

Silence of the faithful is cowardice

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Originally published in the Rocky Mountain News October 22, 2004

Life is full of surprises, and I had another one this week. It turns out that the archbishop of Denver believes that "supporting stem cells is a sin." It must be true because I read it in *Newsweek* magazine. Except it isn't.

On the same day, one of Denver's local dailies informed me that "in another foray into politics," I had accused "Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards of lying about the potential curing power of embryonic stem-cell research."

In fact, I didn't name any candidate, any political party or even the location of the remarks I highlighted. The candidate is immaterial. So is the political party. But the issue, for Catholics and the culture at large, is vital. What I actually said this week - and what I've said many times before this election year - is the following:

"We do know that stem cells from adults and umbilical cords do show great promise and already have applications in therapy. The church has no objection to such stem-cell research. In fact, she supports and encourages it.

"The problem with embryonic stem-cell research comes down to this: We need to kill the embryos to do the research. The fact that developing human beings don't 'look human' is irrelevant. So are their size and their stage of development. They're still human, and left to their natural growth, they become thinking, feeling adults with hopes and moral purpose - exactly like the rest of us."

The Catholic Church didn't place stem-cell research on the public agenda. Others did. The Catholic Church didn't insert the issue into this year's campaign speeches. Others did. But for Catholics to remain silent on matters involving the sanctity of human life and the ethics of scientific research is not "tolerance." It's cowardice.

In a democracy, religious believers, communities of faith and religious leaders have every right to take part in the public conversation. In fact, when they don't, they steal from their country and impoverish our civic dialogue. In the United States, the Constitution guarantees that freedom, and American history is filled with examples of people of faith shaping politics in powerful and healthy ways.

Real pluralism always involves friction. It draws its life from people of strong conviction who work to advance what they believe in the public square - ethically and nonviolently, but vigorously and without embarrassment. Trying to silence religiously based moral witness on public issues is just another form of bullying. It attacks the democratic process in the name of democracy itself.

It's curious that many of the same people who publicly fret about the "separation of church and state" when it comes to issues like stem-cell research and abortion were delighted to have the church speak out about the plight of farm workers, economic justice, Vietnam, civil rights, Iraq and the death penalty.

If persons are serious about what they claim to believe, then they naturally work to bring every aspect of their lives into harmony with it. That includes their family life, their friendships, their business and employment activities, and their political choices. In the case of Christians, who make up roughly 80 percent of America's population, the Gospel tells us to be leaven in the world (Matthew 13:33). It doesn't say, "Except in our political decisions."

If Catholics, for example, claim to "personally oppose" abortion but then do nothing to protect the life of the unborn child, they are ignoring their own principles and violating their own consciences.

For Catholics, abortion is not only a matter of Christian tradition or Catholic teaching. It's equally an issue of human dignity and civil rights. We betray our democratic responsibilities, not simply our religious identity, if we fail to defend the right to life of the unborn child.

Obviously, the church's social ministry deals with a vast array of other issues every day of the week, from assisting the poor, the hungry and the homeless to educating inner-city children. For Catholics, that's our duty and our privilege. Our obligations to pursue social and economic justice, and to advance the dignity of the whole human person by no means end with the unborn child. But they do always begin there, because the right to life is first and fundamental.

Catholics - and all persons of goodwill - should demand of both political parties exactly the same thing: policies that defend the sanctity of every individual human being from conception to natural death; and policies that serve the common good.

Decent people can differ very deeply about which policies best achieve those goals, but all other rights depend on the right to life. That's the cornerstone of social justice. Reasonable persons should be able to agree on that and act - and inform their vote - accordingly.