

# Respect Life

## Abortion's prevalence reveals society's moral crisis

By George Weigel  
Guest contributor

Wherever you go these days, people are convinced that our country is living through a profound moral crisis. That crisis is experienced in different ways in different places. Some communities have become aware of it through the lethal triad of drugs-crime-murderous violence. Others point to skyrocketing rates of illegitimate births, divorce, and sexually transmitted disease, or the tidal wave of salacious "entertainment" on television and in the movies; still others may cite tax-cheating or decreasing educational accomplishment as evidence of American moral decline.

We pro-life people have been aware of this moral crisis perhaps longer than many of our fellow citizens. For when we look at America after *Roe v. Wade*, we see a lot of uncomfortable things. We see the human carnage of 1.6 million innocents killed every year. We see the physical and emotional wounds inflicted on women in distress by the abortion industry, and by pro-choice groups who treat every unintended pregnancy as the moral equivalent of a bad toothache. And we see the betrayal of the American promise of liberty and justice for all in the name of a "liberty" that is, in truth, a private license to commit

lethal violence for personal convenience. Seeing all that, we wonder just what kind of a people we have become.

Today's sense of moral crisis in American life should be seen as a wake-up call reminding us of two basic facts. The first is that happiness is not a function of wealth, possessions, or social status; what makes us happy are faith, family, and friends; what gives us the greatest human satisfaction are obligations fulfilled, kindness performed, wounds healed, insights gained.

The second fact is public. Our moral crisis is a reminder that democracy requires a virtuous citizenry, if it is to survive. The question that Lincoln asked at Gettysburg — whether a nation "so conceived and so dedicated can long endure" — is a question for each generation of Americans. The answer to that question indicates what kind of people we are and whether we are a people fit to govern ourselves.

Why has abortion been the most fevered public question in American life for more than 20 years? In part because it has become the symbol of the sexual revolution. And why has the sexual revolution been so bitterly contested? Because it has become the symbol of the belief that freedom is autonomy: the individual's "right" to do whatever he or she likes, so long as nobody else (or no-

body in whom the state declares a "compelling interest") gets hurt. This debate over autonomy is at the heart of the question about what kind of a people we are and what kind of democracy we shall be. Is freedom the power to do what we like? Or is freedom the right of being able to do what we ought?

The abortion debate is about abortion. But it is also about a lot of other things. Some would argue that the sexual revolution — the radical challenge to the traditional moral codes that once guided American sexual conduct — has made us more honest (meaning less hypocritical) about sex. But whatever the modest accomplishments of the sexual revolution may be, at the very least it has also had an enormous and, I would argue, overpowering "shadow side."

By radically sundering the procreative and unitive dimensions of sexuality, and by treating sex as a form of recreational activity, the sexual revolution has stacked the psychological and cultural deck in favor of men, for whom promiscuity generally has fewer and less severe biological consequences. In doing so, it has created the troubling phenomenon of men who are, in their sexuality, perpetual adolescents: radically self-centered, unable to form permanent commitments, "trading in" their women from time to time for newer and sleeker models. Abortion-on-demand was the final key to unlocking a permissive sexual cornucopia for irresponsible American men, who now had a technological "fix" for any "problems" their predatory behavior might create.

The sexual revolution has also demeaned women. A single-minded insistence on sex as recreation and personal pleasure has reinforced the image of women as instruments for the sexual

gratification of men. By fracturing the linkage between childbearing and sexuality, the sexual revolution also has denied (and demeaned) the most distinctive element of female sexuality: its natural connection to procreation. The abortion industry, a \$500 million-a-year business run largely by men making considerable profits out of women's anguish, is a terrible, if fitting, symbol of what happens when women are made into objects, depersonalized and, ultimately, defeminized.

There is no long-term solution to the moral crisis of American society symbolized in the practice of abortion-on-demand that is not, at the same time, a solution to the moral crisis of the sexual revolution.

If we have been cowed by the culture of the sexual revolution, we need not be. The Catechism of the Catholic Church and Pope John Paul II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* offer an account of human sexuality that is far more compelling, and far more affirming of human sexuality in all its dimensions, than the thin egocentrism of the Playboy philosophy.

The abortion license created by *Roe v. Wade* has also done serious damage to our country's legal and political culture. Both the historical record and reports of the justices' intentions at the time show that the Supreme Court first decided to create a "right to abortion" and then cast about in the Constitution for some means of justifying it. This constitutional fishing expedition has continued ever since.

In the 1992 decision *Casey v. Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania*, three of the Supreme Court's justices, seeking to legitimate their decision to uphold the "central finding" of *Roe v. Wade*, had this to say about the meaning of freedom in America: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." Despite the high-sounding words, one would have to go back to the *Dred Scott* decision to find a judicial pronouncement more ominous in its implications for American democracy.

For what Justices Anthony Kennedy,  
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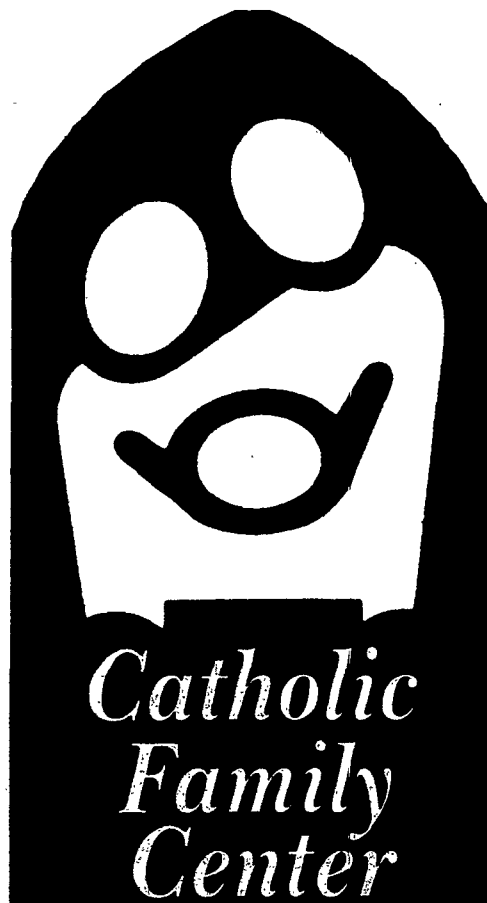
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