

Anti-Catholic Bigotry Again Rears Its Head

By Fr. F. L. Lennon, O. P.

Anti-Catholic bigotry in Rhode Island reared its ugly head in a letter to Rep. Jack Reed by a group of 13 Protestant ministers and 6 Jewish rabbis.

They informed the Congressman that they were troubled by the action of the Roman Catholic bishops in encouraging members of the Catholic Church to oppose abortion coverage in a national health care reform bill.

I ask these reverend gentlemen and lady: Would you deny Catholic bishops their civil right to counsel their flock about the heinousness of killing innocent life in the womb and about their duty to oppose it?

The First Amendment of the American Constitution states that Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion.

No issue in our time symbolizes more the intersection of the sacred with the secular than the direct and deliberate destruction of the unborn child. The right to life is not just one tenet in the American creed: it is the primary and predominant right, the *sine qua non* of all other rights.

Perhaps these bewailers of the bishops' exercise of free speech would like to see the Catholic religion relegated to a totally ceremonial function in life, to a purely private affair, deprived of the public vote to influence those moral decisions made through the democratic political process? No way. The moral tone of society for the next quarter-century is being set largely as a result of certain judicial and legislative decisions, and Catholics, like all concerned

citizens, deserve a voice in its formation.

Supporting bills and candidates that held promise of enacting their moral concerns, these zealots used their churches as rallying points and sometimes as places of sanctuary for public-spirited citizens who were trying to overcome racial discrimination and poverty or to redirect foreign policy.

Every civil rights gain since the Civil War has been achieved, at least partially, by strong religious pressure.

To say that those who oppose abortion are free not to engage in it, while those who approve may do so, simply begs the question, since in effect, Catholics are being asked to countenance the massive taking of human life.

It is ironic that those who accuse the Catholic Church of seeking to impose its morality on the nation never balance that charge with the fact that the Protestant, Jewish, and non-religious anti-life groups which approve abortion are doing the same thing. Indeed, a greater threat would seem to emanate from organizations like the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights which lobbies in Washington and claims to represent 23 Protestant and Jewish factions.

If the pro-abortion clerics had attacked Catholic bishops with the humanitarian intent of dialoging about the abortion issue, one could praise their altruism. But to discuss the morality of abortion is the last thing pro-abortionists want to do.

"Why are we horrified," asks New York's Cardinal O'Connor, "when discarded fetuses are found in the trash? Is it not because we are profoundly convinced that the unborn child is human?" If the fetus lacks the credentials for belonging to the human race, then one doesn't have to confute the argument that the right to life is the foremost of all human rights.

In faulting the Catholic episcopate, the anti-life ministers and rabbis state apodictically that opposition to abortion

“does not represent the vast majority of American citizens.” On the contrary, no poll exists that shows Americans favor unlimited abortion throughout the gestation period.

How, then, account for the hateful animus of the pro-abortion camp toward those who uphold the inviolability of life from the womb to the tomb? In mean-spirited fashion, pro-life promoters are portrayed as vicious fanatics, political troglodytes and enemies of sexual fulfillment. Abortion thereby becomes elevated, in this transvaluation of values from the status of an odious crime to the height of almost a virtue.

Abortion is not a Catholic issue. Every American who values his or her humanity, regardless of religious beliefs, should take pride in being champions of the innocent, helpless, defenseless, voiceless unborn.

Presently our nation is in the throes of a crisis which is, at bottom, spiritual. Starting with the abortion issue, it is metastasizing swiftly into many areas of morality where Christian values are being jettisoned. Many citizens see abortion as the single over-riding moral question of the day. Vatican Council II stands foursquare against the killing of the growing baby in the womb, calling it an “unspeakable crime” and declaring that “no Christian can ever conform to a law that makes abortion legal.”

Anti-Catholic sentiment has undoubtedly surfaced because of the abortion controversy, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that abortion has provided a rationale for feelings already there. Roman Catholics are the major minority group against whom it is still respectable to express prejudice and contempt. Apparently, anti-Catholicism – the dirty little secret of our society – is still alive and thriving. The refusal of the small band of non-Catholic Rhode Island clerics to recognize the right of Catholic bishops to speak out on the social issue of abortion lends credence to the existence of

what historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. labeled the “most deeply rooted of American prejudices.”

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