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Abortion as Betrayal

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ABORTION AS BETRAYAL

Abortion is worse than ordinary murder, principally because it involves the betrayal of a dependent by a natural guardian. Furthermore, abortion is emblematic of wider lethal betrayals of radically dependent persons. All these betrayals are rationalized precisely by the victims' lack of autonomy-based dignity. Christianity counters by affirming the concern and respect due to those who helplessly suffer worldly disdain.

* * *

Suppose we were to find out that over a quarter of the nation's grandparents are killed each year by their teenage grandchildren, often through deliberate dismemberment. Wouldn't responses such as "This is murder!" somehow understate the matter?

Yet such a reaction to the current right to kill unborn children throughout pregnancy is about as hard-hitting as one can find in most pro-life writing. At best, the sheer number of slayings may be brought to the fore, as Cardinal George of Chicago did most powerfully before the last election, when he called us a nation "drenched in blood."

But doesn't even the cardinal's language somehow understate the full horror of abortion, just as it would be insufficient to express our shock at the massive mutilation of grandparents? What lie still unspoken are the multiple evils involved in betrayal of *weak* and *dependent* persons *naturally* in our care. Besides being a living human being, the unborn victim of abortion has three additional characteristics: weakness, dependency, and membership in a natural family. Each of these augments the evil of abortion.

First, the victim of abortion is not an adult, but a helpless child. Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) pointed out, in 1991, that abortion is part of "a true war of the mighty against the weak.... With the complicity of States, colossal means have been used against people at the dawn of their life...."¹ When we read of troops or terrorists slaughtering the weak — the very old, the very young, the very disabled — this seems more inhuman than the killing of vigorous adults. There is something in us that naturally responds to weakness with compassion and deference. The *Catechism* supports this feeling when it states, "Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect" (#2276). When a blind man is robbed of a wallet, our humanity is more deeply injured than when a sighted person has his wallet stolen. The thief has committed an act not only wrong but shameful.

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Problem of Threats to Human Life" (April 8, 1991), Section III, "The War on Life Today," pgh 1, available online at: http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=187.

Hans Jonas has argued that our treatment of babies stands out as a kind of archetype for decency. He points to “the newborn, whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely, to take care of him.”² Abortion, instead, tramples upon him. The legalization of abortion past ten to twelve weeks, the point at which even a child can recognize a child in the womb, is shameless, disgraceful, ignoble.

Second, the unborn child lives in a relationship of dependency. It is worse for a caretaker (a lifeguard, a nurse, a family member) to kill a disabled person than for a stranger to do so, because of the greater betrayal. This dimension of abortion was brought home to me when I was teaching in Ukraine. I saw a prolife poster there with an unborn child sucking its thumb and asked if the caption “Не зрадь мене, Мамо” meant “Don’t kill me, Mommy.” I was told no, that it meant “Do not betray me, Mommy.” *Of course*, I thought, *if there is a life, then there is a child; if a child, then a mother; if a mother, then a betrayal.*

And, our third point, a mother’s betrayal is not just any betrayal by a caretaker. Parental duties are perhaps the most fundamental we can imagine. Pope John Paul II, in *Evangelium Vitae* (#11), first criticizes abortion and euthanasia for being “attacks [which] strike human life at the time of its greatest frailty,” but he immediately adds that even “more serious is the fact that, most often, those attacks are carried out in the very heart of and with the complicity of the family — the family which by its nature is called to be the ‘sanctuary of life.’” By officially authorizing abortion throughout pregnancy, current American law willingly tempts and enables mothers and fathers to turn violently against those little lives that utterly depend on them. Our entire legal system, and those who support it, is itself complicit in an act three reasons worse than ordinary murder³.

Some abortion supporters claim there can be no betrayal where there is no person in the full sense to be betrayed. The long answer here would point to the continuity of the human organism from conception to adulthood and to the fact that a mere change in location (in this case, a movement from inside to outside the uterus) cannot result in a change in the inherent nature or dignity of that developing being. A shorter answer would point out, with Stanley Hauerwas, that one need not be a person in some full sense in order to be a child.⁴

² Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 131.

³ Abortion also differs from ordinary murder in that it involves extraordinary violence — deliberate dismemberment — often while the child is still alive. Indeed, that is precisely why Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and John Paul Stevens upheld the right to partial-birth abortion in the year 2000. They said it is “simply irrational” to object to suctioning out a fetus’s brains partway through birth when the alternative — standard intra-uterine dismemberment — is, in their words, at least as “brutal,” “gruesome,” “cruel,” and “painful” as abortion during delivery. *Stenberg v. Carhart*, 530 U.S. 914, 946,

⁴ “Must a Person Be a Person to Be a Patient? Or, My Uncle Charlie Is Not Much of a Person but He Is Still My Uncle Charlie”, in STANLEY M. HAUERWAS, DAVID B. BURRELL & RICHARD BONDI, *TRUTHFULNESS AND TRAGEDY: FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977) 127, 128.

Other abortion supporters argue overtly that natural family ties have no significance unless they are autonomously assumed. A mother may know she is taking the life of her offspring and yet incur no moral guilt as long as she has never autonomously chosen to accept and rear her child. Choice trumps both life and family.

Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing in *Gonzales v. Carhart* (the second partial-birth abortion case, decided in 2007) reminds us that “respect for human life finds an ultimate expression in the bond of love the mother has for her child.” Mother Teresa, in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, draws the obvious conclusion: “If a mother can kill her own child, what is left for me to kill you and you to kill me?”⁵ If the ancient maternal archetype of devoted care is renounced, what confidence can we still have in one another? Accepting the killing of strangers eats away at our community from the outside in; accepting the killing of our own children rots us from the inside out. How can any dependent human lives be safe?

If we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, why should scientists quail at the dissection of embryos and fetuses unrelated to them? Given that a mother can legitimately destroy her child before birth or during birth, why not doctors after birth, since location cannot seriously be thought to make a difference in a being’s inherent dignity? Federal judge Robert Beezer of the Ninth Circuit has argued that the teaching of the U.S. Supreme Court is that other non-viable people can be treated like fetuses.⁶ Dare aging parents ask for care from those who know their siblings were aborted?

According to *The New York Times*, Dr. Eduard Verhagen of the Netherlands, who freely admits to active euthanasia of newborns in apparently irremediable pain, says he could not do the deadly deed to his own suffering child, but would ask someone else to do it.⁷ Of course, he’s fooling himself if he thinks such abstention would make him a better father, but his admission does show the deep-seated character of respect for the life of one’s own offspring. We tear out the roots of human trust when we authorize the killing of our own children.

Pope John Paul II indeed found the pursuit of individual autonomy to be a root cause of many sorts of betrayals of the weak and vulnerable. The drive for autonomy aims at freedom from all kinds of burdensome dependents. The Pope wrote, in *Evangelium Vitae* (#12), that “a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life-style of those who are more favored tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated.”

⁵ Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Oslo, Norway (1979).

⁶ *Compassion in Dying v. State of Washington*, 79 F.3d 790, 851 (9th Cir., 1996). Dissenting opinion. Judge Beezer made this argument, however, in opposition to killing patients who were “viable” on their own, i.e. able to survive without mechanical assistance. He argued that Roe permits taking the life only of a non-viable human being.

⁷ *New York Times*, Saturday, March 15, 2005, p. A4.

Those unable to bargain out their rights and duties — such as the unborn or the mentally disabled — thus come to count for very little. Their destruction is rationalized by the idea that autonomy alone is the basis for human dignity. Rights are possessed only by “the person who enjoys total or at least incipient autonomy and who emerges from total dependence on others.... There is no place...for anyone who appears completely at the mercy of others and radically dependent on them” (*Evangelium Vitae*, #19). Abortion reasons: *Because* the unborn child stands in utter need, is “nonviable” on her own, she may be slaughtered.

Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon has warned that by “making a radical vision of individual autonomy normative, we inevitably imply that dependency is something to be avoided in ourselves and disdained in others.”⁸ The leading legal theorist Ronald Dworkin exhibits just such disdain. He writes: “We are distressed by, even disapprove of, someone...who neglects or sacrifices the independence we think dignity requires.” For Dworkin, a person who chooses to live in great dependency denies that he is someone “whose life is important for its own sake.”⁹

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote prophetically: “To go on vegetating in cowardly dependence on physicians and machinations, after the meaning of life, the right to life, has been lost, that ought to prompt a profound contempt in society.”¹⁰ Nietzsche complained that Christians (at least in his day) stand against such disdain for the dependent. “If the degenerate and the sick...are to be accorded the same value as the healthy...then unnaturalness becomes law — This universal love of men is in practice the *preference* for the suffering, underprivileged, degenerate: it has in fact lowered and weakened the strength, the responsibility, the lofty duty to sacrifice men....The species requires that the ill-constituted, weak, degenerate perish: but it was precisely to them that Christianity turned as a conserving force.”

Nietzsche was searching, he said, for “a thoroughgoing *practical nihilism*.... Problem: with what means could one attain to a severe form of really contagious nihilism: such as teaches and practices voluntary death with scientific conscientiousness (— and *not* a feeble, vegetable existence in expectation of a false afterlife--)?”¹¹

Has Nietzsche’s “problem” finally been solved in our day? Have our very old, our very sick, our very incapacitated been convinced by the likes of Dworkin and Nietzsche that they are merely contemptible burdens if they do not “autonomously” choose death? Is this the

⁸ Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York NY: Macmillan, The Free Press, 1991), p. 73. Although the context of her remark in the text above is family rather than health law, Professor Glendon emphasizes shortly thereafter (p. 74) that by “exalting autonomy to the degree we do, we systematically slight the very young, the severely ill or disabled, the frail elderly, as well as those who care for them....”

⁹ *LIFE’S DOMINION: AN ARGUMENT ABOUT ABORTION, EUTHANASIA, AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) 235, 237.

¹⁰ *TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS in THE COMPLETE WORKS OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE*, vol. 16 Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (New York, Russell and Russell, 1909-1911; repr. 1964) 88.

¹¹ *THE WILL TO POWER*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Westminster, MD: Random House, 1967), 142-143.

meaning of the recent approval of assisted suicide in the State of Washington? If so, how can our “preferential love for the sick” (*Catechism*, #1503) convince them that they are worth the trouble after all?

The Gospel reading for Holy Thursday provides an answer. It tells the familiar story of Christ’s washing of the Apostles’ feet. We draw, appropriately, the lesson that no act of service is too low for us. But we may miss something in the interchange between our Lord and Peter. Peter at first refuses to let his feet be washed -- perhaps in some sort of embarrassment, perhaps because they smelled. Christ responds, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.” (John 13:8) We Christians have a duty that may sometimes be harder than even the most heroic service: to let ourselves be served by others even when we think ourselves too insignificant to merit such care.

Again: We are to imitate Christ. But Christ Himself is sometimes the one served. True, the Gospels tell us that we shall be judged by how well we serve the needy — “I was thirsty and you gave me drink.” (Matt. 25:35) Yet note that Christ is here not the server but the served. It is thus precisely when we are most afflicted that we have new way to come closer to Christ, the Man of Sorrows who “took our infirmities and bore our diseases, ” the one who humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the publicly humiliating death by crucifixion. Many of the mysterious Beatitudes are in the same vein, calling those who suffer, and who suffer worldly contempt, “blessed.”

Here then is the Good News for all dependent persons, and for the rest of us potentially dependent persons: Our dignity is not a function of autonomy or pleasant smell. Living in dependency, even suffering death in apparent humiliation, can itself be heroic resistance to the enfolding Culture of Contempt and Betrayal. And God gave us a great exemplar in our own day, seen by millions around the world: our late dear Pope John Paul, ever more dependent on others’ help, even to wipe his mouth as he drooled while seeking to speak.

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