

THE MAKING OF A PRO-LIFE CONSCIENCE

When Nelli Gray asked me to be a speaker at the 1996 March for Life convention, I was delighted to accept. Nelli has been out in front of the abortion issue for years and has done as much as anyone in the country to keep this issue before the public. Reflecting on what I would say, I kept coming back to the time when I first gave serious thought to the subject.

Prior to *Roe v. Wade*, I had not thought much about abortion. However, soon after abortion was legalized in 1973, I began teaching at St. Lucy's School in Spanish Harlem. As a third grade teacher in El Barrio, I was asked to teach all subjects, including religion. It was while I was teaching religion that I came to read about abortion and ultimately to form a position on the issue.

As a Catholic, I knew full well what the Church's teachings were on the subject, but as a young graduate student at the time, I wanted to read about all sides of the issue. In the course of doing so, I read about the physical qualities of very young fetuses, the meaning of "unsuccessful" abortions, the contrary positions of Jesse Jackson and a black M.D. from Mississippi, and the consequences of dehumanization. All left a lasting impression on me.

When I read about how soon after conception the organs of the body began to develop, and how the physical qualities that make us human were there from practically the beginning, it seemed plain that the fetus was a child that had not yet been born. To have claimed otherwise struck me as simply dishonest. This being so, it quickly became apparent that the only difference between a fetus and an infant was location, or, put differently, there was no moral difference between feticide and infanticide.

Reading about “unsuccessful” abortions sealed the issue for me even further. An “unsuccessful” abortion, my readings explained, occurred when the baby came out alive. In such cases, doctors and nurses would then try to save the life of the very same baby they said didn’t exist just moments before. How the doctors and nurses could live with themselves after all this, I could not understand. It was beyond me how anyone could pretend that abortion wasn’t homicide after reading about “unsuccessful” abortions. My students, who at that time were seventh and eighth graders, felt the same way.

In the mid-1970s, Jesse Jackson was still a pro-lifer. So much so that he contended that abortion was a form of genocide against blacks. I remember discussing this with my students, and while I had mixed feelings about Jackson’s argument, I felt Jackson’s position was far more plausible than the one that was being promoted by another black professional, a doctor from the Deep South.

In a magazine interview, the M.D. (whose name I do not recall) complained that life was difficult for him growing up as a black person in the Mississippi Delta. No doubt he was telling the truth. But then he added an incredible non sequitur: ergo, legalized abortions were necessary.

It struck me as bizarre that a man who was obviously doing quite well in life—despite his “difficult” upbringing—would now recommend to other blacks, as well as everyone else, the merits of abortion. My students, almost all of whom were black or Puerto Rican, and came from equally troubled circumstances, saw little to admire in the idea that they would have been better off had their mothers aborted them (quite obviously, life was not so bad for either them or the good doctor that suicide was preferable to living). To this day, when I hear that unwanted children should never be born, I see the faces of my St. Lucy’s students, and wonder how anyone could dare suggest that they would have been better off dead.

Finally, I remember reading how Albert Speer, one of Hitler's henchmen, could justify killing innocent people. After spending some 20 years in Spandau prison, Speer admitted that though he helped kill massive numbers of Jews, he never had anything against them as a people. When I first read this, it didn't make any sense to me. Was he lying after all these years? Then he explained his behavior by saying, "I simply depersonalized them."

For Speer, Jews were less than human and were therefore not worthy of human rights. He could not kill a person, but he could kill a Jew. It began to make sense to me.

When I stepped on an ant, I reasoned, I felt nothing. But would I not feel guilt and remorse if I were to step on a human being, however inadvertently? Surely there was a difference between humans and everything else, and that is why humans must be thought of as human, lest we begin to treat them as non-humans. [For more on this, see the splendid book by William Brennan, *Dehumanizing the Vulnerables: When Word Games Take Lives*, just published by Loyola University Press.]

Many years have passed since I presented these thoughts to my students at St. Lucy's, but nothing has happened to make me change my mind. Yes, abortion is about biology, morality, ethics, philosophy, religion, medicine and law. But it is also about honesty and logic. Unfortunately, these properties are in short supply, and nowhere is this more evident than among those walking around with their advanced degrees.