

Bad news for abortion opponents

By Gail Quinn
Guest contributor

"The bishops return to a darker era of U.S. politics" blared the headline on David Boldt's July 1 "commentary" in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Boldt, editor of the paper's editorial page, described the Catholic Church as an "un-American institution," and said bishops who speak out against abortion misunderstand the delicate balance between church and state.

The column was insulting, to say the least. But neither its inaccuracies nor its vehement verbal attack came as any surprise.

Early in July, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a four-part series by *Times* reporter David Shaw, who had spent 18 months studying the media's handling of abortion. Shaw's analysis confirms that the news for pro-life Americans is not good.

He found numerous examples, "large and small, that can only be characterized as unfair to the opponents of abortion, either in content, tone, choice of language or prominence of play."

For example, the language that shapes this debate in the media favors the pro-abortion side, implicitly if not explicitly. Proposed laws against abortion are referred to as "restrictive" or "women's reproductive freedom" — the language of abortion-rights proponents.

Even basic terms describing those on both sides of the issue have a strong impact on how those people and their message are perceived by the public.

Generally, Shaw explained, the media calls groups and individuals by the names they themselves have chosen. To be consistent, Shaw noted, the media would use "pro-life" and "pro-choice." And although he found that media sometimes use "pro-choice" to describe abortion-rights activists, they rarely describe abortion opponents as "pro-life."

Those who advocate abortion are quoted more frequently and characterized more favorably than are abortion opponents,

Shaw also found.

Events and issues favorable to the pro-life movement are often ignored or given minimal coverage, when compared to coverage of events and issues favorable to the pro-abortion movement, the reporter found.

Last year, for example, a United Press International story on public opinion said that "only" 18 percent of Americans believed abortion should always be illegal. The story neglected to note that "only" 27 percent thought abortion should always be legal.

Today, 17 years after *Roe vs. Wade* made abortion legal throughout pregnancy, some in the media continue to suggest that it is legal only in the first trimester. Said Shaw: "The *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Milwaukee Journal* and *Louisville Courier-Journal*, among others, have all mischaracterized *Roe* that way within the last year (although they have also characterized the decision correctly at times.)"

Is this bias a conscious effort at misrepresentation? Shaw says the media have no conscious bias on abortion. But, explains media spokesman John Buckley, "the culture in the newsroom just assumes that abortion is right."

The editor of the *Ann Arbor News* said that in January, "we issued a policy directive on how we'd label groups ... The staff was instructed to avoid the use of 'pro-life' ... We decided the issue was one of choice, not when life begins."

There are some glimmers of fairness. As editors become aware of and concerned about biased terminology and reporting, they are making changes. Eight years after the *Los Angeles Times* decided that "pro-life" was unacceptable, it has now declared the term "pro-choice" equally unacceptable. Henceforth, Shaw noted, the paper will use more neutral terms — "abortion-rights advocates" or "supporters of legal abortion," along with "opponents of abortion" and "anti-



abortion."

Still, Shaw's series quotes James Naughton, deputy managing editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as indicating that abortion opponents feel so passionately about the issue that they will criticize the media no matter how it handles the issue.

"They're seeing a conspiracy that doesn't exist," Naughton told Shaw. "They complain ... even when we've gone fairly deliberately out of our way to ... be exquisitely fair ... to avoid giving them any reason to accuse us ... of being unfair."

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* has carried good stories on the issue. Yet this also was the paper that ran the insensitive and religiously intolerant article about the bishops and abortion.

One wonders how long the media — and through them the public — will be captivated by catchy slogans about the value of "choice." Ultimately the question arises: The choice to do what?

Even the *National NOW Times* recently hit upon this question in a roundabout way by suggesting that the pro-abortion movement may be making a mistake in describing itself as "pro-choice." Avoidance of the word abortion, the paper said, risks contributing to the impression that "abortion is somehow morally wrong."

"How long and how hard do we believe people will fight for something they believe is inherently bad?" the paper asked.

How long, indeed?

EDITOR'S NOTE: Gail Quinn is director of program development for the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Reader suggests column to foster spiritual growth

To the editor:

Concerning Pope John Paul II's "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian:" As a student at a Catholic college I have seen firsthand the confusion that results when Catholic theologians and religious instructors decide to chart their own courses rather than follow the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Many of my peers have left the Church because of the chaotic spiritual leadership of dissenting clergy and laity.

This is not a liberal or conservative issue but rather an issue of spirituality. Jesus Christ, who alone should be the center of all Christian theological and religious discussion, was not a political liberator espousing any particular form of government. He also did not come as an economic liberator bent on establishing an earthly utopia. Christ came into the world to redeem the human race and in doing so he rejected using worldly means to achieve a spiritual goal. The late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen reminds us in his "Life of Christ" that Satan tempted Jesus in the desert to use "short cuts to the cross" in order to more easily win followers. ...

Christ rejected these temptations (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13) but today it seems that we often attempt to use these shortcuts to justify Christianity to an increasingly skeptical world. In doing so, we dilute our religion and deaden our souls to the power of the Holy Spirit. This leads to doubt and confusion. ...

The foremost responsibility of a newspaper like the *Catholic Courier*, in addition to reporting diocesan events, should be to foster the spiritual growth of the diocesan community. This cannot be done without a greater emphasis on Christ and His teachings as given to us by Pope

John Paul II and the Roman Catholic Church. Rather than promoting the views of a well-known Notre Dame theologian who often seems to care more about our relationship with this world than our relationship with Jesus Christ, why not carry more spiritually oriented columns? For example, a weekly column on the teachings of our Pope would be an excellent addition for those of us struggling to live our Catholic faith.

We must never forget that our Lord will not force us to follow the example He gives

us. Remember, many of His disciples left because they could not accept His teaching that they would have to eat His flesh and drink His blood. If we really love Jesus more than ourselves, we will always be able to obey Him and His Church, even when it seems difficult. Such a submission is not in any way degrading, but instead brings the spiritual joy that always accompanies "dying to oneself" and seeking to glorify God rather than ourselves.

Robert Pokalsky
Webster

Serve God by recognizing unity of all creation

To the editor:

I write in support of the May 31 letter of Joel Freedman: "Human beings aren't the only species worthy of our moral consideration and compassion."

Our Church's already inclusive witness to the sacredness of life and our deepening commitment to issues of nonviolence can only be enhanced by a yet greater sense of the interconnectedness of all creation and the extension of compassion to earth and its variety of sentient beings. George Bernard Shaw's statement that "As long as there are slaughterhouses there will be wars" has a poignant relevance in this day of the "Big Mac" and nuclear weaponry.

It is ironic that the Incarnation, instead of inspiring us to a more merciful embrace of nonhuman entities, seems often to be interpreted so as to contribute to a coarsening of our sensitivity and a subsequent narrow homocentricity. The issue is not whether we need to "choose" to love and serve human life in exclusion of nonhuman forms of life; it is rather that we serve God in all creation by realizing the divine unity at the center of all beings whose destinies

are intimately linked with ours, even in anticipation of the New Creation (after Romans 8, for example). This vision is fundamentally Hebrew and is certainly Christ's. Pope John Paul II, speaking recently in Norway, asked, "By misusing the natural environment, do we not threaten our own future?"

Persons who wish to explore these matters more fully or consider a vegetarian commitment to nonviolence might look at: "Animals and Christianity," Linsey and Regan, editors; Peter Singer's "Animal Liberation;" or "To Cherish All Life," written by Roshi Phillip Kapleau of the Rochester Zen Center, among many others.

When we are inconsiderate of the life of the most frail, we are more likely to be insensitive in greater matters. In an era of increasing violence that can only be met by increasing compassionate love, it is well to recall one of Gandhi's insights: "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

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