

Debate on Abortion Becomes A Shouting Match

By Religious News Service

Their colorful clerical vestments blowing in the wind, the group of 40 ministers and rabbis leading a demonstration of several hundred marchers down Manhattan's fashionable Fifth Avenue halted in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral.



There, before television cameras and news photographers, the organizer of the march, the Rev. Howard Moody, an American Baptist minister, hung a three-foot long scroll from the praying hands of a figure of St. Elizabeth Seton built into a center bronze door of the church.

The scroll was a "Declaration of Conscience." It accused the Roman Catholic leadership of "demagoguery" for "calling those who condone abortion or doctors who perform it 'murderers' and 'Nazis' and likening hospitals and clinics to Auschwitz and Buchenwald..."

Responded Father Kenneth G. Jadoff, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of New York, to news reporters: "Abortion is the Holocaust of the 1970s. And the Catholic Church will not be silent while innocent life is being taken."

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., where some 60,000 persons participated in the sixth annual "March for Life" demonstration on Jan. 22, other public exchanges were taking place between antagonists on the abortion issue.

Eleanor Smeal, president of the National Organization of Women, announced she had invited "anti-choice and pro-choice organizations" to discuss contraception and family planning as a means to reduce abortions. Nellie J. Gray, president of the March for Life, rejected the offer, telling an inquirer, "Pro-life people will not negotiate with baby killers. They must stop killing babies forthwith."

A spokesman for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops said the invitation was a "publicity gimmick" and there would be no response. The Christian Action Council, a Protestant pro-life organization, called a news conference to decline the invitation "because the agenda of the meeting precludes the central issue of abortion (which is) the taking of human life." The council invited NOW to a public presentation of both sides of the abortion issue.

Six years after the U.S. Supreme Court decision liberalizing most state anti-abortion laws, public debate has not died down but has, in fact, picked up momentum. Victories by pro-life groups at the state level, in congressional elections, and in successfully lobbying for federal legislation restricting public funding for abortions have triggered a counter-movement by abortion rights groups.

But the debate has been shrill, and there has been little real dialogue, with some exceptions.

In Cleveland, Ohio, the firebombing of an abortion clinic in February, 1978, shocked the community. The Roman Catholic archdiocese condemned the attack and vehemently rebutted charges that the Church condoned such acts of violence. But the incident triggered a meeting between representatives of the archdiocese and abortion rights advocates. They joined in a call for "de-escalation of violence."

"For the first time in a long time both sides with different philosophies (on abortion) have sat down in peace of help pave the way for future meetings to discuss our mutual concerns," the statement said.

Catholics and Jews have also made some efforts at dialogue. In Los Angeles, where an official Priest-Rabbi Dialogue has been underway since 1973, a unified call was issued for "reduction of tensions" over abortion and rejection of "the use of derogatory labels in the abortion controversy." The statement, issued in September 1977, was described by the Jewish cochairman, Rabbi Alfred Wolf, as "probably the first of its kind in the nation." He said that the "ability to disagree agreeably on a highly controversial issue is a sign of great maturity."

The Synagogue Council of America and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops also sponsored a one-day dialogue of high-level representatives on the issue of abortion in 1975. It was described as an "informal" learning experience, and no joint statement was issued.

But the incidence of such learning experiences is rare. Father Richard A. McCormick, the moral theologian, wrote in *America* magazine last July, "I



Groups favoring and opposing abortion parade in a rally (above), at Pacific Beach, Calif., while a youngster, right, has her say on the issue.



have to conclude, regrettably, that the level of conversation is deplorably low. On both sides, slogans are used as if they were arguments; the sound level rises as verbal bludgeoning and interruptions multiply; the dialogue of the deaf continues."

He offers some "rules for debate" and reminds advocates on both sides of the issue "there are broad areas of agreement in this matter, and explicitly speaking of them at times will at least soften the din of conversation and soundproof the atmosphere."

Donald W. McEvoy, vice-president for program development for the National Conference of Christians and Jews, made a call for reasoned debate in March 1979, in a communication to the organization's regional offices.

He said it would be a "social tragedy if the abortion debate is allowed to deteriorate into an interreligious conflict."

"We must not fall into the trap of posing the question as if it were a battle between Catholics on the one hand and Protestants and Jews on the other, as it happens to be shaping up in the public mind," Mr. McEvoy warned.

He noted that the U.S. Catholic bishops are strongly backing a proposed human life amendment, but in this, he said, they are joined by "significant" numbers of Protestants and Jews.

Also, he observed, it is a fact that the leadership of a number of mainstream Protestant denominations are involved in abortion rights advocacy, and "in this they are joined by many Catholics and many Jews."

"Persons of good will and deep conviction about the sacredness of life stand on both sides of this issue," McEvoy observed. "Feelings are strong and emotions are drawn out by the conflict of values which motivate persons of both pro-abortion and anti-abortion positions."

Concern has also been expressed by the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches. Broadly ecumenical in that it has Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist and other representatives who are not part of the NCC parent body, the Faith and Order Commission expressed "dismay" over "the growing division of Christians on the questions of homosexuality and abortion."

It issued guidelines at the beginning of the year to foster more constructive dialogue.

The lack of "widespread and intensive ecumenical discussion on divisive social issues," the commission stated, "is an offense and stumbling block to the unity of the Church."

The commission supported the rights of Churches to influence public policy, declaring that "political activity, which seeks to bring the social order into line with ethical convictions, based on religious commitment, does not violate the separation of church and state."

It went on to warn, however, that "when extensive theological and moral differences preclude consensus on issues of public policy, it is unwise for individual Christians and denominations to advocate the closing of debate through restrictive laws."

It is useful to remember, said the commission, that "freedom of religion demands that public policy be based on a consensus of reason, not a consensus of religious principles."

The commission asserted that much of the conflict in the Churches over these issues arises from the relative "weight or interpretation" given to sources: "the Scriptures, Christian tradition, philosophical methods and principles, scientific information and principles, and the experience of human beings."

"Ecumenical discussion," it said, "must consider the validity and relevance of each of the sources and how each is weighted when conflicts arise."

The commission said that debaters have the "responsibility... to use language which is a true witness to their own positions and to the positions of the opposing parties... Stereotyped notions and caricatures of people and positions must be avoided."

Whether such words of caution will be heeded remains to be seen. Warned McEvoy, of the NCCJ: "Arguments are being couched in phrases which have not been heard in public disputation since prior to the election of John F. Kennedy... that moment in our history when much ancient misunderstanding seemed to be laid to rest."

The controversy over abortion is severely testing what progress has been made in the generation since then.

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