

## womb

sure that the underlying horror of day, at least a little bit." Rescue missions on behalf of children and women who feel trapped are an act of love — an act to probe the nature of the mystery we live as a community of faith. It is coming to realize there is much at Mass than I first understood. In consecration, each of us becomes like Jesus. In a way truly our own "body and blood" is to be shared with brothers and sisters. "Do this in remembrance of me" goes beyond the ritual celebration of Mass to living the love and life in action. "Greater is this that he lay down his life for

ed in abortion rescue missions faithful to the memory of Our Founding giving ourselves for the needy be dispossessed, sick, weak, imprisoned or unborn. In union with the least in our midst leading conclusions: "You did it to do it to Me," call me to question and on abortion — but how we help the poor and especially with the dignity identifies with them all, Our

## Word



hooks." The words of that young rabbi from Nazareth inspire me to announce the Good News stronger than death, that love is not hate. I believe our so-called civility could be known for cherishing the life in its midst. A civilized business of disposing of people is not "not quite people," he said, distant poor people — from the womb, to Death Row, to be said unequivocally that war, as war is a horror, as capital

For the past four years I've lived in Nazareth drawn from the mainstream culture may be more with humanity. I'm not in order, peace, and sanity all deplorative attitude which a world of greed and greed attempts to deny. I share the earth with both prisoners and my conviction that nothing can be done in the name of the Lord of Life and Peace. And so the journey from prison cell to monastic cell and the banning of the bombs and the unborn and all living beings — the business of ourselves. In the midst of this web of life, I often stand bewildered — broken even — and yet in the order and glory of the human world of life, never of death.

He lives and works with the Nazareth Abbey of the Genesee. He serves at the abbey Retreat House and is at Groveland Correctional Faci-

## It's time to accept moral challenge of heated issue

By Frances Kissling  
Guest contributor

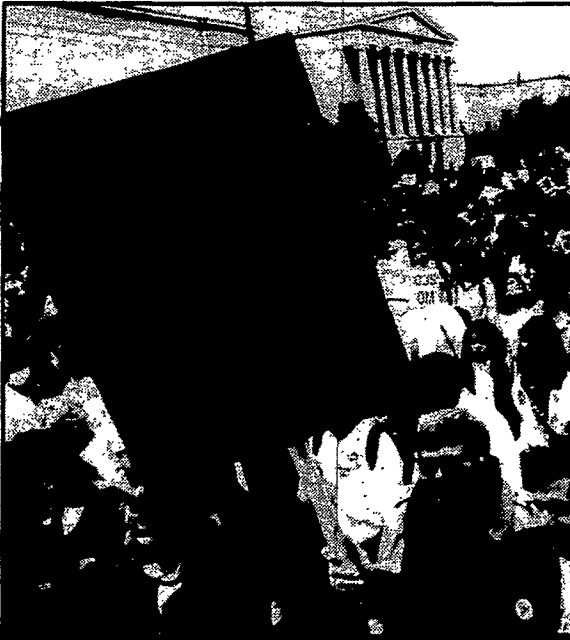
Over the last 20 years, I have worked more than full time on the single, seemingly narrow issue of abortion. I've accompanied frightened women into surgery, holding them and taking into myself their fear and pain and suffering — feelings so intense one left the room drained and exhausted. I've also examined closely the fetal tissue resulting from these abortions and grieved with women for the life that could not be.

I've smuggled safe, modern medical equipment into developing countries where thousands of women die each year from botched, clandestine procedures. I've uncovered and written the story of one solitary Chicana — Rosie Jimenez — who died in 1977 in McAllen, Texas, because she could not use her Medicaid card to buy a legal abortion and instead went to a "partera" (an unlicensed midwife) for treatment. This death occurred some four years after the United States Supreme Court acknowledged abortion as a fundamental right.

As a Roman Catholic, I've tested my views in the crucible of Catholic theology and ethics and emerged passionately committed to the essential justice of allowing each woman to make her own way through the morass of conflicting opinions about sexuality, human life, personhood, rights, relationships and responsibility. After all, and despite their protestations, even the Catholic bishops are unable to ascertain the moment of personhood.

As recently as 1974, in the Vatican Declaration on Procured Abortion issued by the Vatican Congregation of the Faith, the teaching office of the church acknowledged that the personhood of the fetus could not be determined by science or medicine. It was, they said, properly a theological matter about which church theologians are not yet in agreement. More recent statements on abortion by responsible church leaders, including the pope, accept this fact. All nuance their claims by saying: "Abortion is the equivalent of murder," or "the fetus must be treated as if it were a person."

This doubt about the status of the fetus is critical to understanding how one can be Catholic and support the right of a woman to make a decision about whether or not to have an abortion.



File photo  
Thousands of people participated in a pro-choice rally in Washington, D.C. last March.

Given this doubt, I've lobbied, marched, lectured and debated about abortion and women's rights until I'm bone-weary.

We are, however, at a new moment in the battle over abortion, and new understandings need to be reached. The social climate that influenced the court in *Roe vs. Wade* has undergone a major transformation. The 1973 decision was made at a time when recently developed concepts of universal civil and individual rights were expanding to include women; when mortality and morbidity from illegal abortion was a major problem; and when a primary interest of both couples and doctors was the prevention of pregnancy. Today, there is a serious move to subordinate individual rights; morbidity and mortality from abortion is nearly nonexistent; and couples and doctors are focused on treating infertility and enhancing pregnancy. In this climate, more narrowly constructed arguments focusing on traditional rights theories are doomed to failure.

The hunger of the general public for discourse on abortion that seeks to balance the legitimate rights of women with the community's need for

involvement is palpable. Recent opinion polls underscore the public's capacity to hold in creative tension its basic sense of fair play in wanting women, with consultation, to make this decision, while expressing concern for the value of fetal life and the quality of women's decisions.

For those who call themselves "pro-life," there is little room for balance when one's ideology admits only one value — fetal life — as worthy of consideration.

For those of us who are "pro-choice," responding to this hunger does not require abandoning our commitment to women's well-being. To articulate a right to privacy broad enough to cover choices about childbearing and abortion is not to deny the social significance of reproduction. To insist that the law respect women's capacity as moral decision makers is not to deny that abortion is a matter of moral and ethical import.

It is, however, difficult for pro-choice leaders, particularly women, to address the moral and ethical questions raised by abortion. Historically, women have been the objects of the moral discourse of men who have used morality to limit women's freedom. Moreover, in the highly charged, deeply polarized, all-or-nothing climate of abortion politics, an admission that the value of fetal life is an important element of personal decision making is rapidly misinterpreted as an acknowledgement that fetuses are persons entitled to near-absolute protection.

But if abortion is to remain in the sphere of personal decision making, we must take the risk of engaging in moral discourse. While supporting the decision each woman makes, we must acknowledge that each decision involves weighing legitimate competing values.

We must also acknowledge the need to reduce the incidence of abortion by fostering a climate in which the community supports children and respects women. Most important, we need to welcome an increasingly rich public discussion of abortion. May we never live in a world where abortion is not seen as serious business worthy of society's interest and concern.

Frances Kissling is president of Catholics For a Free Choice. This article was reprinted with the author's permission from *The Boston Globe*.

## Catholic couple defends 'pro-common sense' view on abortion

By Teresa A. Parsons  
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — Michael and Brenda Bialaszewski don't believe they are bad Catholics because they support legal abortion in some cases.

The couple's "pro-common sense" view opposes so-called gender abortion, in which a mother opts to end her pregnancy rather than giving birth to a child of a particular sex. They oppose abortion on demand without some restrictions.

On the other hand, the Bialaszewskis believe abortion ought to be a legal option for women who become pregnant through rape or incest, and women whose lives are endangered by a pregnancy. "How much dignity are you showing to a rape victim, a victim of violence, by saying 'You must carry that child?'" wondered Michael. "That doesn't seem moral to me."

Theirs is no casual conviction. Speculation that the U.S. Supreme Court may overturn the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision prompted Michael, a 27-year-old municipal employee, and Brenda, a 22-year-old data processing clerk, to study and pray about the issue. They explored a variety of opinions in discussions with family members and friends — including Christians of various denominations and others with a purely secular point of view.

"Being Catholic, we looked at what the church had to say," Michael said. "We really care about our faith. When this came out it put a screeching halt to the feel-good process of being Catholic."

"We want to be good Christians," Michael added. "There are people out there saying 'You're not good Christians because you have questions'... We

think with our whole heart that the Lord welcomes questions. If not, we think the church would still be selling indulgences and not welcoming women. If people didn't question those things, the church never would have changed."

For the Bialaszewskis, the actions of pro-life and pro-choice advocates often speak louder than their words. Tales of abusive and aggressive demonstrations have discredited some groups in the couple's eyes. They described an incident in which a friend's 70-year-old mother, who suffered from high blood pressure, was harassed by anti-abortion demonstrators on her way to a checkup at her doctor's office.

"They shoved something at her that she thought was a blood-covered fetus," Michael said, noting that the woman was so upset she required medical treatment. "How Christian is an act like that?" he wondered.

The couple respects organizations such as Birthright, which support and counsel women with an unwanted pregnancy and urge adoption as an alternative to abortion. Yet the Bialaszewskis observed that adoptive homes are rarely found for children who are minorities, or who are born to chemically dependent or abusive parents.

"What happens after the child is born, with the social problems that come along later?" Brenda wondered.

Church teaching strikes Michael as especially hard on young Catholics. By prohibiting both abortion and artificial contraception, he believes the church places them in a "no-win situation."

"What that's saying to young people is 'Don't

ever make a mistake or it's irreversible. You'll pay for it the rest of your lives,'" he said.

Support for the Bialaszewski's moderate view on abortion seldom shows up in the church's high places, but they claim it is common among fellow Catholics. "In most cases, what we hear in church represents the official church's point of view — abortion, never," Michael said. "But then you always hear after church people talking and saying 'Gee, is that right in all cases?'"

Lay Catholics hesitate to express such doubts publicly, perhaps fearing retribution from the church's hierarchy or from extremists in the pro-life movement.

Yet national polls seem to echo the Bialaszewski's impression that the majority opinion is moderate. Twenty percent of respondents to a recent New York Times/CBS News Poll believe that abortion should not be available. Other responses split equally between favoring the status quo and making abortions somewhat more difficult to get.

"I can see where things are beginning to turn toward a middle ground," Michael said. "We believe that it's someplace in the middle that this deep division can be healed."

Resolving some of the conflict over abortion could free tremendous resources to address other "life issues," the Bialaszewskis pointed out.

"There are a lot more social problems out there that people should be coming to grips with," Michael said. "There are people who are hungry, who have no homes, no clothes ... who are dying of diseases without medical help. Where's the respect for that life?"