

"Pro-Life" as *benevolent insanity*

An open-letter response to James K. Fitzpatrick on his "A Pro-Life Loss of Nerve?" (Dec/00 FIRST THINGS)
My dear Mr. Fitzpatrick:

1 To keep us from going insane, God nudges us to expose our thinking to one another. Through the other, the Spirit may show me that what I thought was light is darkness or dusk or dawn--as Jesus says (Mt.6.28 NRSV), "If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" Columbine killers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris left a tape revealing their twisted thinking. We heard that tape with **horror**. We could see their insanity, they could not.

2 I must tell you that your article called up in me the **horror** I felt while hearing the Columbine recording. Theirs was a malevolent insanity, yours a benevolent. But the horror at the psychopathy was the same. So was the etiology: they were not in serious conversation with anyone who could have illumined their monomania, you have not been in serious conversation with any of us on the pro-choice side of the abortion issue.

3 Why my **horror**? Because until your article's end, its logic is that of those who bomb "abortifactories" and kill "abortionists." Some of those criminals have actually argued that their action came under the dominical injunction "Love your enemies": by killing them, they prevented them from having to bear the load of further sinning. Exactly the argument used by the Inquisition vis-a-vis the so-called heretics.

4 And I am additionally disturbed by your disingenuous contrast between anti-abortion violence and what you call "the politics of persuasion." Persuasion comes through dialog, but your inflammatory language--abortion is "murder"--excludes dialog. You make clear that what you are pressuring for is coercion, not persuasion. To you, Roe v. Wade is "unjust law" freeing women to abort: just law would forbid it, as all other forms of murder are forbidden.

5 "Murder," ah, there's the rub. Since murder is a crime and the government says that abortion is not a crime, it's a **category error** to call abortion murder. Since the error is deliberate-rhetorical, we must ask whether the end (viz., to end legal abortion) justifies the means (language distortion, the political spinning of "murder" backward ["Abortion should be a crime"] & forward ["Abortion will be a crime"]). But torquing is never cost-free. In this case, what are the costs?

6 *Self-deception* is a horrendous cost. Antinomians can't distinguish right from wrong, & anomics can't distinguish legal from illegal. When the pro-life (honestly put, anti-abortion) preachers confuse the categories of morality & law by blurring the meaning of "crime," & then forget the rhetorical trick they've played on the public, they impede their own clarity of thought & whip themselves up into an anti-abortion frenzy which sometimes obscenely works death in the name of life.

Or do you challenge my conviction that "crime" should not be used in logical discourse for a legal activity? In the CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN ENGLISH (Camb.U.P./00), "crime" is "an action or activity that is against the law, or illegal activity generally." Then this popular meaning (not for situations in which verbal clarity for precise thinking is needed): "People say something is a crime if it is wrong: *It's a crime that people go to bed hungry in this country.*" Of course there's no popular, blurred meaning of "murder." It's only "the crime of intentionally killing a person."

7 But in his workworld, our new attorney general, John Ashcroft, has agreed to blur "murder" in the case of abortion. He told the Senate that, in effect, he is pro-murder in one instance, viz., the enforcement of Roe v. Wade (& other legislation declaring abortion legal). Since he's freely used "murder" for abortion, how could he take a job requiring him to be, in this limited sense, pro-murder? Here the verbal trick leads straight into dissembling & farce.

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8 More farce if we continue to look closely at the pro-life **arcane pollution** of the English language. Let's continue with CDAE's down-to-earth definitions. We all agree that "murder" is "killing a person," but what's a "person"? A "person" is "a man, a woman, or child." But what's a "child"? A "child" is a "person from the time of birth," not from conception or viability.

But in the weird world of anti-abortion argot, a fetus or even an embryo or conceptus (zygote) is an "unborn child" who should be societally accorded the "dignity & rights of a person." This would mean, say, a million murders were committed (as discarded concepti) in producing America's present testtube population of (by an informed guess) 31,000 walking-around folks. Move over, Hitler--or, again, farcical word-abuse. And with biomedical advances, the farce becomes more embarrassing. Since any live cell in your body could conceivably, now, be cloned into another you, would you not be guilty of murder (suicide!) if you were to have surgery which you knew would involve the killing of some cells?

9 Another horrendous cost of your screechy redefining of "murder," "person," "child," etc. is the squelching of debate. You do well to quote C.S. Lewis: "when the Round Table is broken every man must follow Galahad or Mordred; middle things [debating, compromising, negotiating spaces] are gone." You want to have it both ways: (1) the Round Table is not yet broken (if it were, "lethal force against our neighbors" would be justified), & (2) your pro-choice neighbors believe "it should be legal to kill unborn children." How can you say the Round Table is not broken if you think those on the other side are baby-killers? Is mere conversation & civil persuasion sufficient action to take against the murderers of children? You are in self-contradiction: the logic of your article is that "the politics of persuasion" is insufficient to stop murderers, yet you favor letting the mass murdering of "unborn children" proceed until sometime (not in the near future!) abortion becomes illegal. We should not be surprised that some follow your logic into the criminality of murdering people in (another inflammatory expression) "the abortion industry." The brake you put on this criminality is too weak for the power of your logic.

10 In the culture war & the intensifying crisis of civility, we need **cool language** for public discussion & action on hot-button issues. In a downward spiral, hot words heat hot issues to the point of boiling, mind-blowing, reason-subverting rage. Aren't you ashamed to be a party to this antidemocratic incivility?

11 Thank God for those who keep their balance & sense of proportion in the abortion debate. Rightly, Pres. Clinton wanted abortion "legal and rare." Rightly, Pres. Bush--who has pro-choice women (mother & wife) to keep him from going over the edge into benevolent insanity--says "Good people disagree about abortion," though he does hope for a time when "every child will be protected in law and welcomed in life." But his cutting off of funds for world reproduction-control is (& here I'll use two words you use against pro-choice) "error" & "evil." The "pro-life" myopic concentration on the zygote-embryo-fetus is insanely blind to the human & biosphereic implications of denying women control over their reproductive potential. In this denial, the Roman Catholic Church & Islam are the chief culprits, the most influential sinners.

12 History is indeed condemned to repeat its forgotten insanities. Prohibition did somewhat decrease the consumption of alcohol, but at what cost in blood, financial waste, & disrespect for law! That prohibition was only of a substance: why cannot the anti-abortionists imaginately anticipate the evil consequences of denying the public legal access to a behavior women always & everywhere have sought in their anxiety to be released from a multi-threatening growth? Do you really believe that anti-abortion legislation would do more good than harm?

13 Your article appeared in FIRST THINGS, a narrow-minded periodical in which I've never seen a defense of the pro-choice position. In it I have seen & continue to see statements at least implying that there can never be any intellectually respectable pro-choice defense. On abortion, that publication does not believe that "New occasions teach new duties" & "Time makes ancient good uncouth." A pity, & a tragedy.