



PART I

Rewriting
Faithful
Citizenship

The Interrelatedness of Pro-Life Issues

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The March for Life

The annual March for Life in Washington, DC, draws tens of thousands of people to demonstrate their support for the sanctity of human life near the January 22 anniversary of the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. The actual march is preceded by Masses, vigils, and other prayerful events that are designed to emphasize the youthful participation in the fight to end abortion on demand as a constitutionally protected right in the United States. Long processions of bishops and a homily by a prominent prelate are featured in a Mass at the National Shrine of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. Busloads of young people who call themselves the "pro-life generation" arrive from across the country; many are chartered by Catholic schools and dioceses. The lack of attention from the secular media to this sizable annual event is frequently lamented in Catholic circles. But the spread of a viral video featuring Catholic high school students in what appeared to be a face-to-face confrontation with a Native American in the aftermath of the march, along with the subsequent controversy about the video's context, brought plenty of attention to the march in 2019.

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The video clip seen far and wide features a young student, wearing a red baseball cap emblazoned with President Donald Trump's signature "Make America Great Again" slogan, face-to-face with a Native American elder who continues to chant with his rhythmic drumbeat. Unfortunately, this became the iconic snapshot of the 2019 march. Reaction to the video drew further attention to the partisan politics that have so bitterly divided the country and infected the church. Bishops who initially condemned the behavior of the students in the video were vehemently chastised by those who claimed that the students themselves were the victims of racist and anti-Catholic bias. Interpretations of the video clip were largely dependent upon the viewer's politics and worldview. More importantly, the video and the surrounding controversy raise serious questions about the alignment of the Right to Life movement with a president whose policies do little to affirm the dignity of the human person. That moment provided an opportunity for U.S. Catholics to consider how support of the most basic right, the right to life itself, has become separated from the fundamental value of the dignity of each human person. It drew attention to the uncritical alliance of much of the Catholic pro-life movement with the Republican party because of the shared goal of ending abortion, at a time when that party is headed by a leader who has no qualms about insulting immigrants from nonwhite countries, boasting of his sexual exploitation of women, and repeatedly distorting the truth for self-serving purposes.

Donald Trump, having never held any public office, began his campaign for the U.S. presidency with a speech denigrating immigrants from Mexico and broadly categorizing them as rapists and murderers. This was not only extremely offensive to the immigrants themselves, but should have elicited vociferous protests from the church that has consistently called for comprehensive immigration reform for decades and which counts the Latino population, largely from Mexico, as a positive influence and a major source of the church's growth in this country. As president, Trump has considerably lowered the standard of rhetorical decorum and did not shy away from using offensively vulgar terms to describe the nations of origin of African and Caribbean refugees and immigrants. He has publicly stated his preference for increasing the number of immigrants from countries like Norway as opposed to creating a more generous immigration policy for those fleeing hunger, violence, and suffering in their materially impoverished and dangerous homelands. The president who is celebrated by some as a champion

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of the pro-life movement because he appointed staunchly antiabortion judges to the Supreme Court is the same president whose administration created and enforced policies that kept little children penned up in chain-link cages at the U.S.-Mexico border and who presided over the separation of young immigrant children from their parents in custody.

In recent years, video messages from the president and the live presence of the vice president of the United States have given the March for Life the feel of a campaign rally for the president. It is quite expected that the president would highlight his contributions to the antiabortion cause and his friendliness to the movement, but subjecting students sponsored by Catholic institutions to the partisan rhetoric and divisive politics advocated by this presidential administration should not be left unchallenged.

Catholic leaders should ask whether the students of the “pro-life generation,” now exposed to the partisan rhetoric at the March for Life, have been taught about the peace activists at the origins of the pro-life movement for whom opposition to abortion was a natural extension of opposition to all forms of violence. Juli Loesch, who had trained with César Chávez and the United Farm Workers to protect the rights of migrant workers, was instrumental in creating an organization called “Mobilization for Survival” whose members emphasized a consistent pro-life ethic in the immediate aftermath of *Roe v. Wade*. These activists were equally committed to the end of the nuclear arms race and the abolition of abortion because they were both threats to the sanctity of human life. Loesch joined forces with Benedictine Sister Mary Lou Kownacki during the formative period of what is today Pax Christi USA, the national chapter of the international Catholic Peace movement.

Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching has rich content and a long history of defending the right to life of the unborn within the framework of an overall reverence for the dignity of the human person. Today’s young Catholic pro-life activists may not be aware of how, in the decade preceding the *Roe v. Wade* decision, priests, nuns, and clergy of various traditions stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and marched for civil rights. Do they know that in the 1980s the U.S. bishops wrote Pastoral Letters calling for an end to the threat of nuclear

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devastation and promoting world peace? These teachings, consistent with a reverence for human life, were not always well received by the political partisans who agreed with the bishops on the evils of abortion. In the same decade, the bishops wrote a letter advocating economic inclusion of the marginalized and suggesting that the morality of the economy was to be judged on the impact it has on the poor. This too was promoted within an overall teaching of the value of human life and dignity. The pro-life movement and its constituent reverence for the sanctity of human life must include the promotion of all that is necessary for human beings to flourish. A “pro-life generation” should be familiar with all the life issues that have made the Catholic community homeless among the political parties.

Throughout the decades since *Roe v. Wade*, the Catholic Church’s opposition to abortion has been steadfast. Lamentably, the “seamless garment” approach to the interconnectedness of the life issues, so forcefully articulated by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, has become less prominent within the American hierarchy. Showing the interconnectedness of all the life issues came to be seen by some in the hierarchy as detracting from the singular importance of the basic right to life itself. Gradually abortion has become a stand-alone issue for many in the church. Single-issue voters can find great support among fellow Catholics and some Catholic organizations to justify their votes for candidates who are steadfastly against abortion even though they have appalling records concerning the care of the poor, the environment, global human rights, and use of destructive force.

Pope Francis

From the beginning of his papacy in 2013, Pope Francis, who describes himself as having been chosen from the ends of the earth, has tried to turn the church’s attention to the peripheries. By the peripheries, the pope means those farthest from the centers of power, that is, the most vulnerable. He clearly and repeatedly includes the unborn in his descriptions of the marginalized. But Pope Francis sees the lack of reverence for life in the womb as the consequence of a consumerist culture that has come to consider human beings to be just as disposable as our outdated products. The same attitude that would permit aborting a child allows for the careless indifference to the elderly and the handicapped

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and even the disposal of the terminally ill. He has decried, in homilies and apostolic exhortations alike, the “globalization of indifference,” which allows the powerful to ignore the suffering and deaths of the poor even when this occurs regularly on a massive scale. Pope Francis would find it hard to justify support for an administration intent on building walls to keep out human beings considered undesirable, that has fought for a policy that intentionally seeks to exclude refugees on the basis of their profession of Islam, and that has been slow and equivocal in its questionable condemnation of racially incited violence. He would find it inconceivable to consider such an administration to be “pro-life.”

Pope Francis describes the interrelatedness of pro-life issues in his 2018 apostolic exhortation *Rejoice and be Glad*, a reflection on the universal call to holiness. He says, “Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection” (*Gaudete et exultate* 101).

Open Wide Our Hearts

In November 2018, in the context of increasing hate crimes, violence against people of color, and a surge of white nationalist demonstrations that have coincided with the Trump candidacy and presidency, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued *Open Wide Our Hearts*, their first Pastoral Letter on racism since 1979. This letter speaks of the structural kind of racism that has worked itself into the fabric of our nation. It describes the unspeakable sins from the slave trade in which the church was itself complicit as well as the sins of national policies that forced Native Americans off their lands, harmed their traditional cultures, and threatened their very livelihood. The Pastoral Letter inserts racism in its rightful place as a “life” issue. The legacy of slavery, the Jim Crow era of enforced segregation, and unofficial policies that kept people of color from certain neighborhoods, jobs, and educational opportunities have contributed to the systematic racism about which the people in the dominant culture can be blindly naive. Our pro-life catechetical and

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educational curriculum needs to include a critical look at our culture and national history, which have threatened the dignity and sanctity of whole categories of human lives. Pro-life students must grapple with this history and ask themselves how they are going to live differently. Those students who come from the dominant cultures must learn why the slogan “Make America Great Again” can be seen as offensive, especially when the word *again* for many refers to a more racially segregated and stratified period of history.

The bishops’ letter on racism also helps point the way toward a comprehensive pro-life ethic: “Our individual efforts to encounter, grow, and witness, to change our hearts about racism must also find their way into our families. We urge each person to consider the dignity of others in the face of jokes, conversations, and complaints motivated by racial prejudice. We can provide experiences for children that expose them to different cultures and peoples” (*Open Wide Our Hearts*, 26–27).

Intercultural encounters, opportunities for immersion experiences in the inner city or at the southern border, mission trips, and service projects with the appropriate accompanying theological reflection as well as opportunities for dialogue with other religious traditions can all help younger people overcome prejudice and fear of the other while growing in reverence for human dignity. As our parishes become more diverse, we will find opportunities for overcoming the globalization of indifference right within our own congregations that span across categories of race, nationality, and immigration status. The church’s service to migrants and refugees can also help form these values in the next generation.

The Care of Creation

A genuinely pro-life agenda must also include an emphasis on the care of creation. Our young people are quite aware of the environmental danger that threatens their future. The near unanimity of the scientific community has established that major catastrophic consequences will face the inhabitants of the earth because of climate change and that the idea of the planet becoming uninhabitable for greater numbers of human beings is not at all far-fetched. How can this not be of concern to those intent on preserving human life in the womb? The presidential administration that so solemnly addresses the March for

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Life has withdrawn the United States from the Paris climate agreement and has steadily and eagerly reversed many of the environmental regulations set in place by the previous administration. More than merely partisan reversals, the catastrophic consequences for the air, water, and soil that will result from these reversals threaten the quality of human life, especially for populations that do not have access to the private goods and services that can lessen the effects of environmental degradation for some.

Building on the attention his immediate predecessors gave to environmental concerns, Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si'*, enshrines the care of creation within the official body of Catholic social teaching. Pope Francis takes the name of this encyclical and the spirituality incorporated throughout from his namesake, Francis of Assisi. In his famous "Canticle of the Sun," St. Francis celebrates a familial interconnectedness among all of creation. Pope Francis takes note of the alarming condition of the planet and the disproportionate consequences for the poor from ecological devastation, the destruction of their homelands and the means of their livelihood, which results in armed conflict and mass migration. The pope insists on the dignity of the human person, whose dominion over creation, paired with responsibility, is asserted in the Scriptures and at the same time offers a critique of an excessive anthropocentrism that would diminish human responsibility for the care of other creatures and elements of creation. "When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities—to offer just a few examples—it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected" (*Laudato si'* 117). Pope Francis demonstrates that an attitude of reverence toward human life requires a sensitivity and reverence toward all life and all creation. The destruction of the environment and its effects on the human community cannot be ignored; a fully consistent pro-life attitude will include care for what Pope Francis describes as our common home.

Conclusion

The pro-life movement claims that its ultimate goal it is to make abortion unthinkable; this is substantially more than making abortion illegal. This noble aim involves not just a political and legal strategy, but

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an effort to bring about real conversion in a society that views everything as disposable. Regarding issues as diverse as the reform of church structures to transforming the global economy, Pope Francis has stated that a change of structures without the corresponding conversion of hearts will lead to the eventual corruption of whatever new structure is set in place; how much more this conversion is needed regarding the basic dignity of the human person. The energy, vitality, and creativity of the thousands of young people who consider themselves part of the pro-life generation have so much to contribute to the overall conversion necessary to make abortion unthinkable. If they can cultivate an understanding of the inter-relatedness of all creation, consider how best to address the economic pressures that make abortion appear as a viable option to women in crisis pregnancies, recognize how the degradation of women is connected to their sexual exploitation and the possibility of unwanted pregnancies, and see how insulting cultures and races of people is incompatible with a reverence for life, this youth-led movement can be prophetic. The alignment of the movement with a narrow focus on the rights of the unborn, without the larger concerns of the overall flourishing of human life, and a continued uncritical alliance with a partisan leader, will result in further division that in the end is not really pro-life at all.



Questions for Further Reflection

1. Have you ever attended the annual March for Life in Washington, DC? Did you think it was a religious event? A political event? Did you see the video of the Catholic high school students and the Native American elder that the author mentions? What did you think when you first saw it? Did your impressions change when you learned more about the context?
2. The author thinks that our current president has been inconsistent on life issues. How does he justify that characterization? Do you agree or disagree?
3. What does the author explain were the peace activism roots of the pro-life movement? Did you know about these origins? Does

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knowing them make you see the pro-life movement in a different light? Why or why not?

4. The author says that Catholic social teaching has a long history of defending the dignity of the human person. What examples does he give of this? Were you aware of this history?
5. The author mentions “the seamless garment” approach to life issues. Have you ever heard of that approach? What does it entail?
6. The author contrasts this approach with considering abortion as a stand-alone issue. What does he see as the difference between these two approaches? Which approach do you prefer yourself? Was your answer based on your faith or your politics? Explain.
7. What does Pope Francis’s outreach to those in the peripheries entail? Are these geographic or economic peripheries, or both? How is outreach a life issue? What does Pope Francis mean by the “globalization of indifference”? Is this a life issue? How would a Catholic voter combat this “globalization of indifference”?
8. What does Pope Francis say about the lives of the poor in his apostolic exhortation *Rejoice and Be Glad*? Do the lives of the poor need as much protection as the lives of the unborn? Are these rights in opposition to each other or are they part of the same Catholic ethic? Explain. How does your answer affect how you would vote?
9. Were you aware of the U.S. bishops’ letter *Open Wide Our Hearts*? If not, why not? What is this letter about? Have you taken the time to read it? Why do you suppose the bishops found it necessary to issue such a letter in 2018?
10. What ways does the author suggest as ways for young people to overcome prejudice and fear of others? Do you agree or disagree with this approach?
11. What roles does the care of creation play in a pro-life agenda? How is the care of creation being affected by current politics? What role does Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato si’* play in your views of a Catholic rationale for protecting creation? Would a care for creation affect the way you vote? Why or why not?
12. The author says that a true pro-life movement would require not just a change of structures but a change of heart. What structures is he talking about here? What changes of heart? How could you help such changes come about?