



My Journey with “Roe v. Wade”

Personal Reflection

by Rev. Michael Ratajczak

Today, I want to take time to share with you my own journey in regard to the Supreme Court Decision, “Roe v. Wade,” which legalized abortion in this country on January 22, 1973.

This Supreme Court Decision has been and continues to be one of the most divisive and political issues we have faced as a nation.

When I just say the word “abortion,” you can feel the room split. There are those who sit on the edge of their seats to listen and those who immediately tune out once the word “abortion” is mentioned.

All of us have been in conversations with others when the word “abortion” surfaces. You can immediately feel the participants’ temperatures rise, their voices become louder and more passionate and the air is soon filled with acrimony.

I invite you today to walk with me through this very personal sharing of my journey with “Roe v. Wade.” I do this today as one way of inviting you to revisit the abortion question and to ask yourself - “Where am I on this issue? After 33 years, have I taken a position on one side or the other? Have I ever challenged myself to deal with this issue; not only on a personal level, but in terms of what this issue means to us as a society and as a Church? How does the abortion issue fit in with my thinking in terms of other life issues?” and “Are my views consistent with Church Teaching? If not, why not?”

“Roe v. Wade” became the law of the land 33 years ago in January of 1973. I began my ministry on behalf of the Church in November 1973, when I was ordained a deacon. I was a transitional deacon until my ordination as a priest in January 1975.

“Roe v. Wade” and my ministry both had their beginnings in the same year. My entire ministry has been in the context of abortion being legal by government standards and immoral and sinful by Church standards.

How did I view abortion when it was first legalized? How did I begin to deal with it in the context of my ministry?

I have always considered abortion as sin, as immoral, as the wrong choice for people to make. But I was not very passionate in terms of reversing the law. In the early years, my response was, “If you don’t believe in abortion, don’t have one; don’t participate in the decision making that leads to one; if it is a part of your work environment, say ‘no’ to it.”

My thinking and response was on a personal “one to one” level, without seeing the necessity to reverse the law of the land. Abortion would be personal, occasional and would not have any great effect on the mores of our society.

As I reflect on my thinking, I believe that I thought this way for two main reasons:

1. concern for the individual woman and
2. an uncertainty about when life actually began along with the question of when does the fetus become a separate entity from the woman, the mother.

In those days, in regard to the law, I would try to imagine myself being a woman and, for whatever reasons, finding myself with an unwanted pregnancy. Would I want anyone else but myself,

ultimately, to make a decision about what to do with my body? If I found myself pregnant, would I want others making decisions for me about my pregnancy, deciding for me how my future would be?

And who are those “others,” who are making those decisions that are affecting my life? In the 1970’s, what was the gender of the majority of people who created legislation, who strongly influenced the mores, the customs and the traditions of society? That gender majority was, and still is to a lesser degree today, male. It was so easy then, and still is, again hopefully to a lesser degree today, for men to tell women what to do, how to do it, and to know their place. Men are in charge. Men will make the decisions.

So, I found myself being concerned more about the individual woman than about the life in her womb. And I believe that I did so, because of the lack of gender equality that I experienced in society and in the Church. “Roe v. Wade” was one way of giving greater leverage to women in their struggle for equality in our society and in our Church.

The second influential factor in making me less passionate about reversing the law was an uncertainty about when life began in the womb. At what point did the embryo, the fetus become an unborn child and become a separate entity from the mother? At what point, did the argument, “It is my body, and I have the right of control over my body,” lose its validity?

In the 1970’s, those issues were not firmly decided. There was vagueness. Arguments about whether the embryo, the fetus was considered a fully human person were presented from a variety of perspectives, and there was not a clear understanding about when life began. Over the years though, I saw myself becoming more concerned about the legality and the morality of “Roe v. Wade.”

What brought this about? First and foremost was the scientific and medical technology and knowledge that we have acquired about life in the womb. Today there is no question that what is in the womb of the mother is life, a separate and entirely different human being from the mother. And it can

not be pinpointed as to when that “differentness” begins to happen. It is now easy and logical to conclude that a new and entirely different human being is created and God’s breath, the soul, is infused at the moment of conception.

In recent years, as medical advances continue, as we experience more sophisticated sonogram equipment and see pictures of children in the womb at very early stages of development; as we do fetal surgery, surgery in the womb; as courts convict people for intent to kill an unborn child; have you noticed how our language has changed?

We talk less and less of embryos and fetuses. We use the language of pre-born and unborn children.

It has become fact, not belief, that life in the womb is an entirely different human being from the mother and that the only logical point for the beginning of life is at the moment of conception, the moment when man and woman, with God’s help, create new life.

In regard to the right of a woman to choose, the abortion argument over the years has shifted from, “I have a right to control my body” to “Are my rights, as the woman and mother, greater than the rights of this unborn child? Do I as the mother have the right over the life of this child or does this child have certain inalienable rights equal to my rights that are determined by society’s legal standards? Who ultimately makes the decision as to whether this unborn child comes to life outside the womb or not?”

Today it has become a very different argument. As the discussion swirls about, this debate has the voice of many more women who are anti-abortion. There are many more women in various positions of power who influence society and the Church, who help to create legislation, who are a part of the ongoing dialogue of what is necessary to create and maintain a healthy society. (As a side note, I admit that there is still not complete gender equality in society or in the Church. We have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.)

Because of this greater participation in the ongoing dialogue of society and Church, and because there is a greater degree of gender equality, women,

I believe, feel somewhat safer and freer to examine the question of life in the womb and to share decision making about the unborn child's future with society through legislative decisions.

I hope you see the first link that I am trying to make regarding what it means to be pro-life. Pro-life is not just anti-abortion. Pro-life is also about gender equality at all levels, in all places in society and in the Church. When there is a commitment to gender equality and when there is gender equality, I believe there will be fewer abortions as women feel a greater ability to participate in creating a healthier society and a healthier Church.

Once I came to the realization and conclusion that life in the womb is a unique and completely separate human being from the mother and that life begins at the moment of conception, I began to struggle with the question of, "Does the unborn child have rights; if so, what kind of rights and do these rights need to be protected and how do these rights weigh in when compared to the rights of the mother?"

My initial response to those questions was, again, not to reverse the law, but to be more passionate and vocal about the abortion issue and to work for change on a "one to one" level.

One of the most thought provoking comments that came out of the 2000 presidential campaign came from the then Governor George W. Bush who said, "It is not so much about making abortion illegal as it is about making it unthinkable."

I resonated with that phrase because it summed up my personal belief that was operative for a number of years: "Leave the 'Roe v. Wade' decision alone and work to create a climate of life in regard to all social issues and to make sure that the abortion issue is viewed in the context of other life issues."

I have worked very hard and continue to do what I can in my ministry to create a "Culture of Life" in which abortion becomes unthinkable. I have faithfully attempted to do this in my "one to one" ministry and in my efforts on a parish-wide basis here at St. Thomas More.

This attitude worked for a while, but I continued to be nagged by the question of the unborn child and

his/her rights. What happens to all these human beings who cannot speak for themselves while we, as a society, are busy getting our "Culture of Life" act together?

Are they society's sacrifice? Or do we, if we believe that they are pre-born human beings, protect them with the rights that we grant born children and adults?

And, indeed, we grant even greater rights to infants and children than to adults because infants and children are more vulnerable. Do we not logically conclude that pre-born children should have those same rights?

It is one thing to try to persuade people to live within a "Culture of Life," and it is another to ensure that "Culture of Life" rights are guaranteed for everyone, especially the weak, the vulnerable, the defenseless.

What finally moved me to decide that we not only must create a "Culture of Life" through persuasion, but at the same time, we must create, enact and enforce laws that protect all human beings whether born or pre-born was my remembrance of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and especially the witness of Martin Luther King Jr.

Could you imagine if that movement was only about persuasion? Could you imagine Rev. King saying, "Let us try to convince white people that they shouldn't be prejudiced toward black people. Let us try to convince them that separate is not equal. Let us point out all the institutionalized inequalities and simply pray for change"? Where would we be today? Not very far from the late 1950's and 1960's, I believe!

It was the legislation that was created, enacted and enforced that made people change behavior and hopefully, in time, change attitude and feelings.

We see a great change today in 2006, and it is because of legislation and moral persuasion!

Moral persuasion alone, unfortunately, would not have begun to bring discrimination to an end. If we believe in a "Culture of Life," we must be willing to not only change attitudes, but we must be willing to create legislation that reflects our beliefs.

We still see many forms of subtle and not so subtle discrimination that continue 45 years later even though legislation is in place. The reason for that, in my opinion, is because we, as society and as a Church, need to do more in the way of moral persuasion! Discrimination based on skin color, ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, mental and physical disabilities, economic and academic abilities must be loudly denounced. Where legislation is still needed, it must be enacted and enforced. These issues are, indeed, pro-life issues. If we want to protect life in the womb, we must be sincere and tireless in our efforts to protect life out of the womb.

We must make those connections. Otherwise our efforts to be anti-abortion are meaningless!

Two years ago we went through a long and difficult presidential campaign. Both candidates had claimed to be pro-life, but for very different reasons. As Catholics, we must keep in mind that neither Mr. Bush nor Mr. Kerry and neither party, the Democrats nor the Republicans, are fully pro-life in the Catholic understanding.

In creating a “Culture of Life,” and in being Catholic, when we are pro-abortion and anti-death penalty; when we are anti-abortion and pro-death penalty; when we turn a deaf ear to a variety of discriminations; when we care not about the poor and the recently arrived in our society; when we see ourselves in isolation from other peoples and countries; when we begin wars pre-emptively, we are not consistent in our Catholic beliefs. We must be willing to make the connections!

This consistency is called the “Seamless Garment Ethic.” The phrase was coined by the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago. The phrase alludes to the event during Jesus’ crucifixion, his act of solidarity with the sufferings of Creation:

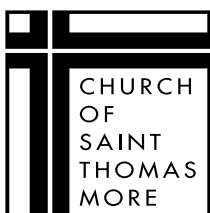
“When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garment and made four parts, one for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom; so they said to one another, ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.’ ” (John 19: 23-24)

The “Seamless Garment Ethic” makes the same point as the Gospel story: the fabric of God’s Creation is desecrated when we tear it, gamble over it, or in any sense lay claims of ownership upon any part of it. This ethic involves an opposition to abortion, sexism, warfare, the use of nuclear arms, the death penalty, economic deprivation and the active killing of the sick and disabled. Just as much, the ethic calls us to create positive alternatives to these violent practices.

If I am to be pro-life, I must be consistent. I must be willing to wear the seamless garment. I must be pro-life in all places and at all times - from womb to tomb. I must work to create the “Culture of Life” not only through moral persuasion, but I must also work to create legislation that institutionalizes the “Culture of Life” beliefs. It is not “either/or.” It is “both/and”!

Thank you for allowing me to share my personal story with you. I pray that my sharing will help you in your struggles with the variety of life issues.

It is time that we stop pointing fingers at one another and arguing with each other about whom is more pro-life. The challenge for each of us is to look into our hearts and ask ourselves: “How well am I wearing the seamless garment of Christ?”



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