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by NCR Staff

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The annual March for Life is slated to take place today with none other than President Donald Trump [as the headliner](#). NCR has published two opinion pieces recently pointing out the political aspects to the abortion debate, the first by Patrick Carolan and Brian McLaren, [asking for a change](#) in how we debate the issue. NCR political columnist [Michael Sean Winters writes](#) about how both sides of the abortion debate are falling short. Letters to the editor have been edited for length and clarity. To participate in the discussion, [follow the instructions](#) at the bottom.

It's naive not to consider the Catholic Church's role in the divide that exists today, what with running bake sales to fund trips to anti-abortion rallies in Washington, D.C., to the very position that use of any form of birth control is a sin requiring a confession, repentance, and penance, and until such has occurred, the sacrament of communion is off limits. It's naive to run retreats for married couples that specify sex should only occur when the couple desires conception to occur.

Consider all the campaigning that occurs from the pulpit and acknowledge the church owns the lion's share of the responsibility for the mess we're in today.

"No doubt, such extremists may exist, but we haven't met any." Who then is enacting laws that criminalize, restrict access to reproductive care and require doctors to perform medically impossible uterine implantation of ectopic pregnancy? Consider the extremists you posit might be out there. They're in positions of power endangering the reproductive lives of countless women.



Are you even aware that Catholic-run hospitals won't perform medically necessary terminations when it's obvious the fetus is dead and the mother's life is in danger? Are you aware that Catholic hospitals won't perform tubal ligations under any circumstances, even when a gynecologist has determined it to be medically necessary?

These draconian positions combined with the power of the pulpit are the primary reasons polarization has become the runaway train that it is. Look in the mirror first to acknowledge the church started the fire before putting it on the rest of us.

MARIA TURNER

Indianapolis, Indiana

At first read, it is tempting to be sympathetic to the views Patrick Carolan and Brian McLaren set out in their opinion piece, "It's time to change the abortion debate in America," because the world does seem to be becoming too divisive and polarized, and we need to exercise caution to not get enmeshed in it.

However, when in the article they state, "The fact is that life and choice are not mutually exclusive, and in a democracy, we can hold our own moral convictions about life and choice, rooted in our religious traditions, without feeling that others should be forced to live by them," we are not discussing how to dress for dinner or how someone else should practice their religion. We are talking about the values we hold when it comes to human life. The Ten Commandments, upon which we base our rule of law and justice system, condemns the taking of another's life, and even attempting or conspiring to do so.

The Catholic Church teaches us that life begins at conception, and thus according to church doctrine, intentionally taking that life is murder. Carolan and McLaren are suggesting that this may be the church's teaching, but we can mellow out a bit when it comes to our neighbors and not expect our country's laws to conform to the teachings of the Catholic Church. That is a challenge, especially if we consider the fetus an innocent human who through no fault of his or her own cannot experience life outside the womb.

Further, Carolan and McLaren seem to be suggesting that our world is becoming more divisive and we are becoming too polarized in our attitudes and values, and thus all the more reason for us to accept the values and traditions of others. Human history is not one of inclusion. Globalization has brought together peoples of different backgrounds, traditions and values. For everyone it is a period of adjustment and challenge. Throughout history we have alienated those different than ourselves, but the bar of acceptance and equality has been raised, and we must learn to assimilate if we are to live in harmony. Does this mean though that we must compromise our values?

In these challenging times our values are being tested. We must decide whether to cringe and hide our value of respect for all human life, or whether we can unabashedly stand behind our church's doctrine.

CATHARINA SUMMERS

Kingston, Ontario

Yes! This debate needs to be reframed. But there are two major flaws in the current debate that are not addressed by this proposal.

First, the current debate pits women's rights and needs against children's. Yet research shows that the well-being of children rise and fall with their mothers, not their fathers. It's a false premise that one can be chosen over the other.

Second, the current debate has been promoted, funded and brought into the law by men, not women. In my experience within public, religious and academic settings, the conversations of women are much more nuanced, respectful, compassionate, and informed by experience. It's time for men to stop talking over and around women and children and listen. The decisions rightly belong to women and so should the conversation.

I would be happier if this opinion was addressed to men and encouraged them to take a back seat as women consider the needs of both mothers and children.

CATHERINE MARESCA

Washington, D.C.

With regard to this new generation is there a wiser way to address the abortion issue then the commandment given by God to Moses?

MONICA DOYLE

St. Paul, Minnesota

I suggest we reframe the abortion debate in the following manner: First, we state that when human life begins, it is sacred and has a right to develop. Some scientists state that human life begins sometime shortly after conception. The fetus cannot survive and develop without the mother's support. But it is also true that newborn babies cannot develop and grow without adult intervention. Some scientists state that human life comes later in the development of the fetus. Both sides could support a deeper understanding of when human life begins and respect that the right to human life is to be respected by all.

Second, we should separate morality from legality. No one should be prosecuted for an abortion unless society agrees that human life is being taken. Some immoral actions are not prosecuted. For example, killing a human being is immoral or wrong but no one would be prosecuted for killing someone in self-defense.

I have oversimplified the abortion debate but would like to see one with this reframing happen.

BOB GRAF

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By all means. Let's begin by reframing the issue: the options are not life or choice, but life or death. No matter how many words are used, abortion kills a living, growing human embryo or fetus.

There is no question that a woman who finds herself in a crisis pregnancy is in a very serious situation. But there are always solutions other than abortion: She can carry the baby to term and either raise it, or she can place it in adoption. Never an easy decision, but as an obstetrician, I have had the privilege of working with many women in this situation.

The question is do we have the right to give away someone else's life for the sake of a sanitized debate? We can get ahead of the issue by preventing the crisis pregnancy. Nearly all abortions in this country are elective. The National Institutes of Health has approached this issue by fostering non-coital methods of contraception to

relieve women of the burden of taking a pill or inserting a device, or expecting a man to take precautions even though advocating "dual methods." (Since long acting reversible contraceptives have been introduced birth rates have decreased but sexually transmitted infections have tripled in the 15-25 year age groups.)

I have another suggestion: learn that fertility is not a disease but can be managed by learning the biomarkers of the woman's cycle and making adult decisions based on the information.

Shall we try it again?

HANNA KLAUS

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In a graduate moral theology class, a student made a comment once: "Has anyone noticed that generally speaking conservatives are pro-life and for the death penalty, while liberals are against the death penalty but are pro-abortion?" That general question, or statement, seemed to characterize a most poignant observation that seemed peculiarly accurate.

The discussion then ensued on the obvious innocence of the unborn while a convicted person could deserve forfeiting all rights, including his or her life.

While I commend the good intent of Patrick Carolan and Brian McLaren on the abortion debate, I would respectfully suggest that some issues of life and death are not debatable. I am a statistic of one and so is the aborted person. While many good and well-intentioned theologians argue against a dualistic way of thinking and pretend most things can occur on a spectrum, one cannot be somewhat alive or somewhat dead. It is an either-or proposition.

I think the error has been biting the hook that the right to life is a religious issue. I know atheists that find abortion is abhorring. Life is life, and it is not a religious issue. Many of us forget that.

PETE SUAREZ

Miami, Florida

I hoped for some refreshing thoughts in this commentary, as a Norwegian Catholic, unfortunately I was disappointed. The solution is simply the one advocated also from the pro-abortion side in Norway, which compared to the U.S. is relatively and absolutely much more superior and stronger than the pro-life side.

The pro-abortion side is obviously in favor of as few abortions as possible. Not for the sake of the non-born human, but simply because it is in the woman's interest as well. But to promote that in the U.S. is simply giving up advocating the Catholic moral position. That is what the church is doing in Norway simply because it has been defeated.

The Catholic Church in the U.S. has, fortunately, not been destroyed by the Reformation. The Norwegian Lutheran church has 500 years of history as a state-controlled church and is unable to be a correcting force in relation to the dominating view on abortion and other issues in my country. The commentary is proposing that the Catholic Church in the U.S. is running down the same road.

HÅKON BLEKEN

Oslo, Norway

Excellent and thought-provoking article. One thought is that the "pro-life" goal of eliminating abortion is of course unrealistic.

Nothing will ever eliminate abortion, especially now that effective, relatively safe and inexpensive abortifacients are readily available.

And, anyway, the lowest abortion rates are in countries where it is legal and there are governmental supportive programs for parental couples, pregnant women, the unborn, infants and children.

It is the care — not the law — that helps women decide to carry and give birth. This is Jesus' way. Relying on the state to curtail abortion by decreeing it illegal is Caesar's way.

As for the argument that churches and private agencies can meet all these life supporting and life encouraging needs better than government, the data show otherwise. For one example, 95% of food for the poor and hungry comes from government programs (that many pro-lifers want to cut) — and this includes the unborn with their continual need for intra-uterine nourishment. It seems better and wiser and kinder for the state to help in providing a support system for women, the unborn, infants and children than for the state to outlaw abortion.

We need to stop arguing and work together, especially us Christians, in helping more people choose life.

JIM LEIN

Minot, North Dakota

Finally — religious people who see both sides of the abortion issue! Abortion has been around since before *Roe vs. Wade*. And it will continue to be around if *Roe* is overturned. Before *Roe*, abortions were increasing at a rate that can be graphed as a line that's close to perpendicular. It had started going up when the pill became legal and continued at the same angle after *Roe*. That line began to go down once people began to talk about the moral dimension of abortion. Before that, it hadn't been discussed much.

Few people (and certainly not our government) have done the work to make abortion rare. It's easier to stand outside Planned Parenthood holding signs and shaming women who enter than it is to find out why those women are seeking abortions and try to make those reasons go away. I was amazed to learn that the country with the fewest abortions isn't one of the most religious; it's the relatively atheist Netherlands! And other Scandinavian countries are close. Those countries allow abortion but make sure that women receive prenatal care, postnatal care, care for their children, and help meeting other needs.

Meanwhile, our country is high on the scale of numbers of abortions and doesn't offer much in the way of aid to women who are pregnant or to children once they're out of the womb.

When will we ever learn?

MARILYN MARTIN

Tucson, Arizona

Unfortunately, the abortion debate is not about rationally reducing the number of abortions but is about firing up a base demonizing the other side and gaining political power via a culture war about changes in how people deal with sexuality, marriage, gender roles, masculinity and femininity, violence, race, class, church power and a number of issues that arose in significance in the 1960s. "Abortion" as an issue is in fact a demonization subject for all these other things, which has acquired an emotional power that those who benefit will not give up.

For those using this demonization to "stand down," they will need to either have this tactic become less effective in drawing emotional reaction to gain power, or will have to agree with the author that the harm done by this type of political power seeking is more destructive than it is beneficial to them. How do we do this?

STANLEY HIRTLE

Dayton, Ohio

Canada has half the rate of abortions per life births, as the U.S., even though abortion on demand is readily available in Canada. Could it possibly be lower in Canada because Canada has prenatal care, birth services, well baby care, postpartum care with no cost at the point of delivery of care; and one year of paid leave from employment after giving birth?

These services are not what we provide in the U.S., where mothers to be, and new mothers are on their own for medical care related to giving birth.

BOB KRASEN

Columbus, Ohio

Advertisement

"It's time to change the abortion debate in America" is a fine article that makes a valuable contribution to healing the polarization today in the United States, where individual participants in the abortion debates are almost universally persons of good will.

(Fr.) D. BRUCE NIELI, CSP

Austin, Texas

I am a Christian and a citizen.

Those identities should prompt voting to support the common good: fair housing, education, a clean and safe environment, a nurturing diet, and affordable healthcare.

How tragic that one plurality of the U.S. electorate fails to champion human dignity as enthusiastically for those granted breath as it does for the unborn. Such single-issue voting compromises the body of Christ.

Of course, it's simpler to vote pro-life as an act of faith. That decision is also ill-advised. It not only cheapens the Gospel message of grace for all, it also sanctions

- Record high deficit spending
- A relentless attack on the agencies charged with protecting our common resources for future generations
- Our dependence on fossil fuels
- Inequitable taxation
- The dismantlement of public education
- Disparate access to healthcare, and
- Fear of immigrants documented and undocumented.

Central to these concerns is this principle: All life figures into the ongoing act of creation.

God extends grace as much to women willing and unwilling to be mothers, as much to the emigrants now our neighbors as to immigrants seeking safety, as much to the poor as to the rich, as much to our seniors as children, as much to the sick as to the healthy.

We should recall as much when we vote and enact the many vocations of our citizenry.

DAVID THOMSON

Waco, Texas

As someone regarded on the political left, I agree with Michael Sean Winters that the left needs to engage the abortion debate in a sensible, compassionate and logical way. No one is going to have the whole enchilada as the extreme left views its current abortion-on-demand vantage.

The most convincing argument, I believe, is to adopt the position that abortion should be legal, safe and rare. We have seen abortion rates fall drastically when administrations have waged, if not a war, at least a battle by promoting programs that lift up hard-working poor families. The public pendulum seems to be swinging into at least some sensible restrictions against the mindset that abortion is just another acceptable form of birth control and/or survival of the fittest.

At present, rightists, including the leadership of the Catholic bishops, have gone bonkers in their support for President Donald Trump, who does nothing but throw them deceitful rhetoric and an occasional bone, like blocking federal health agencies from offering contraceptive services to poor women. Their belief that he has been promoting conservative judges on the Supreme Court to overthrow *Roe vs. Wade* is misplaced. He promotes rightist judges because they will support his extremist agenda of removing any regulations curbing his main base's voracious appetite for more wealth.

Others, including many good people who reject dialogue because they see their positions as absolute, such as many gun enthusiasts, anti-immigration advocates and pro-lifers, among others, get sucked into Trump's anti-intellectual, nihilist orbit.

FRANK MAUROVICH

Ossining, New York

I am impressed with Michael Sean Winters' perspective of both sides of the abortion debate. He states that believers of pro-life movement support President Donald Trump and his Republican lieutenants. Trump and Republican legislators are unwilling to welcome children and their parents into our country and instead have poor immigrant children die in out detention centers and are forced to be apart from their parents.

Our current administration promotes increases in funding for military spending at the expense of funding appropriate child care to assist young parents out poverty and encourage parents to increase their education.

I also liked Winters' statement that ignoring climate change is robbing our planet and future generations of valuable natural resources.

We need a more comprehensive view of abortion that is based on love and enhances a quality of life.

RON PAQUETTE

Biddeford, Maine

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