

The two Americas

By the dawn's early light on Nov. 5, two distinct Americas hove into view. The two Americas are not defined by conventional economic, ethnic or religious categories; it's not rich America vs. poor America, black America vs. white America, or Catholic America vs. Protestant America. No, what this year's election cycle clarified decisively is that the great public fissure in these United States is between the culture of life and the culture of death.

In 1995, when Pope John Paul II introduced the phrase "culture of death" in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* [The Gospel of Life], more than a few commentators coughed politely and tried to suggest, if gently, that this terminology was a bit over-the-top - too dramatic, too confrontational, incapable of being heard by those it was intended to persuade. Thirteen years later, it is obvious that the critics were wrong and John Paul the Great was right. The pope saw more clearly into the future, thanks to his insight into the forces at work beneath the surface of the present. Now those forces are plainly in view, and the results are clear for all with eyes to see:

The people of the United States have elected the most radically pro-abortion presidential candidate in American history, and by the largest popular vote percentage garnered by a Democrat since Lyndon B. Johnson.

The people of the State of Washington have adopted, in a landslide, an act permitting the euthanizing of the sick, elderly and burdensome under the Orwellian rubrics of "death with dignity" and "physician-assisted suicide."

The people of California have exercised their sovereign will to prevent the parents of minors from being notified if their daughter intends to have an abortion - although you may be quite certain that said parents would be consulted before said minor's school nurse administered an aspirin tablet.

And the people of Michigan have decided to authorize a wholesale slaughter of human embryos for research purposes - at precisely the moment that embryonic stem-cell research has lost much of its scientific luster, thanks to developments in the reprogramming of adult stem cells.

Culture of death, indeed.

What is to be done?

The first order of business at the national level is to prevent the new Congress from passing the federal Freedom of Choice Act [FOCA], an explicit attempt to destroy every state-based pro-life legal achievement of the past three decades. If prevention is impossible and FOCA is enacted, then it must be vigorously challenged in the federal courts. The stakes are very, very high: in addition to facilitating a greater slaughter of the innocents, FOCA, by eliminating state conscience-clause protections for pro-life health care professionals, would create a situation in which the Catholic health care system as we know it would cease to exist, within a decade at most.

Then we come to adult catechesis. This year, the pro-abortion candidate carried every state in what Maggie Gallagher calls the “Decadent Catholic Corridor” - the Northeast and the older parts of the Midwest. Too many Catholics there are still voting the way their grandparents did, and because that’s what their grandparents did. This tribal voting has been described by some bishops as immoral; it is certainly stupid, and it must be challenged by adult education. That includes effective use of the pulpit to unsettle settled patterns of mindlessness. This year, a gratifying number of bishops began to accept the responsibilities of their teaching office; so, now, must parish pastors.

We need more persuasive ideas and language in the fight against euthanasia. Yes, the good guys were outspent in Washington State by orders of magnitude - and that should cause serious examinations of conscience among Catholic philanthropies and individuals of means. But, as in the debate over embryo-destructive stem-cell research, the culture of life has yet to develop a language that trumps the invocation of “compassion” when that’s misused by the culture of death.

And we need prayer - lots of it. Some demons require special powers to exorcize. As of Nov. 5, it is clear that certain of them have taken up residence in the United States of America.

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