

Is Cardinal Ratzinger a proportionalist?



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

MORE LETTERS

tion might like it to appear as though abortion is in the forefront. As the media once again heats-up this contentious issue, attention is diverted from the facts that our president was not elected by popular vote, that he led America to invade another nation for economic reasons, and that hundreds of young Americans and thousands of innocent civilians have been killed to feed insatiable corporate greed. Yet Ms. O'Brien's CNS article quotes Steven Ertelt who describes our president as "extra-ordinarily pro-life." Mr. Ertelt's appreciation for the sanctity of life is clearly limited to the unborn.

Let's remember the "seamless garment" when we see or read "pro-life." Being pro-life means far more than being simply anti-abortion.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: CNS had not yet made available its campaign-series articles on war and capital punishment when we went to press for the September issue. Those series installments are contained in this edition.

Imagine no Roe v. Wade

To the editor:
Abortion is an abomination, in my view and those of

other Catholics. Yet I try to imagine a United States after the repeal of Roe vs. Wade. Perhaps the Prohibition Era is the closest analogy — abortion gone underground, performed by quack doctors and pimped by professional criminals. There would be an increase in "tourism" to countries with special clinics catering to wealthier Americans. Whatever the precise scenario, it would not be pretty, nor would there be a decrease in the number of abortions in all likelihood.

Politics is the art of the possible. Translated into theological terms, we have the doctrine of the lesser evil. By all means, provide counseling, alternatives and material support, but I believe in our present world the mantra of former President Clinton stands as the best to strive for: abortion should be safe, available and RARE.

There are many issues in the November election, and single issue politics is, of its nature, a recipe for bad governance. We know what the current administration has done in the last three and a half years, or left undone. Dare we hope for an enlightened and a more truly compassionate alternative? What we decide in November matters in so many ways to the future of our tired planet.

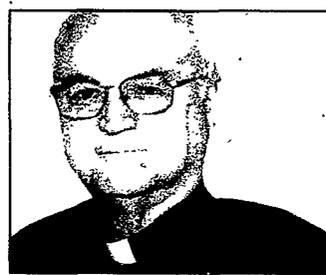
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Proportionalism is a controversial type of moral reasoning employed in recent years by some leading Catholic theologians, including the late Jesuit medical ethicist Father Richard McCormick. It was explicitly criticized by Pope John Paul II in his 1993 encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, but the proportionalist theologians insisted at the time that they did not hold the positions reproached in that document.

Indeed, proportionalism is not easy to define. It derives its name from what its proponents call "proportionate reason" as a way of determining the moral rightness or wrongness of human acts and the various exceptions to moral norms.

According to Father McCormick, an "action becomes morally wrong when, all things considered, there is no proportionate reason justifying it. Thus just as not every killing is murder, not every falsehood a lie, so not every artificial intervention preventing (or promoting) conception is necessarily an unchaste act. Not every termination of a pregnancy is necessarily an abortion in the moral sense" (*The Critical Calling: Reflections on Moral Dilemmas Since Vatican II*, Georgetown University Press, 1989, p. 134).

Proportionalism has been rejected by conservative ethicists and moral philosophers who maintain that there are certain basic human goods which one can never directly go against, no



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

matter what the circumstances or the intentions.

But why should any of this interest readers who do not happen to be moral theologians or philosophers?

Because Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger no less appealed to proportionate reasoning in a "Statement of Principles" which he sent to the U.S. Catholic bishops in June to assist them in their deliberations about the matter of Catholics in political life, with particular reference to the controversy over denying Communion to Sen. John Kerry and other Catholic politicians who have voted for pro-choice legislation.

At the end of that statement (reprinted in *Origins*, 7/29/04, pp. 133-34), there is a bracketed paragraph introduced by an N.B., the abbreviation for the Latin, *Nota bene* ("Note well"). Cardinal Ratzinger indicated therein that a Catholic would be guilty of "formal cooperation in evil" when voting for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion and/or euthanasia.

However, if the Catholic does not share the candidate's stand in favor of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, "it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of *proportionate reasons*" (my italics).

Is Cardinal Ratzinger, therefore, a proportionalist? It would seem so.

Some of the most vehement Catholic opponents of abortion insist that, because abortion is intrinsically evil, there is never any justification for it nor is there ever a justification for a Catholic's voting for a pro-choice politician, because, in the mind of such anti-abortionists, pro-choice is always tantamount to pro-abortion.

But here we have Cardinal Ratzinger insisting that "proportionate reason" is involved here.

Where does this leave those few bishops who have not only threatened Catholic politicians with exclusion from Communion but also any and all Catholics who would consider voting for such politicians? Up the proverbial river without a paddle, one suspects.

Moral wisdom always balances the good against the bad. In appealing to "proportionate reason," Cardinal Ratzinger seems to do the same.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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