

Why the issue of abortion is still the preeminent priority

It is the belief of this pro-life leader that those who consider abortion as merely one issue among others see abortion as just that—*an issue*. They don't see 60 million dead people.



“It is not Catholic that abortion is the preeminent issue that we face as a world in Catholic social teaching. It is not.”

Bishop Robert McElroy of the Diocese of San Diego boldly declared these words **during a heated debate** earlier this month at the annual fall meeting of the bishops, held in Baltimore. Since the Supreme Court decision of 1973 that imposed legalized abortion on the entire nation, one would be hard pressed to find any other bishop speak so forcefully *against* the decades-long position of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops that abortion is the “preeminent” social justice concern believers should consider when they go to the polls.

McElroy made his comment when amendments were considered to a letter that would accompany the 2015 document ***Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*** (FC), the primary text of the USCCB on Catholic political responsibility. The treatise is meant to provide guidance on how Catholics should apply the Church's social thought when they go to the polls. FC teaches that of all the social injustices of which Catholics need to be concerned “abortion remains our preeminent priority.” Debate was stirred when Cardinal Blaise Cupich strongly proposed that paragraph 101 of Pope Francis' 2018 apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* be included in its entirety. That paragraph reads:

The other harmful ideological error is found in those who find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist. Or they relativize it, as if there are other more important matters, or the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend. Our defence of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. (84)

Coming to Cupich's aid, McElroy wanted "abortion remains our preeminent priority" removed from FC, and if not, that article 101 of the pope's exhortation be included with the intention to mitigate the pastoral's emphasis on abortion. Cupich himself stated that FC needed to reflect the "Francis magisterium" that other issues are "equally sacred" and that defending the unborn is not "the only thing that counts."

By a vote of 143-69 the Cupich intervention failed. Instead the bishops, in a kind of compromise, quote in part article 101 where the pope notes that other lives are "equally sacred" and provides a footnote to that article. The bishops recognize that indeed there are other social issues. However, regarding abortion FC declares:

The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed. At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life and dignity such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty and the death penalty.

Our efforts to protect the unborn remain as important as ever, for just as the Supreme Court may allow greater latitude for state laws restricting abortion, state legislators have passed statutes not only keeping abortion legal through all nine months of pregnancy but opening the door to infanticide. Additionally, abortion contaminates many other important issues by being inserted into legislation regarding immigration, care for the poor, and health care reform.

Article 22 states abortion is the preeminent issue because abortion is an "intrinsically evil" action that "must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned." The bishops even identify the right-to-life as "the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 5)."

Article 28 of FC, within the context of abortion, explicitly denies that all social justice issues have equal weight and notes two mistaken approaches to the application of Catholic social doctrine:

The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity. The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed.

In article 29 the bishops caution against “the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity.” In other words, it is wrong to act as if no other social justice issues exist besides abortion.

However, footnote 3 in the above quote cites **the “Doctrinal Note” issued seventeen years ago** this weekend by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was prefect. The note directly addressed the problem of the Catholic politician who lives “two parallel lives”—those who separate their faith commitment from their political actions:

In the face of fundamental and inalienable ethical demands, Christians must recognize that what is at stake is the essence of the moral law, which concerns the integral good of the human person. This is the case with laws concerning abortion and euthanasia. . . . Such laws must defend the basic right to life from conception to natural death. (4)

Vatican II and John Paul II

Abortion is the preeminent social justice issue because the protection of human life presents “fundamental and inalienable ethical demands” in a way other, even very grave moral evils, do not. “What is at stake is the essence of the moral law.”

The claim that abortion is the preeminent social issue stands on plenty of doctrinal solid ground. Vatican II’s *Guadium et spes* states: “Therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes” (51). No other grave injustice is condemned by the Church in such strong, severe language.

Moreover, in article 62 of *Evangelium vitae*, John Paul II went so far as to declare that the Church’s condemnation of direct abortion is an infallible teaching.

Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops—who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine—I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.

No other serious injustice, except for euthanasia, has received such a solemn clarification. Consider also John Paul II’s teaching in *Christifideles laici*:

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 for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination. (38)

The injustice of abortion is the preeminent social justice issue because the right-to-life, so violated in abortion, *is the condition for all other rights*. In this we need no other argument.

In 1998, the bishops at the end of that year's November meeting issued a pastoral letter titled ***Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics***. Adopting the consistent ethic of life approach to social justice issues the bishops admonished that “abortion and euthanasia does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. 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” (22).

However, the bishops go to say: “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.” And if anyone has any doubt that abortion is affirmed as having priority in the hierarchy of social justice concerns the bishops state:

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. As Pope John Paul II reminds us, the command never to kill establishes a minimum which we must respect and from which we must start out ‘in order to say ‘yes’ over and over again, a ‘yes’ which will gradually embrace the entire horizon of the good” (*Evangelium vitae*, 75).

The right-to-life is characterized as “most fundamental.” Abortion and euthanasia, unlike other social evils are “direct attacks on innocent human life”—attacks that “strike at the house's foundation.” And if the right-to-life is attacked the conscience is dulled that is “ultimately destructive of other human rights.” All of this certainly supports why abortion and the life-issues have “preeminent priority.”

We could quote Church documents all day long, but let's cut to the chase. When it comes to abortion the first thing to be considered is the horrific body count. No other grave injustice in America, or in the world, has claimed as many lives. In the United States over 60 million

human beings have been put to death since 1973. No other group of people perishes at the rate of 3000 per day as do the unborn. Moreover, no other group—even those who are victimized and oppressed—are formally declared by law to be “non-persons.” Only the unborn have been systematically and legally cast out of the human community. For the purposes of their right-to-life the unborn are reduced to the level of a thing; even worse than a thing, they are reduced to trash, their bodies treated as so much waste or sold for scientific research.

The unborn are the most oppressed group in America. Their oppression should shake us to the core of our souls as only these totally innocent persons are subjected to a violent obliteration protected by law. The injustice of abortion is staggering. And for all the foregoing reasons, even if the bishops never say so—abortion is the preeminent priority as a social justice issue. Thus it is incumbent on the shepherds of the Christ’s flock to guide the conscience of the Catholic voter to first take the injustice of abortion into account when selecting public officials.

Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, and Cardinal Bernardin

And let’s examine paragraph 101 of *Gaudete et exsultate*. Pope Francis says that other lives are “equally sacred,” to those of the unborn. But even though this is absolutely true and must never be denied, this doesn’t mean that all injustices are equally urgent. For instance, every child in the family is equally sacred, but the fact is, one child may need extra care, attention and resources, say for instance the child who is ill, handicapped or especially troubled—and the care may need to be given immediately. The extra swift attention spent on that child in no way indicates that the lives of the other children are less precious.

However, it’s not as if Cardinal Cupich has no leg to stand on. Indeed, while article 101 could have been inserted into FC without detracting from abortion as the “preeminent priority”, albeit with some proper explanation, article 102 of the pope’s exhortation is more troubling. There Francis states:

We often hear it said that, with respect to relativism and the flaws of our present world, the situation of migrants, for example, is a lesser issue. Some Catholics consider it a secondary issue compared to the ‘grave’ bioethical questions. That a politician looking for votes might say such a thing is understandable, but not a Christian, for whom the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children.

Francis seems to assert that the plight of the illegal immigrant is equal to the plight of those who suffer abortion. Yes, Christians should be concerned about the rights of those who wish to migrate to another country especially when they seek to escape oppression and poverty. But can the injustices that immigrants may face and the evil of abortion be equated? There is at least one, if not several differences between the plight of immigrants and the plight of the unborn. We can start with the fact that the right-to-life is inviolable

and even John Paul II in EV declared as infallible teaching that “the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral.” And abortion as the preeminent issue received support from EV 58: “Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable.” Human beings have a right to immigrate to another country, but this is not an absolute right as is the case with the right-to-life.

The problem we face between those who insist on equalizing all moral ills and those who insist that abortion has priority is that of political identity. Sadly, the Democratic Party advocates and defends legalized abortion, while the Republican Party, by and large, supports the right-to life. Thus, the pro-life movement, having nowhere else to go, is politically dependent on that party. Many Catholics abhor the Republican Party and especially abhor the Republican who now occupies the White House. Therefore, Catholics who ally themselves with Democrats, knowing that party’s support for abortion contradicts Church teaching, must justify their allegiance by asserting other social evils are as important as abortion—or even more important. The pro-life movement is marked by a political conservatism which some find odious and with which they refuse to be identified.

The debate over the gravity of the injustice of abortion when compared to other social evils is certainly nothing new. Those who believe abortion is only one issue among several find strong support from the “Seamless Garment” speeches of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, delivered in 1983 and 1984.

Those who don’t see abortion as the primary instance of injustice, and who may actually support legalized abortion have used Bernardin’s “consistent ethic of life” as a club to beat the pro-life movement seeking to dilute its political influence, divert attention away from the killing of the unborn and believe they’ve been given a justification to support candidates and a party that directly defends a law that sends millions of people to their deaths. After all, other “life” issues are equally important. Even if Bernardin never intended it, arguably this has been the chief outcome of his “seamless garment” proposal. Thus, nearly forty years after Bernardin gave those speeches, a bishop can actually say, “It is not Catholic that abortion is the preeminent issue.”

It is important to notice that even Bernardin identified the single moral principle guiding the “seamless garment”, namely “prohibition against direct attacks on life ... central to the Catholic moral vision.”

It is the belief of this pro-life leader that those who consider abortion as merely one issue among others see abortion as just that—*an issue*. They don’t see 60 million dead people. The unborn are essentially silent, invisible victims and thus it is easy to never be personally affected by their absence. Indeed, it is because their plight is so innately hidden, their killing sanitized, and their existence easily dismissed, that this oppressed class needs extra, urgent attention. When the bishops assert, in the face of nearly unprecedented opposition from within their own ranks, that abortion is the “preeminent priority” – we must take it to heart and end this slaughter.