

There is no equivalence

By Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.



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Here's a simple exercise in basic reasoning. On a spectrum of bad things to do, theft is bad, assault is worse and murder is worst. There's a similar texture of ill will connecting all three crimes, but only a very confused conscience would equate thieving and homicide. Both are serious matters. But there is no equivalence.

The deliberate killing of innocent life is a uniquely wicked act. No amount of contextualizing or deflecting our attention to other issues can obscure that.

This is precisely why Cardinal John O'Connor, Bishop James McHugh and others pressed so hard for the passage of the U.S. bishops' 1998 pastoral letter, *Living the Gospel of Life*. As Cardinal Joseph Bernardin once wisely noted, Catholic social teaching is a seamless garment of respect for human life, from conception to natural death. It makes no sense to champion the cause of unborn children if we ignore their basic needs once they're born.

Thus it's no surprise that — year in and year out — nearly all Catholic dioceses in the United States, including Philadelphia, devote far more time, personnel and material resources to providing social services to the poor and education to young people than to opposing abortion.

But of course, children need to *survive* the womb before they can have needs like food, shelter, immigration counseling and good health care. Humanity's *priority* right — the

one that undergirds all other rights — is the right to life. As the American bishops wrote in 1998:

“Opposition to abortion and euthanasia does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care ... *But being ‘right’ in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life.* Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community. If we understand the human person as the ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ — the living house of God — then these latter issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. *All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house’s foundation.* These directly and immediately violate the human person’s most fundamental right — the right to life. Neglect of these issues is the equivalent of building our house on sand. Such attacks cannot help but lull the social conscience in ways ultimately destructive of other human rights” (22).

A case is sometimes made that abortion is mainly a cultural and moral issue, and politics is a poor solution to the problem. The curious thing is that some of the same voices that argue against political action on the abortion issue seem quite comfortable urging vigorous political engagement on issues like health care, homelessness and the environment.

In practice, politics is the application of moral conviction to public discourse and the process of lawmaking. Law not only constrains and defends; *it also teaches and forms.* Law not only reflects culture; it shapes and reshapes it. That’s why Christians can’t avoid political engagement. Politics is never the main content of Christian faith. It can never provide perfect solutions. But no Christian can avoid the duty to work for more justice and charity in our life as a nation, a task that inescapably involves politics.

Thus the recent Senate vote to defund Planned Parenthood was not only right and timely, but *necessary*. And the failure of that measure involves a public failure of character by every Catholic senator who voted against it.

Memory is important: Two years ago Kermit Gosnell was stripped of his medical license and convicted of murdering three infants born alive from abortion procedures. He operated a Philadelphia abortion center that more closely resembled a butcher shop than a medical clinic.

His clinic environment was uglier than the pleasant restaurants and offices captured on recent Center for Medical Progress (CMP) undercover videos. Those videos show a face of Planned Parenthood — senior staffers chatting blithely about the dismemberment and sale of fetal body parts — that can only be called repugnant. But it’s not surprising: If aborted children are simply lumps of potentially useful (and profitable) tissue, what’s the problem?

Again, memory is important: Thirty years ago “pro-choice” groups tried a strategy of using the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act to shut down certain forms of pro-life witness. The strategy ultimately failed but — maybe it’s God’s sense of irony — the word “racket” very quickly comes to mind in watching Planned Parenthood staff on the CMP videos.

I’ll close with a word of thanks to Ruben Navarette, Jr. Navarette is a veteran “pro-choice” voice, but his August 10 column at the Daily Beast is worth reading and sharing for its honest revulsion at the whole, ugly, system-wide barbarism of Planned Parenthood’s fetal trafficking. And his column’s best lines come in quoting his pro-life wife:

“Those are babies that are being killed. Millions of them. And you need to use your voice to protect them. That’s what a man does. He protects children — his own children, and other children. That’s what it means to be a man.”

Amen.