

Social climate affects understanding of 'choice'

...from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes.

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 51

By Miriam J. Barth

"Freedom of choice" has become the battle cry of the more radical segments of the women's movement. All women's rights, they would have us believe, are dependent upon this one right. What exactly is this "right," this "freedom?"

Abortion advocates indicate that it is the freedom to choose whether or not to bear a child, and the freedom to choose abortion as an alternative to birth once a child is conceived. But freedom to decide when to conceive a child is far different from the freedom to take the life of a child already conceived.

Freedom to determine one's destiny is an ideal in a just society. Yet in the process of self-determination, we must establish ethical limits beyond which we cannot go. In light of the many achievements of the women's movement, it is sad that some radical feminists see women's rights to self-determination as depending upon the right to destroy other human beings — the children of their wombs. The right of self-determination can never justify depriving another of his or her right to exist.

There exists in our society a climate that not only influences a woman toward abortion during the crisis of an unintended pregnancy, but also propels her toward abortion. In the April, 1990, issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Martha Bayles points out that "Pro-choice arguments reflect the ambitions, hypocrisies and contradictions of contemporary feminism. ... Because the comparison between maternal and fetal consent favors the fetus," she says,



"the logical solution is to shift to a comparison that favors the woman — pro-choice activists have an overriding rhetorical need to stress female, as opposed to fetal, helplessness."

The church has accepted its mission to foster an atmosphere of freedom and has called upon individual Catholics, its social service agencies and health-care facilities to assist all people — especially pregnant unmarried women — so that they are never deprived of the freedom to bring their unborn children to birth.

Further, the church continues to seek govern-

ment policies supportive of the physical and social welfare of families. Fully aware of the tension and turmoil faced by a young woman confronted with an unintended pregnancy, church agencies have reached out in compassion and understanding with pregnancy-assistance programs to help women arrive at decisions that benefit mother and child.

Women sensitive to the isolation a young woman feels when she learns of an unplanned pregnancy have established pregnancy centers in areas accessible to adolescent and college-age women. Coalitions have been formed utilizing Catholic social service agencies, Catholic hospitals, diocesan Respect Life offices and committed volunteers who staff 24-hour hotlines to respond to women in crisis pregnancies. These centers respond immediately with such forms of assistance as free pregnancy testing, professional counseling, residential or outpatient prenatal care, parenting programs, family counseling for adolescents and their families, continuing education, spiritual and emotional guidance, shelter and career planning.

It is not enough simply to oppose abortion. We must stretch our limits in every diocese and parish until accessible and well-advertised services are available so that no woman will ever feel compelled to choose abortion over childbirth. For only when we accept the mission entrusted so directly to us by the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, and respond with love and respect for the dignity and well-being of women and their unborn infants, will we be attuned to the mystery of God in human life.

Freelance writer Miriam Barth frequently focuses on pro-life issues, and is the former co-director of the Office for Pro-Life Activities in the Diocese of Buffalo.

Politics provides way to influence society's policies

... the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good ... also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life.

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 30

By Kathleen M. Gallagher

As Christians, as human beings, we know countless problems exist in our society. We see them every day — drugs, abortion, homelessness. We are rightly concerned and anguished over such problems. We know that such realities demean and devalue the sacredness of human life.

Yet oftentimes the problems seem too complex and too overwhelming to do anything about. The questions for us become: How do we transform our legitimate concern and anguish into effective action? How do we — as individuals, as Catholics, and as citizens — go about "making a difference?"

One answer is through legislative advocacy. Recently a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding has centered on the church's right to speak in the public arena. The church does not seek to impose its religious doctrine on a secular state; it advocates public policies that will benefit the moral order of society. The programs and policies the church supports are designed to meet the human needs and serve the common good of all people in society. Although we are motivated by faith, it is not faith we seek to promote in the political arena; rather, it is the protection and enhancement of the lives of all citizens.

The church, like other tax-exempt organizations, is prohibited by the Internal Revenue Code Section 501 (c) 3, from participating or intervening in political campaigns on behalf of or in opposition to



candidates for elective political office.

However, the church and other tax-exempt organizations may engage in legislative advocacy on behalf of the concerns they espouse. Issue-oriented speech is entirely proper under the code's framework and is further protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. In the political arena, church groups may not support or oppose people; they are encouraged, however, to support or oppose issues.

Much of the recent confusion is fueled by the intense and controversial public dilemma of abortion. Nowhere do we hear louder and stronger charges of breaching the "wall" separating church and state. In fact, when the church speaks out in defense of arms reduction or service to the poor, it receives not protest, but praise.

Here are some specific steps Catholics are encouraged to take:

- Educate yourself and others. Become familiar with the Church's teaching on the critical issues of our day. Read the newspapers, the bishops' pastoral letters and other Church documents. Familiarize yourself with the legislative process.
- Contact your state Catholic conference or diocesan pro-life director to learn the legislative issues of concern to the church in your state.
- Visit your congressional representatives and state legislators in their district offices, or write a letter to your legislators on specific issues of concern.
- Provide your legislators with objective evidence and factual data that demonstrate support for the respect-life position you advocate.

You can make a difference!

Kathleen Gallagher is Associate Director of the New York State Catholic Conference in Albany.