

'Pro-life' means no 'ifs,' 'ands' or 'buts'

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It might prove helpful to review the Church's full understanding of its pro-life moral stance.

First, let's acknowledge that the Church has been pro-life from the first moments of Her existence in Her teaching and practice. Even a brief look at the Church's sacraments sees the clarity of their message of life: Baptism brings one from the death of sin to the life of sanctifying grace; Penance offers one the opportunity to reclaim the life of grace lost by sinful choices; Eucharist is the food of life; Confirmation is the gift of a deepened life in the Spirit; Marriage is the sanctification of sexual union, making it a life-giving commitment; and Anointing of the Sick provides a path from sickness and death to healing and life, whether earthly or heavenly.

Similarly, we find in the earliest non-biblical Christian text, the Didaché, which dates from somewhere around the end of the first century, a clear condemnation of abortion. From Her inception the Church has asked those approaching baptism to choose always on behalf of life. Thus, it is understandable why the mission of the Church --- proclaiming the reign of God --- has been called the *Evangelium Vitae* or Gospel of Life, by Pope John Paul II.

In his encyclical of 1995 he makes it clear that to "be" Catholic is to "be" pro-life. This identity is essentially what ensures pro-life choices, pro-life actions. Pope John Paul II states: "The Church acknowledges this value (the incomparable value of every human person)...She feels called to proclaim to the people of all times this "Gospel," the source of invincible hope and true joy for every period in history."

There are several important aspects of the Church's pro-life stand that perhaps demand more attention than they get. Let me suggest that the Catholic commitment to life is marked, at the least, by three indelible aspects:

- It is a positive and pro-active ethic rather than a negative and passive ethic.
- It must be consistent.
- It must be exception-less, if it is to be authentic.

To be positive and pro-active means that our pro-life morality is at its essence a stance that propels us to protect and enhance our own lives and the lives of all of our brothers and sisters. To define our stance only or even primarily as "anti" anything misses the power of the Church's mission to proclaim the presence of the reign of God, the Gospel of life. Our primary mission is to make it clear that the Christian message is, at its heart, "the good news."

There is absolutely no doubt that certain actions are in and of themselves, anti-life and intrinsically evil. But while denunciation of structural evils, like abortion and euthanasia, should and must be a part of our pro-life stance, they can never define it in its entirety or we miss the power of Christ's message.

Jesus made it clear that the commandments given to Moses at Sinai cannot contain the fullness of the New Law, the Law of Christ. It is not enough that we do not slander, steal from or murder our neighbor. Those who walk in the reign of God must love their enemy. Jesus' powerful parable of the final judgment, found in Matthew 25, makes it clear that the pro-life stance demanded of each us includes feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting those in jail and in hospitals.

This positive pro-life stance is further articulated in more than 100 years of Catholic Social Teaching, making it clear that building political and economic structures of justice are just as essential to being pro-life as is the denunciation of anti-life laws and political agendas. As Catholics we must not only defend life, but we must promote life. These are not competing pro-life goals, they are complementary.

Together, both defending and promoting life are essential to an authentic pro-life commitment. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "The Gospel of God's love for us, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of life, are a single indivisible Gospel."

Secondly, we are stewards of our physical lives and those of all of our sisters and brothers from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. This consistent ethic of life solidifies and authenticates a true pro-life approach. All life comes from God and belongs to God.

Some have complained that an equal emphasis on protecting the right to a natural death for the convicted criminal in death row weakens or dilutes the anti-abortion message. On the contrary, it is only by insisting on consistency in our stance that the Church maintains the moral integrity essential to proclaiming God's providence over the unborn. John Paul II addresses this directly when he says: "Thus the deepest element of God's commandment to protect human life is the requirement to show reverence and love for every human person" (*Evangelium Vitae*).

Lastly, to be truly pro-life, one must make no room for exceptions. In other words, there are no "ifs," "ands" or "buts" in a consistent ethic of life.

Divine Revelation is clear in that every person is created in the image of God. This, of course, lies at the foundation of authentic pro-life morality. Whether one is conceived in or outside of wedlock, one is no less created in the image of God. The Church can never accept the argument that children conceived as a result of the very real tragedies of rape or incest can be aborted. Neither does the intent to use stem cells for scientific or medical research justify the destruction of human embryos, the tiniest and most vulnerable of all human beings.

Along these same lines, there are too many other examples in human history of exceptions to the consistent ethic of life, even among Christian peoples. For example, the status of personhood was denied to people through the institution of slavery. Even some theologians and Catholic monarchs defended this intrinsically evil practice partly on the premise that individuals belonging to particular cultures (particular those indigenous peoples of Africa and South America) had no souls. Tragically, the legacy of slavery remains a sinful part of contemporary society as evident in the multiple manifestations of prejudice that remain both overtly and covertly present. One needs look no further than the recent tragedies in New Orleans to see evidence of that.

The absolute protection of the innate and inalienable dignity of every person is an essential aspect of the proclamation of the reign of God. The unborn, the undocumented, the handicapped, the incapacitated, the immigrant, the poor and, yes, the privileged all demand that we stand by their side and protect their lives and their opportunities to flourish.

Finally, we need to address those who would protect only the "innocent." Who are the innocent? I can think of only one, the Blessed Mother. Are not all of us conceived in original sin? Our pro-life stance embraces every person equally or it is not truly pro-life. Let us not forget the clear teaching of the church:

"...whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain ...all these things and others like them are infamies indeed" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 27).

To be pro-life is to be pro-active, consistent and exception-less in our proclamation of the Gospel of Life.

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