

Qualifying the Culture of Death

By William A. Donohue

In his encyclical letter, *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II warns against what he calls a “perverse freedom,” one that awards “*absolute power over others and against others*,” resulting, he says, in a “culture of death.” His concern is borne out of the reality that “broad sectors of public opinion justify certain crimes against life in the name of individual freedom.” The roots of this “perverse freedom” lay in a conception of liberty that “exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way, and gives no place to solidarity, to openness to others and service to them.” In short, the Holy Father is saying that when radical individualism is interpreted as freedom, the consequences include a “culture of death.”

To make clear the association between radical individualism and the “culture of death,” it might help to consider how the killing of unborn children, as well as infants, has been justified in the name of liberty. And what better person to listen to than Frances Kissling, the infamous anti-Catholic baiter from Catholics for a Free Choice. When Pope John Paul II laid bare his thoughts on abortion infanticide, euthanasia, the death penalty, ecology and biological engineering in *Euangelium Vitae* Kissling responded by saying that “What he calls the ‘culture of death’ is really human freedom being able to make choices based on conscience.”

Kissling’s idea of freedom is the “perverse freedom” that the Pope advises us against. For her, the taking of innocent human life is “really human freedom” because it is a choice “based on conscience.” Such logic, of course, could be used to justify serial killing and genocide, both of which are presumably authorized by persons making choices “based on

conscience.” To regard this as “really human freedom” shows the depravity of Kissling’s conscience and the wisdom of the Pope’s concerns.

Those who counsel feticide and infanticide must know in their heart of hearts what it is they are counseling, and that is why this debate has become so intellectually dishonest.

The recent U.N. Conference on Women that was held in Beijing provided more evidence of how dishonest this debate has become. In the pages of the *New York Times*, an organization titled International Women’s Health Coalition placed an ad addressing its concerns about the Beijing Conference. It stood squarely for abortion rights, stating that “We are ensuring that reproductive and sexual health and rights are central in all programs and policies that affect our health.” But after having acknowledged its support for abortion, the organization decried the fact that “100 million women are not alive today due to discrimination that leads to malnutrition, poor health care and pre-natal sex selection.”

Notice the selective concern over “pre-natal sex selection.” It appears that the ladies who comprise the International Women’s Health. Coalition are bothered by the Third World practice of killing babies in the womb once it has been determined that they are female babies. But, of course, why should it matter to them, if in fact, human life isn’t present in the womb?

On September 16, the editorial board of the *New York Times* echoed the same fears when it approvingly noted that the final Beijing document warned of “discrimination against girls, even before birth in some countries all over the world.” Once again, those who claim that abortion doesn’t take innocent human life suddenly switch gears when female feticide is practiced. But isn’t it just “matter” that is being discarded? And if some abortions artificially reduce the population, then why don’t all abortions?

It is not just sexism that the pro-abortion advocates are guilty of, It's homosexism as well. According to the latest ideological fad, it is one thing to kill a heterosexual baby (or at least one that is male), quite another to kill a homosexual baby. If this sounds crazy, consider the following.

About a year and a half ago, I was watching some TV talk show hosted by Tom Snyder. Two gay guys were on the air talking about gay rights, etc. I didn't pay much attention until the discussion turned to the possibility that there might be some gay gene that determines homosexuality. Admittng that the book is open on this subject, the participants all expressed grave concern over what might happen if a gay gene really were discoverable. Wouldn't that lead many parents to opt for an abortion if they knew that their child would be gay? And wasn't that an awful thing to contemplate?

Well as it turns out that brave new world of aborting gay kids may never be upon us. In February 1994, the scientist who discovered a possible genetic marker for male homosexuality said that if his team finds the gene they'll hold the patent on its uses and "won't license it for use in amniocentesis" to screen fetuses. Whew!

So there we have it, folks, the pro-abort crowd goes bonkers at the thought that we might run out of homosexuals. Now it may not be comforting for straight guys to learn that affirmative action for women and homosexuals has now extended into the womb, but the reality is that even those who favor abortion- on-demand are beginning to have second thoughts. Now if we could only convince the pro-abortion activists that every child might be either a female or a homosexual-and a physically challenged person of color as well-we might very well end abortion altogether.

The Catholic Church is also happily out of step with the radical animal rights movement. Citing the Bible, Catholic doctrine understands the right of humans to exercise dominion

over animals. Yet those who want to protect all animals at all cost from extinction typically have no problem with killing unborn children. Ingrid Newkirk, co-founder and chairman of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, once summed up the sentiments of her ilk by saying, "A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy." Now wouldn't that make you nervous if your kid was invited to her house for dinner?

Every spring, the residents of Stuart, Florida, are warned that loggerhead turtles are an endangered species and that anyone who disturbs their eggs is in violation of the law. But it is not just those animals that are accorded special protection, even animals that have been downgraded to a "threatened" status (e.g., the Bald Eagle) have their nesting sites protected by law. It says something sinister about our "culture of death" that the nesting site for humans isn't accorded the same protection.

Women, homosexuals, endangered and threatened species-these are the ones that give pause to the pro-abortion crowd, and that is why their support for a "culture of death" is qualified. Unfortunately, some in this crowd show less interest in preserving infants than birds and turtles. And it is not just handicapped infants that I am talking about.

The founder of the animal rights movement is an Australian philosopher, Peter Singer. In a book he wrote in the 1970s, *Animal Liberation*, he argued that some animals are more self-aware than infants and should be given due recognition in society. This same man admitted in the 1980s that the pro-life people had a good point when they maintained that it was impossible to mount a moral argument in favor of feticide that couldn't also be used to justify infanticide. After all, Singer reasoned, there really was no moral distinction between killing a child in the womb and killing a child out of the womb. But "the solution," as he called it, was "to abandon the idea that all human life is of equal worth," thereby coming to the perverse conclusion that if it is okay to kill unborn

kids, it was okay to kill them once they were born.

Singer is not alone. The theologian Joseph Fletcher once said that infants may properly be killed if they didn't measure up to his fifteen "indicators of personhood" (one of which was I.Q.) Newborns, he said, were not "persons," only "human lives." Fletcher, it should be known, had previously won the Humanist of the Year award.

Speaking of children with birth defects, James Watson opined in the 1970s that "If a child were not declared alive until three days after birth, then all parents could be allowed the choice...the doctor could allow the child to die if the parents so chose and save a lot of misery and suffering." Dr. Watson was the scientist who cracked the genetic code and won a Nobel prize for his work.

Philosopher Michael Tooley takes an even bolder stand when he argues that to have a right to life it is necessary to be able to desire to continue living, and this in turn requires a degree of self-awareness no newborn infant possesses. Thus, the Jeffersonian ideal of inalienable rights is now given a new twist: there can be no rights until humans are able to see themselves as separate beings with a past and a future. This position, shared by historian Mary Anne Warren, is an open assault on the natural rights doctrines that have informed both the Catholic and the American traditions.

It is little wonder why the Catholic Church is targeted for abuse by so many in our society. Against this "culture of death" stands a 2,000 year old institution that continues to preach the dignity of the human person. Unlike its adversaries, it does not tailor its teachings to trendy ideological paradigms or to selfish and base motives. Those who champion the "culture of death" know who the enemy is and that is why they continue to rail against the Catholic Church. But it is precisely for reasons like this that this is a great time to be a Catholic.