

Pro-Lifers need to talk about it all

With the recent attention to both the March for Women and the March for Life, I'm noticing an upswing in the chatter over what pro-lifers really stand for. The typical criticism goes something like: "You people only care about babies until they're born!" or "You're not pro-life, you're pro-fetus!"

This is unfortunate.

First of all, because it's unfair. Yes, there are some sad, strange people out there who are hung up on the issue of abortion though they bear no reverence for human life in the first place. Take abortion clinic bombers. Or some who cheered candidate Trump's promise to kill the families of terrorism suspects. Or the trolls who recently commented online that my dear friend should have been aborted because they disliked a (maybe/kind of/not really pro-choice) image she was associated with. Thankfully, those people are rare. (And they shouldn't even be called pro-life.)

And yes, there are some pro-lifers who can be thoughtless and inconsistent in how they conduct themselves. Sometimes the same woman who prays rosaries for unborn babies is decidedly unloving to the women who carry them. Sometimes people seem unable to transfer their affection for innocent, defenseless babies to the somewhat less innocent, defenseless people those babies grow into. I won't defend this behavior, but I will point out that we're all sometimes inconsistent. We're all sometimes wrong. We all have things to work on within ourselves, and we should all get to working on them.

What I really want to talk about is the rest of us. Those of us who genuinely care about human life, who aim to protect it, who try to be consistent, but who differ on which efforts should be emphasized. Here's what I see in the Catholic pro-life community: (I can't speak to the rest of it.)

I see social-justice-minded people (you might say liberals) who honestly care about the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death, but who think that bishops and other church leaders have focused on abortion at the expense of other issues. They want to see people speak up for vulnerable individuals who have already been born. They want to defend the child living in poverty, the undocumented neighbor, the family seeking refuge from a war-torn country, the man condemned to death. They oppose abortion, but they want to focus on these "least of these" because they feel like too many - including too many pro-lifers - have ignored them.

I see conservatives who honestly care about the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death, but who feel that pro-lifers should be aiming the bulk of their efforts at the most elemental right of all: the right to be born. They want more

than anything else to see people join together to bring down the legal “right” to abortion and the industry that makes it possible. They may in theory support those living in poverty, or immigrants, or refugees, or those sentenced to capital punishment, but they feel like they will only be able to move on to other issues when their “least of these” – the unborn – have been protected.

(I should admit that conservatives seem to be split further into at least two camps: those who mostly agree with the social justice crew on how we should assist and protect vulnerable individuals, and those who would disagree, whose fiscal conservatism leads them to value private over public efforts to help those in need. This is another discussion for another time.)

I also see the hybrid: the people who can’t be mistaken as those who care about the unborn at the expense of the born or the born at the expense of the unborn. People who march against abortion and stand vigil for prisoners being executed. People who tutor immigrants in English and drop off supplies at crisis pregnancy centers. People who write letters encouraging their legislators to pass restrictions on abortion and to allow refugees into our country. People who embrace, and who are ready to tell you about, the full meaning of the label “pro-life.”

It’s natural that we should vary in our attachment to various issues, so I don’t mean to tell one set of pro-lifers or another that they’re wrong in focusing their efforts on x,y,z. You do you: pray at an abortion clinic, volunteer at a soup kitchen, donate to Catholic Charities / Catholic Relief Services / National Right to Life. Do your part, whatever it is, to advance the dignity of human life.

But I do think that all pro-lifers should do a better job of talking about it all. Liberal pro-lifers should speak against abortion just as they speak against poverty and discrimination. Conservative pro-lifers should speak for the immigrant and the refugee just as they speak for the babies. Because this divide has become too divisive. There is too much resentment. There is too much misunderstanding. There is too much distrust. There is too much space for evil to sneak its way in.

And there are too many women who hear that pro-lifers “only care about babies until they’re born” and believe it.

The honest truth is, each side of this divide is incomplete without the other. If human life is to be respected, it’s to be respected at all stages. If human life is to be respected, it is to be respected in all forms. If we Catholic pro-lifers truly believe that each human being is created in the image and likeness of God, then we’d better talk like we do. We’d better dwell on that idea, chew on it, practice it by saying it aloud.



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