

Life Matters

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A Special Pre-Election Issue

By: Fred Dwyer

Just this week I received a letter in my e-mail from Fr. Frank Pavone, National Director, Priests for Life. As I read through it, I thought immediately of a current e-mail exchange with a Catholic who though highly involved in the Church, performing many charitable works, professes to believe that abortion is simply each woman's choice. I am quite saddened to hear that this good person can accept the destruction of pre-born human beings as simply an individual's choice. Naturally I sent Fr. Pavonne's letter to her. I further thought, if I have a friend who believes it's alright to simply accept abortion on demand, how many others in the parish have such a friend? Would they find Fr. Pavonne's thoughts useful? Therefore that letter (*Distorted Citizenship*) is reproduced on these pages, taking up nearly all of this issue. I do hope you will read and find it useful.

Distorted Citizenship

By: Fr. Frank Pavone,

National Director, Priests for Life

We seem to have a major problem in the Church in the area of reading comprehension. The problem is most obvious when the reading material asserts the primacy of abortion among issues that voters have to consider in elections.

Statements of the Pope, various Vatican officials, committees and officials of the

USCCB, and the entire body of US bishops, all point to abortion as the fundamental human rights issue of our day. Even Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who during his life was a key spokesperson for the "consistent ethic of life," pointed out repeatedly that the fundamental right is the right to life.

To illustrate how profound the reading comprehension problem is, just take a look at the list of quotes I have added at the end of these remarks. Then determine for yourself whether they are clear or not.

Meanwhile, we have people in various positions within the Church saying that all the issues are equal. Excuse me, but not only does that violate Catholic teaching, it violates common sense. Ask any parent whether, among their daily activities caring for their children, all issues are of equal importance. In fact, you can ask the children themselves. They seem to know the answer better than some Church officials do.

I've been acquiring a whole file of letters sent out, often from offices of "social ministry" in various dioceses, which state that voters have to consider a wide range of issues. So far, so good. But then these letters say that no issue is more important than another. And that's where the lack of reading comprehension reveals itself. Either they have never seen the quotes below, or they are deliberately ignoring them. And neither is appropriate for a person who has the responsibility to convey Church teaching.

Two explanations can be offered for why some would distort the teaching. The first is simply loyalty to [a political] party. The problem has to be faced honestly that the loyalty of some Church ministers to [their] Party is deeper than their loyalty to Catholic teaching. There is nothing wrong with belonging to a political party and being loyal to it. But when that party

promotes the widespread, daily, legal killing of children, the voice of protest must be heard. Silence is not an option, neither for Democrats, Republicans, or anyone else - most certainly [not for] Catholics.

The second explanation for the reading comprehension problem is a legal concern. Unfortunately, the Church has been fed for decades with legal advice which is far more restrictive of the Church's freedom than the IRS or the FEC has ever been. And this is wrong. Not only are the IRS/FEC restrictions on the Church minimal, but the enforcement policy is even looser. No Church has ever lost its tax exemption by teaching about abortion, or the primacy of the right to life, or the duty of public officials and voters to advance the Culture of Life by voting. No Church has ever lost its tax exemption for doing what it exists to do, namely, convey the teachings of the Church. No Church has ever lost its tax exemption for distributing materials that did not cover a wide-enough range of issues; in fact, no Church has lost its tax exemption for distributing voter guides, period.

Despite all this, various Church officials will go into all kinds of contortions to protect their assets from legal problems that they think will arise if the Church says that the right to life is primary among all the issues. Of course, the problem here is that this kind of legal advice, if it were accurate, would prove too much. Statements of the US Bishops themselves, like "Living the Gospel of Life" (1998), would constitute illegal activity under such an erroneous framework. The best way to describe the current problem with some of our attorneys is the bumper-sticker that says "I Brake for Hallucinations."

The solution to all of this is for all of us, clergy and laity alike, to bear faithful witness to the teachings of the Church, no matter what the political implications may be. Bear witness to the consistent ethic of life, and to that which makes it consistent --- the right to life. Proclaim that there are many rights, and proclaim the foundational right.

And be sure to keep your reading skills in top shape!

Abortion: The Primary Issue

According to Statements from the Pope and Bishops

The 1974 Declaration on Procured Abortion published by the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated, *"The first right of the human person is his life. He has other goods and some are more precious, but this one is fundamental, the condition of all the others."*

Pope John Paul II elaborates on this theme in his 1988 apostolic exhortation, *The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (Christifideles Laici)* in the following passage: *"The inviolability of the person, which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God, finds its primary and fundamental expression in the inviolability of human life. Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights -- for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture --- is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition of all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination . . ."*

In 1989, in their Resolution on Abortion, the US bishops stated, *"At this particular time, abortion has become the fundamental human rights issue for all men and women of good will...For us abortion is of overriding concern because it negates two of our most fundamental moral imperatives: respect for innocent life, and preferential concern for the weak and defenseless."*

In *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae, 1995)*, Pope John Paul II pointed out that there is a wide array of life issues and attacks on human dignity about which we must be actively concerned. He then, however, points to abortion and euthanasia as attacks of "another category" and of "extraordinary seriousness." He explains what he means as follows:

"It is not only that in generalized opinion these attacks tend no longer to be considered as "crimes"; paradoxically they assume the nature of "rights", to the point that the State is called upon to give them legal recognition and to make them available through the free services of health-care personnel. Such attacks strike human life at the time of its greatest frailty, when it lacks any means of self-defense. Even more serious is the fact that, most often, those attacks are carried out in the very heart of and with the complicity of the family ---the family which by its nature is called to be the 'sanctuary of life' "(n.11).

In 1998, the US Bishops issued *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*. Paragraphs 21-23 of that document discuss the relative importance of various issues as follows:

21. *"Bringing a respect for human dignity to practical politics can be a daunting task. There is such a wide spectrum of issues involving the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity. Good people frequently disagree on which problems to address, which policies to adopt and how best to apply them. But for citizens and elected officials alike, the basic principle is simple: We must begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing, of any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled, or desperate that life may seem. In other words, the choice of certain ways of acting is always and radically incompatible with the love of God and the dignity of the human person created in His image. Direct abortion is never a morally tolerable option. It is always a grave act of violence against a woman and her unborn child. This is so even when a woman does not see the truth because of the pressures she may be subjected to, often by the child's father, her parents or friends. Similarly, euthanasia and assisted suicide are never acceptable acts of mercy. They always gravely exploit the suffering and desperate, extinguishing life in the name of the "quality of life" itself. This same teaching against direct killing of the innocent condemns all direct attacks on innocent civilians in time of war.*

22. *"Pope John Paul II has reminded us that we must respect every life, even that of criminals and unjust aggressors. It is increasingly clear in modern society that capital punishment is unnecessary to protect people's safety and the public order, so that cases where it may be justified are "very rare, if not practically non-existent." No matter how serious the crime, punishment that does not take life is "more in conformity with the dignity of the human person" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 56-7). Our witness to respect for life shines most brightly when we demand respect for each and every human life, including the lives of those who fail to show that respect for others. The antidote to violence is love, not more violence.*

23. *"Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care. Therefore, Catholics should eagerly involve themselves as advocates for the weak and marginalized in all these areas. Catholic public officials are obliged to address each of these issues as they seek to build consistent policies which promote respect for the human person at all stages of life. But being 'right' in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life. Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the 'rightness' of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community. If we understand the human person as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" -- the living house of God -- then these latter issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house's foundation. These directly and immediately violate the human person's most fundamental right -- the right to life. Neglect of these issues is the equivalent of building our house on sand. Such attacks cannot help but lull the social conscience in ways ultimately destructive of other human rights."*

The Pastoral Plan for Pro-life Activities of the US Bishops has always pointed out the priority of abortion, and the most recent version of the plan (2001: A Campaign in Support of Life) explains it this way:

"Among important issues involving the dignity of human life with which the Church is concerned, abortion necessarily plays a central role. Abortion, the direct killing of an innocent human being, is always gravely immoral (The Gospel of Life, no. 57); its victims are the most vulnerable and defenseless members of the human family. It is imperative that those who are called to serve the least among us give urgent attention and priority to this issue of justice.

"This focus and the Church's commitment to a consistent ethic of life complement one another. A consistent ethic of life, which explains the Church's teaching at the level of moral principle, far from diminishing concern for abortion and euthanasia or equating all issues touching on the dignity of human life, recognizes instead the distinctive character of each issue while giving each its proper place within a coherent moral vision."

Faithful Citizenship (2003) quotes Living the Gospel of Life 5 as follows: *"As we wrote in Living the Gospel of Life, "Abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human life and dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental good and the condition for all others." Abortion, the deliberate killing of a human being before birth, is never morally acceptable."*

Bishop Elio Sgreccia, Vice-President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, said the following in an interview conducted in May, 2004: *"Without respect for life, without respect for the family, society simply does not exist...all [other] rights presuppose the right to life. If the right to life is not defended, the defense of all these other rights is useless. It becomes a lie, because it would mean that the defense to the right to work, to society, etc. applies only to some, and not to all."*

Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said the following in an interview conducted in May, 2004: *"The Holy Father speaks of the protection of life as the fundamental realization and respect for human rights. Without that realization, without that respect for the right to life, no other discussion of human rights can continue; it must be based upon the foundation of human dignity and the right to life."*

Archbishop John Foley, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications at the Vatican, said the following in an interview conducted in May, 2004: *"Generally, law is needed to protect the weakest members of society because strong members of society, the rich, the powerful, the strong can usually take care of themselves but the weakest members of society need the protections of society itself and the help of society itself. That is why we need laws to protect the weak against violence from outside. The weakest members of society are the unborn. They have no other spokespersons except, you might say, society itself. So we must defend the rights of the innocent unborn...If we don't have life we don't have anything."*

In July, 2004, Priests for Life also interviewed representatives of the United States Bishops' Conference and asked whether, in the view of the bishops it was true to say that abortion is the number one most urgent moral issue.

Cathleen Cleaver Ruse, Director of Planning and Information for the Pro-life Secretariat of the US Bishops' Conference, responded, *"Sure, that's absolutely true. The church has taught on this issue of abortion and its immorality since the Apostolic Age. It's one of our longest standing moral public policy issues and it is not like any other issue really. It is, some might say, it's non-negotiable. There are no instances where it is morally licit or justifiable. That sets it apart from other issues like capital punishment, like just war theory and many other social issues that are very, very important but don't have that kind of no exceptions policy. So, the way the Church looks*

at abortion - abortion is one of those fundamental issues. If that right is taken away, if the very right to life is taken away then no other right matters. You don't have the ability to hold another right or to have another right taken away. So, while health care, the right to a good education, housing all of these issues are very, very important, they are meaningless if the right to life is not first protected."

"If social issues are like a house then the foundation is the right to life. An abortion takes away or rips out the foundation. The many other social issues can be considered the walls of that house but they can't be built unless there's a foundation."

Richard Doerflinger, Deputy Director of the Pro-life Secretariat of the US Bishops' Conference, echoed the same theme:

"What the Church has said is that because it is the first gift from a loving God and the condition for all other human goods, all our other rights - life itself has to be a top priority it is the most basic gift and if we lose the right to live we lose everything else. Now within the whole network of issues about life, the first priority has to be the right of each individual at every stage simply to exist at all. To be inviolable. To be free from direct attacks. So the church has said that issues that involve direct attacks on innocent human life - and in our society today, obviously abortion which takes over a million lives in the United States every year - issues like euthanasia for the terminally ill are primary. They are the most basic threats to human life because they are direct attacks on life because they attack innocent life that's not doing anybody else harm or attacking anybody else and because they are attacking life at its most vulnerable and defenseless - the very stages where children and the elderly should be able to expect the respect and protection of their families because it is where they are weakest and most vulnerable.

"What the Bishop's said in their 1998 document Living the Gospel of Life, was that this whole edifice of human goods and ways of enhancing

human life are like a house but the other issues that enhance the quality of life for everyone are like the walls of the house and protecting the inviolability of life itself from attack is like the foundation. You cannot have a house anymore if you don't have a foundation. It's meaningless to say we are going to enhance all these qualities of human life and say that human life itself has no inherent worth. Those have to primary. Everything else grows from that. We promote a consistent ethic of life and at the same time there are priorities, some things are more fundamental than others."

Following are some statements by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who was one of the key spokespersons on the "consistent ethic of life."

In 1984, Cardinal Bernardin wrote: *"Our "Statement on Political Responsibility" has always been, like our "Respect Life Program," a multi-issue approach to public morality. The fact that this Statement sets forth a spectrum of issues of current concern to the Church and society should not be understood as implying that all issues are qualitatively equal from a moral perspective...As I indicated earlier, each of the life issues, while related to all the others, is distinct and calls for its own specific moral analysis. "(A Consistent Ethic of Life: Continuing the Dialogue, The William Wade Lecture Series, St. Louis University, March 11, 1984)."*

"A consistent ethic of life does not equate the problem of taking life (e.g., through abortion and in war) with the problem of promoting human dignity (through humane programs of nutrition, health care, and housing). But a consistent ethic identifies both the protection of life and its promotion as moral questions" (Wade lecture, as above).

A year later, he declared, *"The fundamental human right is to life, from the moment of conception until death. It is the source of all other rights, including the right to health care" (The Consistent Ethic of Life and Health Care Systems, Foster McGaw Triennial Conference, Loyola University of Chicago, May 8, 1985).*

On Respect Life Sunday, 1 October 1989, Cardinal Bernardin issued a statement entitled "Deciding for Life," in which he said, *"Not all values, however, are of equal weight. Some are more fundamental than others. On this Respect Life Sunday, I wish to emphasize that no earthly value is more fundamental than human life itself. Human life is the condition for enjoying freedom and all other values. Consequently, if one must choose between protecting or serving lesser human values that depend upon life for their existence and life itself, human life must take precedence. Today the recognition of human life as a fundamental value is threatened. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of elective abortion. At present in our country this procedure takes the lives of over 4,000 unborn children every day and over 1.5 million each year."*

With that final quotation, Fr. Pavone ended his letter

An Excerpt from the Oct. 13 U.S. Presidential Candidates' Debate

As reported on LifeSite.net

SCHIEFFER: The New York Times reports that some Catholic archbishops are telling their church members that it would be a sin to vote for a candidate like you because you support a woman's right to choose an abortion and unlimited stem-cell research. What is your reaction to that?

KERRY: I respect their views. I completely respect their views. I am a Catholic. And I grew up learning how to respect those views. But I disagree with them, as do many. I believe that I can't legislate or transfer to another American citizen my article of faith. What is an article of faith for me is not something that I can legislate on somebody who doesn't share that article of faith. I believe that choice is a woman's choice. It's between a woman, God and her doctor. And that's why I support that. Now, I will not allow somebody to come in and change Roe v. Wade. The president has never said whether or not he would do that. But we know from the people he's tried to appoint to the court he wants to. I will not. I will defend the right of Roe v. Wade. Now, with respect to religion, you know, as I said, I grew up a Catholic. I was an altar boy. I

know that throughout my life this has made a difference to me. And as President Kennedy said when he ran for president, he said, "I'm not running to be a Catholic president. I'm running to be a president who happens to be Catholic." My faith affects everything that I do, in truth. There's a great passage of the Bible that says, "What does it mean, my brother, to say you have faith if there are no deeds? Faith without works is dead." And I think that everything you do in public life has to be guided by your faith, affected by your faith, but without transferring it in any official way to other people. That's why I fight against poverty. That's why I fight to clean up the environment and protect this earth. That's why I fight for equality and justice. All of those things come out of that fundamental teaching and belief of faith. But I know this, that President Kennedy in his inaugural address told all of us that here on Earth, God's work must truly be our own. And that's what we have to -- I think that's the test of public service.

SCHIEFFER: Mr. President?

BUSH: I think it's important to promote a culture of life. I think a hospitable society is a society where every being counts and every person matters. I believe the ideal world is one in which every child is protected in law and welcomed to life. I understand there's great differences on this issue of abortion, but I believe reasonable people can come together and put good law in place that will help reduce the number of abortions. Take, for example, the ban on partial birth abortion. It's a brutal practice. People from both political parties came together in the halls of Congress and voted overwhelmingly to ban that practice. It made a lot of sense. My opponent, in that he's out of the mainstream, voted against that law. What I'm saying is that as we promote life and promote a culture of life, surely there are ways we can work together to reduce the number of abortions: continue to promote adoption laws -- it's a great alternative to abortion -- continue to fund and promote maternity group homes; I will continue to promote abstinence programs. The last debate, my opponent said his wife was involved with those programs. That's great. I appreciate that very much. All of us ought to be involved with programs that provide a viable alternative to abortion.