

SOME (LIFE ISSUES) ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

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A Catholic priest speaks against abortion from the pulpit. At a neighboring church, a Catholic priest speaks against capital punishment. Both priests address the subject of life and death, and both issues involve public policy concerns, yet only one priest will be criticized for violating the wall of separation between church and state. Moreover, the other priest will be heralded—by the very same people—as a dutiful moral leader. We all know which priest is “guilty” and which is “innocent,” but do we know why?

To be sure, we all have our blind spots. But this goes beyond what can be understood as simply another expression of self-interest. This is high inconsistency, the kind of rank hypocrisy that should never be tolerated. Unfortunately, in an age when politics trumps principle, it is not surprising that we have become accustomed to tolerating the intolerable.

When the pope recently visited St. Louis, he spoke about many life issues. “As believers,” he told the crowd at Trans World Dome, “how can we fail to see that abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide are a terrible rejection of Gods gift of life and love?” He also spoke against capital punishment, imploring America to “end the death penalty,” a punishment he branded “cruel and unnecessary.”

That night on the evening news, and the next day in the newspapers, the media were all a buzz about the pope’s condemnation of capital punishment. Indeed, in some reports, the public was led to believe that the pope spoke extensively, and perhaps exclusively, about the death penalty. This, of course, was false. The enthusiasm with which this “news” was

greeted underscored the media's desire to hype the pope's anti-capital punishment message while diluting his admonitions regarding abortion.

Orwell's quip that "some are more equal than others," has application here: for many in the media, capital punishment is a life issue worthy of much more attention than abortion, hence the interest shown when the pope speaks against it. Then, when the pope successfully intervened to stop the execution of a three-time murderer, the media really began to hyperventilate.

On January 27, Pope John Paul II personally asked Missouri governor Mel Carnahan to commute the death sentence for Darrell Mease. The next day, Carnahan, a Southern Baptist who had previously approved 26 executions, granted the pope his wish. He was immediately hailed as a hero, even by those not inclined to agree with the Church on just about anything.

But why wasn't this plea for mercy labeled a flagrant violation of the principle of separation of church and state? Why wasn't the ACLU up in arms? Why didn't the *New York Times* issue a dire warning about the fragility of the First Amendment? Why didn't Americans United for Separation of Church and State ask the IRS to rescind the Church's tax-exempt status? Why was the pope not slammed by NPR for sticking his Vatican nose into the public affairs of Americans? Because none of this has anything to do with principle, that's why—it's all about politics, pure and simple.

Want proof? Just ask yourself what would have happened if the pope had intervened to stop an abortion, instead of an execution? Imagine the reaction to a news story that the pope had successfully persuaded an abortion clinic operator in St. Louis to shut his doors, even if only for a day? The hue and cry over violating church and state would begin with the weeping and gnashing of teeth and end with a lawsuit against

the Vatican. Catholics for a Free Choice would be going ballistic and clarion calls would be issued from every population control freak in the country demanding that the Holy See be kicked out of the U.N.

The hypocrites are in our own ranks as well. For example, we hear endlessly about the need for dialogue on the issue of abortion, but never do we hear about the need for dialogue regarding capital punishment. There's a reason for this: those Catholics who are anti-capital punishment believe that they've won that battle and thus have no interest in instigating a dialogue on the death penalty. But their skittishness on abortion makes them crave for dialogue. Yet the polls show that 67 percent of Catholics support the death penalty—a far higher figure than support abortion—making it rather odd that is abortion, and not capital punishment, that the Vatican is pressed to reconsider.

Those Catholics who are anti-abortion and pro-capital punishment have their own inconsistencies to work out. If it is wrong for pro-abortion and anti-capital punishment Catholics to selectively follow the magisterium, why is okay for anti-abortion and pro-death penalty Catholics?

No one ever said that being a good Catholic was easy. And that is how it should be: the path to salvation is a bogus one if it is not graced with occasional torment.