

Can you be pro-life and pro-choice?

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

I did a column a few weeks ago about angels. Most readers are familiar with the old saying about going into places "where even angels fear to tread." This week's column revisits abortion. There probably won't be any angels coming along for the ride.

(In order to keep the devils at bay, however, it should be said at the outset that the official Catholic Church teaching on abortion is not in question here.)

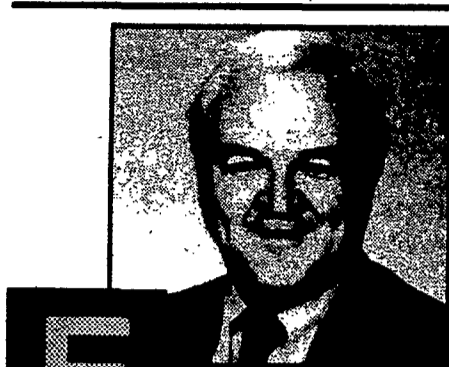
If you believe that all bad things eventually come to an end, we have reason to hope that the terribly divisive controversy over abortion will also eventually end. But that is likely to happen only after the number of unwanted pregnancies is reduced to almost zero.

When all is said and done, women have abortions only because, for whatever reason, they do not want to bring their pregnancy to term.

And that is why, from the outsider's point of view, our church's unyielding reaffirmation of its teaching on contraception seems inconsistent. We want abortions to stop, but we deny the most practical means of making them stop.

At least that's the way it looks to others, and evidently we haven't done an effective job of dealing with the perception.

In the meantime, the controversy



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continues in all its fury. To mitigate that fury somewhat, we might be more attentive and sensitive to the way we carry on the debate.

For starters, we might acknowledge that the slogans both sides have espoused are misleading.

"Pro-choice" sounds very American, and it is. But it has stirred the ire of the pro-life side, and they have fought back.

There are ads on television now that show young children at play. The voice-over, with sweet musical accompaniment, claims that all the children were the product of unplanned pregnancies. (That isn't really the case, and the ad has to acknowledge that it's a

"dramatization.") The spot ends with words like, "Life, what a wonderful choice!"

Fair enough. Deciding not to have an abortion is also a choice, and given the result, a child's birth, it is indeed a wonderful choice.

On the other hand, the pro-life side can't fairly claim that "pro-choice" always means "pro-abortion."

There are many Americans, including Catholics, who are morally opposed to abortion who also do not want to see it criminalized. Poll after poll shows this to be the case.

They wish that abortion were truly rare or non-existent in our society, and they regard it as a morally tragic and even reprehensible act which they could never contemplate for themselves or for anyone in their family.

But they don't want to see doctors thrown in jail over it, nor do they want women to be denied access to it and be forced over again into the proverbial "back alley."

Is it possible for a Catholic to be opposed to abortion and still be "pro-choice?" Yes, if by "pro-choice" we mean the above. To hold this view one has to be mindful of an important distinction, articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas and others, between the moral law and the civil law. Not everything prohibited by the moral law needs to be prohibited by the civil law as well.

Civil laws have to be enforceable, if

they are to be good laws. But only those laws are enforceable which have a sufficient consensus behind them, that is, when society at large wants them enforced and is prepared to support and demand their enforcement.

But paying for abortions with federal money, as the president's current health-care-reform package proposes, is another matter.

While there are many U.S. citizens, again including Catholics, who oppose the criminalization of abortion, they do not want their tax dollars to pay for something to which they object as a matter of conscience.

If there is a "pro-choice" consensus on the criminalization issue, it isn't carried over to the funding issue. The polls show that most oppose such funding.

One final point. Just as "pro-choice" can't be the exclusive property of one side to the debate, so "pro-life" can't be the exclusive property of the other. It is arguable, in fact, that one can be "pro-life" and "pro-choice" at the same time.

Conversely, there are those who claim the "pro-life" label regarding abortion who take an anti-life position on other issues, such as capital punishment.

Inconsistency is a problem for both sides, and words are a problem for all of us.

Our moral leaders have their work cut out for them.

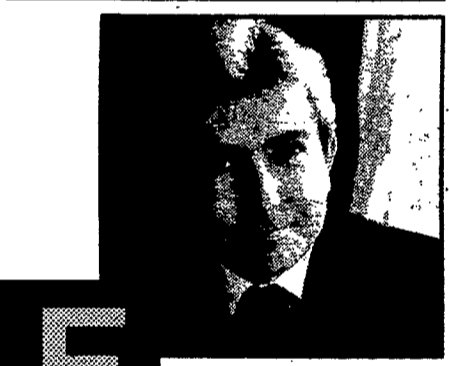
Havel displays spirituality of activism

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Vaclav Havel is not a Christian. For his own reasons, the president of the Czech Republic is not a believer in Jesus of Nazareth or His church.

Still, when I was assigned by my new spiritual director the task of reading any biography I wanted, I chose *Vaclav Havel: The Authorized Biography* (St. Martin's Press, 1993) by Eda Kriseova. I was fascinated to discover what spiritual beliefs and disciplines motivated and sustained a gentle writer and playwright to first lead a non-violent "velvet" revolution and then become his country's acclaimed leader.

"For years, he criticized the practice of politics as a pragmatic battle for power, whose goal was to gain power by any means," Kriseova explains, "he promotes 'apolitical,' moral politics, politics based on con-



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science and truth. Then destiny played him a dirty trick, it invited him to show what he could do as a politician."

In his acceptance speech for the Erasmus of Rotterdam Prize in 1986, Havel summarized his spirituality of activism. "The theme of his speech," Kriseova notes, "was that each of us, no matter how insignificant or powerless, is able to change the world. It sounds unbelievable, but each of us can move the globe a little forward. You must start with yourself, gather courage, and be a fool in the spirit of Erasmus, for only a fool would take on the power of state bureaucracy with no weapon but his feeble typewriter."

"I should probably say," Havel once said, "first, that the kind of hope I think about — especially in the kind of situations that are particularly hopeless, like prison — I understand as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't. It's a dimension of soul ... It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It transcends

the world it has immediately experienced, and it transcends that world and comes from somewhere beyond its horizons. I don't think you can explain it as merely derivative of something here, of some movement, of some favorable sign. I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental.

"Hope in this deep sense, in this powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well or the willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for an early success. But rather it's an ability to work for something just because it's good ... not because it stands a chance to succeed. As I said, I feel its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are, although of course I can't — unlike Christians, for instance — say anything concrete about this transcendental."

Christian or not, Havel has a lot to teach me about spirituality.

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