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Pro-Life Witnessing

Last week I was involved in an interesting experience that called for making a judgment and a decision on the side of life. I serve as Bishop President of Pax Christi, USA. Every August, Pax Christi holds an assembly in a different city in the country. Last year's assembly was in Richmond. This year's was scheduled in Memphis for the first week in August. It came to light that the keynote speaker, who is well known for non-violence activities, also happens to be pro-choice and is publicly supportive of abortion. His two positions – opposing violence and promoting abortion – seemed definitely contradictory.

The Pax Christi National Council, on which I also serve, was facing a real dilemma. The Council voted unanimously to cancel the Annual Assembly rather than compromise Pax Christi's own stand of being pro-life across the board. The decision to cancel was not as easy as it might seem. All the preparations had been made. Many of the other speakers had been chosen. Hundreds of participants were expected to attend and over 100 people had already registered.

I admire Pax Christi for having the courage to stand by its convictions – particularly the conviction of a consistent approach to the sacredness of life. The question that their decision underscores is: "What does it mean to be pro-life?" Is the pro-life movement supposed to be consistent in upholding the sanctity and inviolability of human life – from conception to natural death – or can it be selective? Can we embrace one life issue while rejecting, or even opposing, another and still really be pro-life? Decisions are not always clear-cut, but to claim to be pro-life one must always be found on the side of life.

I wonder what the attitude of many who consider themselves pro-life is when it comes to the issue of capital punishment? The majority of our people still favor the death penalty even though it's an act of vengeance, does not deter murder and diminishes the value of life. Virginia and Texas are two states that continue to uphold the execution of retarded persons. After a mother in Texas recently

killed her five young children, some folks there immediately started calling for the death penalty; but there are still not enough public outcries to ensure that DNA evidence is used in capital cases to protect the innocent from being put to death.

What about health care coverage? Where do we stand with that issue if we claim to be pro-life? Our nation somehow lacks the public will to provide medical insurance for over 40 million of our own citizens who have no access to health care. Providing adequate health care is a way of sustaining life as well as maintaining health. Today we hear much discussion about the Patients' Bill of Rights. A pro-lifer would certainly believe a person should have access to critical medical procedures based on the advice of a physician.

Just recently I read about the "Unborn Victim of Violence Act." With this federal legislation, currently under consideration by the Senate after it passed the House, a person who attacks a woman and in the same action injures or kills the woman's unborn child could be charged, not only with violence against the woman, but with the injury or death of the unborn child. Twenty-four states have already taken this pro-life position by enacting laws that recognize unborn children as victims of violent crimes. To its credit, Virginia passed such legislation this year by making "feticide" a crime.

Stem cell research is also a critical pro-life issue. This research can be done with the use of stem cells from adults. I certainly oppose the use of human embryos for research purposes because embryonic destruction is the destruction of human life. Our church condemns such practices as simply another form of abortion.

Concern for the poor and the disadvantaged is certainly a pro-life issue. Our church favors debt relief to Third World countries that are burdened by debt for which their citizens are not responsible. People in these countries live enslaved under the hellish cycle of poverty because so much of their nation's income goes solely to pay the interest on such enormous debt. Many poor countries spend more on debt repayments than on the health and education of their people combined.

Certainly, the sanctity of life demands that much more can and should be done to eradicate the scourge of HIV infection and AIDS. AIDS is killing millions of people, especially on the continent of Africa. This disease is spreading throughout the countries of Latin America and Asia. Our country, which has felt the effects of AIDS, should be a world leader in finding a cure to this scourge.

Ecology is, for me, also a pro-life issue. Does not our generation have an obligation to future generations to preserve the life of planet earth and its natural resources, to keep its air and water free of pollution? Gradually, the world is becoming more conscious of the harmful effects of global warming. Do we not have a moral obligation in stewardship to provide and preserve what will be needed for the life of future generations?

As a member of Pax Christi, I certainly oppose a national missile defense. Not only does such an effort negate the nuclear non-proliferation treaty that has been in place for 30 years, but it will compel other countries to build their own new generations of nuclear weapons. The arms race has taught us that if we build a better shield, others will feel bound to build better swords. In addition, a missile defense will cost billions of dollars that are needed for the benefit of our own citizens, especially for health care, education and the alleviation of poverty.

I share these thoughts related to Pax Christi's decision about its Annual Assembly because all decisions have an ethical and pro-life component. I recognize that some questions are very complicated and require a great deal of reflection and dialogue. I hope that our guiding light is the Gospel of Life – to stand always on the side of human life, its sacredness, its fundamental value and its ultimate enhancement – in every circumstance and at every stage. That, to me, is what it means to be a pro-life person.

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