

Another Catholic Issue

by Leon J. Suprenant, Jr.



As the dust continues to settle from the November election, it's increasingly clear that "moral values" were instrumental in swaying Catholic voters to President Bush. This shift turned out to be more significant than anticipated, especially among Catholics who attend Mass on a weekly basis, where President Bush enjoyed a 56-43 advantage.

We all know that by "moral values" we're talking about the non-negotiable, hot button issues of the day—abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem-cell research, cloning, and same-sex "marriage"—concerning which the Catholic position is clear and not subject to a diversity of opinions.

Dissident Catholic John Kerry thought he could publicly oppose the Church in these areas yet still gain wide acceptance among American (read secularized) Catholics. He certainly had his apologists from the far left. Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister began her *National Catholic Reporter* column the week before the election with this anecdote: "Asked why she was supporting John Kerry rather than the incumbent, George Bush, a woman said, 'Because I'm Catholic and I think that to be pro-life is to be more than anti-abortion. We have to support all the life issues, not just one.'"

Similarly, controversial theologian Fr. Richard McBrien vehemently

opposed the American bishops' efforts to prioritize life issues for Catholics. For example, he wrote, "[O]fficial Catholic teaching strongly condemns abortion and homosexual behavior, but it also condemns unjust wars (as Pope John Paul II condemned the war in Iraq), capital punishment, laying unfair tax burdens on the poor, damaging the environment, closing the doors of one's country to immigrants, and denying workers the right to unionize."

The overwhelming majority of practicing Catholics didn't buy such efforts to blur crucial distinctions and marginalize key issues such as homosexuality and abortion. Catholics are not "single issue," and they can't even be sure what inroads can be made over the next four years on the "non-negotiable" issues.

But most Catholics knew a Kerry presidency would spell unmitigated disaster when it came to fundamental life and family issues, irrespective of any good he might have been able to accomplish in other areas.

Out of the Blue

On election night we heard news anchors talk about "red states" (states that voted for President Bush) and "blue states" (states that voted for Senator Kerry). There were red and blue counties and even red and blue

issues. Certainly abortion and homosexuality were significant "red" issues.

What about the "other" life issues? Unfortunately, in rightly emphasizing that some life issues are not on a par with the more foundational ones, proliferators are frequently accused of not caring about social justice concerns. The effect is that issues involving the poor, sick, imprisoned, marginalized, immigrant, and minority populations are cast as blue (and "negotiable") issues. Yet all matters involving the dignity and protection of human life are truly "Catholic" issues. They're far too important to be left as scraps for anti-life forces.

Sure, abortion is *the* issue. I haven't done as much as many of the pro-life heroes I've admired in recent decades. But I have been arrested for pro-life advocacy and have been threatened by past employers (not CUF!) to refrain from pro-life advocacy. I've written dozens of articles for Catholic and secular publications on the subject. I "vote pro-life." I even have 12 children (six living). I'm not boasting but simply emphasizing that stopping abortion—on both a personal and societal level—is a top priority to me.

Yet, dating back to my days as a volunteer law clerk in the Los Angeles County Public Defender's office, I've been sensitive to the dehumanizing character of our criminal justice system.

In my estimation, this “life” issue too often receives short shrift, even though approximately seven million Americans are currently in prison or jail, or on probation or parole.

Clearly, prison ministry was a priority to Our Lord, who explicitly noted that we will be judged on how we treat those who are incarcerated (see Matthew 25:31-46). That’s why visiting the imprisoned to this day is considered a corporal work of mercy, right up there with feeding the hungry and caring for the sick (see Catechism, no. 2447).

This also is a priority to Pope John Paul II, who has addressed criminal justice concerns many times. In his “Message for the Jubilee in Prisons,” he noted: “We are still a long way from the time when our conscience can be certain of having done everything possible to prevent crime and to control it effectively so that it no longer does harm and, at the same time, to offer to those who commit crimes a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society.”

Just Punishment?

I’m often called upon as a father to punish my children when they act inappropriately. If I were to fail to do this, I would be doing my family—and especially the offending child—a serious injustice. Yet, I never discipline for its own sake. Punishment is medicine ordered to the correction of my child, not a license for me to vent my rage or frustration. While I’m usually not this transparent as I mete out the punishment, I’m at least saying to myself, “This is for your own good” (see Hebrews 12:5-6). If my goal ever ceased to be the correction of my child, my discipline would lose its purpose and become vindictive, harsh, and possibly even abusive.

Something similar is at work when it comes to administering justice to the criminal. Far too often, we’ve undervalued if not abandoned altogether the necessary rehabilitative or restorative element that justifies the imposition of punishment in the first place. Retribution not ordered to the correction of the offender too easily degenerates into societal vengeance.

Some examples of this mindset identified by the U.S. bishops include oversimplistic policies such as “three strikes and you’re out” and “zero tolerance” for drug offenders; the increased use of mandatory minimum sentences; increased willingness to use isolation units; and the broadening

application of the death penalty, among other things.

Unfortunately, “tough on crime” (like “affordable healthcare” and “no child left behind”) too often is used as rhetoric that plays upon our fear, rather than as reflecting a real commitment to address this serious issue at its roots.

Love Them Both

I remember my brother once telling me a joke about a foolish dairy farmer who, in the face of serious financial losses, was advised to increase his sales volume. Therefore, he bought a bigger truck!

Sometimes it seems that our society’s answer to the problem of crime is to build larger jails and prisons, though tragically supply hasn’t kept up with demand. Over the past 25 years, the number of persons under correctional supervision has increased nearly 400 percent. According to Bureau of Justice statistics, this amounts to a staggering 3.1 percent of all U.S. adult residents, with a disproportionate number of those incarcerated being poor, aliens, African-Americans, and Hispanics. Despite the laudable efforts of our jail and prison chaplains, the Catholic Church, beset by a priest shortage and strained budgets, is having an increasingly difficult time meeting the spiritual needs of inmates.

If our efforts to overturn *Roe v. Wade* were to succeed tomorrow, such that in the coming year there are one million children born who would otherwise have been aborted, we can reasonably—even conservatively—project that tens of thousands of these children would eventually be incarcerated. What’s the pro-life response to *that*?

The issue of “crime and punishment” is complex and certainly cannot be addressed in satisfactory detail here, but I can leave *Lay Witness* readers with this thought: When it comes to abortion, one of our most important and compelling messages is that we “love them both.” In other words, we’re magnanimous enough to be “pro-woman” *and* “pro-child.” In truth, we can’t be one without the other.

Similarly, I truly believe that we will not get a handle on our criminal justice system until we’re “big enough” to embrace both victim *and* offender, offering them redemption and healing through Jesus Christ, who came to set captives free in the best and truest sense. ■

From Our Founder

We’re up against a real battle. I think the only way we can hope to last is to keep remembering that it isn’t our own battle, after all, but the battle of Christ Himself, and that He is almighty. He allows us to help as a gift to us and not as a necessity for Him; and I think that we have to do what we can each day and then, each evening, put it back into His hands in confidence, and sleep in peace.

H. Lyman Stebbins
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