

Can one be pro-life and for choice?

Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Almost all of the arguments within the Catholic Church regarding abortion have been arguments about public policy.

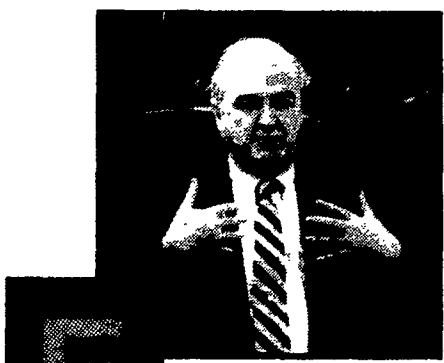
Should abortion be legal? If so, with what restrictions? Is it ever legitimate for a Catholic politician to vote for federal funding of abortions? Is it prudent for Catholics to vote against politicians on the basis of abortion alone? And so forth.

Relatively few Catholics differ among themselves about the morality of abortion. The overwhelming majority of Catholics are opposed to abortion on moral grounds, even if those moral grounds remain ill-defined for many.

According to polls, however, the majority of that majority is uneasy about the criminalization of abortion, and they are dismayed by the stridency and the militancy of some in the pro-life movement.

These Catholics regard themselves as morally pro-life and legally pro-choice — a distinction that some of their fellow Catholics vehemently reject.

Since most of our intra-church arguments about abortion have indeed been conducted at the level of public policy rather than morality, there is a risk that some self-described pro-choice Catholics may



ESSAYS
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forget why they are also pro-life.

The classical Christian moral position is aptly summarized in three points by Father Richard A. McCormick, SJ, in his *How Brave a New World? Dilemmas in Bioethics* (Doubleday, 1981, pp. 194-197).

First, human life as a basic gift and good may be taken only when there is no other life-saving and life-serving alternative, or when the taking of life is the lesser evil.

Whether there is a "person," a "baby," or a "child" being aborted at a particular stage of pregnancy is debatable. What is not debatable is that it is "human life," or, at the very least, potential human life in some stage of development.

Reasonable doubts can be raised

about an absolute claim to life in this pre-implantation period because of the phenomena of twinning, the number of spontaneous abortions, the time of the appearance of two fertilized ova into one (chimera), and the time of the appearance of the embryonic disc.

When there is a doubt, one generally favors life, but not always.

Thirdly, for an act to be life-saving and life-serving and to be the lesser evil (all things considered), there must be at stake human life or its moral equivalent, that is, a good or a value comparable to life itself.

Thus, when human beings go to war and take human life to defend their freedom against an enemy who would strip them of it, something is being affirmed about human freedom compared with human life.

Father McCormick makes three additional points about the process of moral evaluation itself.

First, he says that he accepts the traditional Christian moral position on abortion because he "can think of no persuasive arguments that limit the sanctity of human life to extra-uterine life."

Secondly, in saying that he shares the traditional Christian moral evaluation, he does not mean to suggest that all problems are solved. They are not.

For example, the distinction

between direct and indirect abortion (as in an ectopic pregnancy) remains a theoretical problem "of the first magnitude."

More specifically, what is to be done in those instances where both mother and the unborn will die if an abortion is not performed?

Father McCormick cites an answer given by the Belgian bishops: "The moral principle which ought to govern the intervention can be formulated as follows: Since two lives are at stake, one will, while doing everything to save both, attempt to save one rather than to allow two to perish."

Thirdly, the traditional Christian moral position on abortion, he insists, is deeply rooted in history and theology.

Over against contemporary Greco-Roman codes of sexuality in which abortion and infanticide were commonplace, early Christians proclaimed every person God's creature, worthy of respect.

"Thus," Father McCormick concludes, "the value of human life leading to the traditional evaluation was seen in God's special and costing love for each individual — for fetal life, infant life, senescent life, disabled life, captive life, enslaved life, yes and most of all, unwanted life."

It sounds a bit like the consistent ethic of life, doesn't it?

Watching roadwork can be spiritual

Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

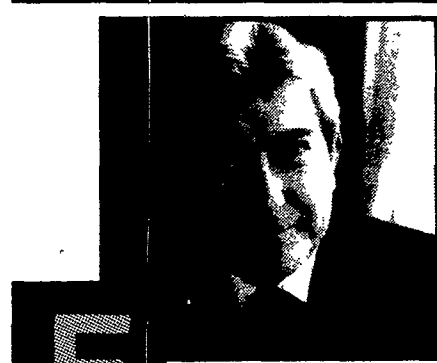
The city is rebuilding the street in front of my business, and that makes me think about God.

Clark Street is one of the main north-south thoroughfares in Chicago, which is a very north-south kind of town. Clark has served residents and transients since well before Mrs. O'Leary's cow started the first urban-renewal program here.

Now Clark Street is being rebuilt. Not merely repaved, mind you, but reconstructed from the bedrock up.

In some respects, this is a colossal pain in the neck. Dirt can be seen and noise heard everywhere; traffic has been rerouted; and it is difficult to come and go out of my company's driveway.

I am thankful that my business is wholesale because some of the retailers on the street might go under with such a prolonged inter-



FAITH
AND
WORK

ruption of customer flow.

Yet despite such aggravations, I find the work of rebuilding the street profoundly spiritual.

First of all, it took massive planning. You don't just start tearing up a street such as Clark. Such improvements have to be budgeted years in advance, and the actual

construction has to be well and thoroughly planned. While God has a spontaneous side (see the Big Bang), there is also something divine about slow and careful development (see Evolution).

The work involved in reconstructing a road looks backward as well as forward. As the workers peel layer after layer from the existing roadway, they are uncovering years — even centuries — of history.

They dug up the old rails and wooden ties from when Clark had trolleys. They continued down past the original brick streets. Finally, they reached the dirt of the old Native American trail that became the main link between Fort Dearborn in Chicago and Fort Howard in Green Bay, Wisc., in pioneer times. God has been there for all of that.

The water, sewer, gas and electric pipes and cables that bring us power and comfort and take away our refuse and waste can also be

found below the road's base. These, too, are all being updated, since God knows it makes no sense to rebuild a road if the infrastructure underneath is decaying.

The people that do the work also remind me of God. While exercising power and skill, they exhibit a certain seriousness about what they are doing and a kind of sacred sensibility about how they do it.

I have not observed the kind of laziness and sloughing off that is supposed to exemplify "government workers." Instead, these men and women seem to know and care that this road will have to carry many vehicles for many years. They seem to want to make it last forever. God's domain is forever, too.

Chicago recently had a flood in its underground tunnel system, which many believe could have been prevented by city officials. Thus, it's gratifying to see some people trying to do their work the way that God does.

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