turning its back on God, and that because people kill people, not guns, anti-gun laws are useless. Yesterday, The Family Research Council's Tony Perkins repeated this last bit of nutzo reasoning saying that DC needs more guns so that citizens can protect themselves from the kind of attack that hit his organization's HQ the other day. Perkins is no dummy. He knows that, in good traffic, you can get from his HQ to the Commonwealth of Virginia in about five minutes, that Virginia has virtually no limits on the purchase of guns, and so blaming DC's gun laws for being ineffective is a little disingenuous.

So, crazy talk from the far right is nothing new. It is a danger, especially to other conservatives ? and I here repeat my belief that a healthy body politic requires both a vigorous conservative movement and a vigorous liberal movement ? whose views get tarnished by the kookiness. But, in this case, Akin's comments damage the pro-life cause because they have been linked to abortion. After all, he was explaining why his opposition to abortion does not allow for an exception for cases of rape or incest.

To be perfectly clear: I also do not believe abortion is morally licit in cases of rape or incest. I do not see how one tragedy, a rape, is ameliorated by adding another tragedy, the destruction of innocent human life. I was moved to tears by one comment on my post yesterday, from a mother whose daughter had been raped and the mother counseled her to carry the child to term and put the child up for adoption because the mother knew that her daughter would feel guilty for the rest of her life if she had an abortion. The mother also admitted that she wished her daughter had been raised in such a way that she would not have felt such guilt. Here we see the conundrum for the pro-life movement, and why Cong. Akin's comments struck such a nerve: We wish to uphold a principle, an important principle, the right to life, but the circumstances in which the issue arises are always shrouded in the vale of tears that we call human life.

Obviously, the moral status of the unborn child is no different if that baby is the product of rape or not. What is different is that the rapist stole from the woman her ability to consent or not to the sexual act and, given the

biology of it all, she is stuck with the consequences. That is one of the reasons Akin's comments struck such a deep chord: He said the rapist not the child should be punished, which is true enough, but he failed to acknowledge the issue of justice for the rape victim. And, worse than that, someone who presents himself as a champion of Christian family values seemed incapable of acknowledging the tragedy of the situation he was describing. In our culture, the Christian Church is the only institution that speaks honestly about tragedy and suffering. How could we not? We have crucifixes in our churches, and schoolrooms, and hospitals, and over our beds, for a reason, to remind us that, this side of the Eschaton, the face of love in a sinful world is a suffering face. Suffering is what love looks like in the midst of evil, they are flip sides of the same reality, a reality the true significance of which was revealed for us Christians on the Cross.

Abortion is a moral issue, an instance when we are called to do right not wrong. It is also a political issue, an instance when the community is called to promote justice not defeat it. But, abortion is a moral and a political issue because it is first a human issue. Those of us who wish to claim the pro-life mantle must first don the garment of empathetic humanity if our witness is to be effective, and not just effective, but true to our own vocation as baptized Christians and, therefore, evangelizing. We must acknowledge the horror of rape, not minimize it. We must try to understand what would prompt a woman to think her only viable option is to end her pregnancy, even while we disagree with the decision to do so. We must seek out women who face such circumstances and show them all the love we can, and not just in a happenstance way, but the way we Catholics do ministry, with organization and fundraising and attention to public policy. We can never, never create a culture of life until we first create a culture of love. The reason the pro-life movement so often seems stuck is, in part, because so many of its champions are mean-spirited and judgmental, so devoid of empathy, so willing to swallow foolish nonsense in order to make a point as Cong. Akin did, we miss the essentially human aspect of the problem and, just so, we get the morality and the politics wrong.

We in the pro-life movement also need to retrieve the idea of the Seamless Garment, of a consistent ethic of life, if our witness is to be persuasive, even to ourselves. A culture that cares for the undocumented because they are human beings first and foremost is a culture that is closer to caring for the unborn and for their mothers than the culture we have today. A culture that recognizes the way unemployment diminishes human dignity and is more interested in putting people to work fixing roads and public spaces than building bombs and drones, is a culture that is more capable of recognizing the human dignity of the unborn child. And, contra Akin, only a society that treats women with respect will ever respect those unborn children who are also very, very young women.

If a woman friend came to me and told me she had been raped and had gotten pregnant, I am not sure what I would say. Of course, the scenario suggests a degree of mutual love and respect, of friendship, that would permit candor. I know that the first thing I would do is hug her and assure her of my love and hope that in my love she could discern the love of Him who alone is capable of supporting the human soul at such a moment. Until we let women facing crisis pregnancies know that we love them, we should shut up about the politics and the morality of the issue or we will be false prophets and blind guides. Ask Congressman Akin.

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