



## Why this work matters: human dignity and the road ahead

*Cleveland Right to Life, Cleveland, Ohio, March 9, 2010*

Politics can sometimes work like a virus. The simpler a political slogan is, the faster people absorb it; the faster they transmit it; and the less likely they are to really *think* about it – which means they don't develop an immunity to its content.

Here's an example. A theme we've heard from many of our political leaders over the past 18 months goes like this. America needs to return science to its "rightful place" in public life. Well, who can argue with that? Science does an enormous amount of good. Obviously science should have its rightful place alongside every other important human endeavor. But one thing that this theme often means, in *practice*, is that we need to spend a lot more money on research. Especially the controversial kind. And while we're at it, we should stop asking so many annoying ethical questions, so that science can get on with its vital work.

We could spend the rest of the day debating whether science has lost its place as a national priority. But I want to focus on those words "rightful place." That's an interesting phrase. A "rightful" place suggests that there's also a wrongful place; a bad alternative. And words like right and wrong, good and bad, are loaded with moral judgment. A "good" law embodies what somebody thinks is right. A "bad" public policy embodies what somebody thinks is bad, or at least inadequate.

All law in some sense teaches and forms us, while also regulating our behavior. The same applies to our public policies, including the ones that govern our scientific research. There's no such thing as morally neutral legislation or morally neutral public policy. Every law is the public expression of what somebody thinks we "ought" to do. The question that matters is this: *Which* moral convictions of *which* somebody's are going to shape our country's political and cultural future – including the way we do our science?

If you and I as citizens don't do the shaping, then somebody else will. That's the nature of a democracy. A healthy democracy depends on people of conviction working hard to advance their ideas in the public square – respectfully and peacefully, but vigorously and without apologies. Politics *always* involves the exercise of power in the pursuit of somebody's idea of the common good. And politics *always and naturally* involves the imposition of somebody's values on the public at large. So if a citizen fails to bring his moral beliefs into our country's political conversation; if he fails to work for them publicly and energetically; then the only thing he ensures is the defeat of his own beliefs.

We also need to remember that most people – not everyone, of course, but most of us – root our moral convictions in our *religious* beliefs. What we believe about God shapes what we think about the nature of men and women, good human relationships, and our idea of a just society. This has very practical consequences, including the political kind. We act on what we really believe. If we *don't* act on our beliefs, then we don't really believe them. As a result, the idea that the "separation of Church and state" should force us to wall off our religious beliefs from guiding our political behavior makes no sense at all, even superficially. If we don't remain true in our public actions to what we claim to believe in our personal lives, then we only deceive ourselves, because God isn't fooled. He sees who and what we really are. God sees that our duplicity is really a kind of cowardice; and that our lack of courage does a lot more damage than simply compromising our own integrity. It also undermines the courage of other good people who really *do* try to publicly witness what they believe. And that compounds a sin of dishonesty with a sin of injustice.

I'd like to dwell on the issue of science for just another moment, because it will lead us into the rest of our discussion today. I want you to listen to some thoughts from two very different sources. Here is the first source:

"Science, by itself, cannot establish the ends to which it is put. Science can discover vaccines and cures for diseases, but it can also create infectious agents; it can uncover the physics of semiconductors but also the physics of the hydrogen bomb. Science [as] science is indifferent to whether data are gathered under rules that scrupulously protect the interest of human research subjects . . . [or by] bending the rules or ignoring them altogether. A number of the Nazi doctors who injected concentration camp victims with infectious agents or tortured prisoners by freezing or burning them to death were in fact legitimate scientists who gathered real data that could potentially be put to good use."

The same source goes on to worry that, today, many of the bioethicists who claim to counsel and guide the moral course of American science "have become nothing more than sophisticated (and sophistic) justifiers of whatever it is the scientific community wants . . . In any discussion of cloning, stem-cell research, germ-line engineering and the like, it is usually the professional bioethicist who can be relied on to take the most permissive position of anyone in the room."<sup>1</sup>

Now listen to these words from my second source:

"What is our contemporary idiocy? What is the enemy within the [human] city? If I had to give it a name, I think I would call it 'technological secularism.' The idiot today is the technological secularist who knows everything . . . about the organization of all the instruments and techniques of power that are available in the contemporary world -- and who, at the same time, understands *nothing* about the nature of man or about the nature of true civilization."<sup>2</sup>

The words from my first source appeared in 2002. They come from the author and scholar Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama strongly supports the benefits of science and technology. He is not -- to my knowledge -- a religious believer. And based on his writings, he seems to have very little use for Christianity. But he's also not a fool. He sees exactly where our advances in biotechnology could lead us if we don't find an ethical way of guiding them.

The words from my second source were written nearly 50 years ago, in 1961. They come from John Courtney Murray, the great Jesuit priest and Christian scholar. Murray was a thoughtful man, and he chose his language very carefully. He used the word "idiot" in the original Greek sense of the term, which is quite different from its meaning in modern slang. For the Greeks, the "idiot" was not a mentally deficient man. Rather, he was a man who does not possess a proper public philosophy; or as Murray says, "a man who is not master of the knowledge and skills that underlie the life of a civilized city. The idiot, to the Greek, was just one stage removed from the barbarian. He is the man who is ignorant of the meaning of the word 'civility'."<sup>3</sup>

As I said, these two sources are very different. One was a believer. The other is not. Father Murray died more than four decades ago, long before today's stem-cell debates. But both men would agree that science and technology are not ends in themselves. They're enormously valuable tools. But they're tools that can undermine human dignity, and even attack what it means to be "human," just as easily as they can serve human progress. Everything depends on who uses them, and how. Fools with tools are still fools -- and the more powerful the tools, the more dangerous the fools. Or to put it another way, neither science nor technology *requires* a conscience to produce results. The evidence for that is the record of the last century.

Now I've talked about these things so far for a simple reason. The struggle we face today in defending human dignity is becoming more complex. I've believed for many years that abortion is the foundational human rights issue of our lifetime. We can't simultaneously serve the poor and accept the legal killing of unborn children. We can't build a just society, and at the same time legally sanctify the destruction of generations of unborn human life. The rights of the poor and the rights of the unborn child flow from *exactly the same human dignity* guaranteed by the God who created us.

Of course, working to end abortion doesn't absolve us from our obligations to the poor. It doesn't excuse us from our duties to the disabled, the elderly and immigrants. In fact, it *demand*s from us a much stronger commitment to materially support women who find themselves in a difficult pregnancy.

All of these obligations are vital. God will hold us accountable if we ignore them. But *none* of these

other duties can obscure the fact that no human rights are secure if the right to life is not. And unfortunately, abortion is no longer the only major bioethical threat to that right in our culture. In fact, the right to life has never, at any time in the past, faced the range of challenges it faces right now, and *will* face in the immediate future. Physician-assisted suicide, cloning, genetic engineering and developments in biotechnology will raise profoundly serious questions about the definition of "human nature" and the protection of human dignity in the years ahead.

This raises a pressing question: What do those of us in prolife work need to do in preparing for whatever lies ahead? Let me offer a few dos and don'ts that might help guide us, and we can talk about them in greater depth during our discussion time.

Here's the first don't. *Don't let divisions take root.*

Unity is a sign of God's Spirit. Division is the sign of Someone very different. St. Augustine said that we need to be united in the essentials, free in the debatables, and charitable in all things. It's good advice. Differing prolife opinions go with the movement's richness. As a bishop, I've been baffled by the energy wasted on internal prolife bickering. We can never allow our differences to become personal. Acrimony among us is a gift to the other side. It's also a form of theft from the unborn children who will suffer the consequences of our division.

Here's the second don't. *Don't create or accept false oppositions.*

Dialectical thinking -- and by that I mean the idea that most of our options involve "either/or" choices -- is usually untrue and also un-Christian. During the 2008 election, a number of new and so-called prolife organizations argued we should stop fighting the legal struggle over abortion. Instead we should join with "pro-choice" supporters to seek "common ground."

Their argument was pretty simple: Why fight a losing battle on the legal front? Let's drop the "divisive" political battle. Instead let's all work together to tackle the economic and health issues that might eventually reduce abortions.

The trouble is, Americans *didn't* take the gradual, social-improvement road to "reducing" racism. Quite the opposite. We passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Nor have I ever heard anyone suggest that the best way to deal with murder, robbery, sexual assault or domestic abuse is to improve the availability of health care and job training. We make sexual assault illegal -- even though we know it will sometimes still tragically occur -- because it's *gravely evil*. It's an act of violence, and the law should proscribe it. Of course, we also have a duty to improve the social conditions that can breed domestic and sexual violence. But that doesn't change the need for the law.

Likewise, if we really believe that abortion is an intimate act of violence -- and of course, it is -- then we can't aim at anything less than ending abortion. It doesn't matter that some abortions have always occurred, or that some will always occur. If we really believe that abortion kills a developing, unborn human life, then we can *never* be satisfied with mere "reductions" in the body count.

The Catholic bishops of our country have argued for more than 30 years that government needs to improve the economic conditions that can lead some women to abortion. But good programs for economic justice don't absolve anyone from the legal struggle to restrict and eventually end abortion. We can do that incrementally, but we need to do it. Protecting the unborn child is not an "either/or" choice. It's "both/and." We need to help women facing problem pregnancies with good health care and economic support; *and* we need to pass laws that will end legal abortion. We need to do both.

Here's the third don't. *Don't hate the adversary.*

People who support so-called "abortion rights" are opponents to the cause of life. But they rarely understand the full gravity of what they're doing, and they're never our "enemies." Our enemy is the Evil One, not other human beings. Abortion-friendly lawmakers and organizations, and even people who despise us for what we believe, are still our brothers and sisters. We need to trust in the power of love; the true power of God. St. Irenaeus of Lyon warned the early Christians that we've been sent like sheep into the midst of wolves. The moment we become wolves ourselves, we lose.

Now here's the first and most important do. It's very simple: *Do become martyrs.*

I said it was simple. I didn't say it was easy. "Martyr" is originally a Greek word, and it simply means

"witness." We need to witness our beliefs about human dignity with the example of our daily choices and actions. But public witness can be costly. We need to be ready to pay a price for our convictions. We may never be asked to bleed for what we believe. But we do see character assassination, contempt and calumny against good people every day in our public media. We need to prepare for that. Nothing, not even our good name, should stop us from doing what we know to be right.

Here's the second do. *Do keep hope alive.*

Cultivating a spirit of joy is not self-deception. It's a way to acknowledge that God *really* is on the side of human life and dignity, and that human nature, created by God and despite the wound of original sin, is also on our side. Nothing is more inspiring than happy warriors. I've never in my life seen a joy-filled pro-abortion event. And I've always found that instructive.

Here's the third do. *Do use the best means for your message, especially the new technologies.*

Today's new technologies can be a mixed blessing. But they're also cheap and useful tools that proliferators – like Brian Burch at catholicvote.org and many others -- can use very effectively. Many of the traditional, mainline media are losing influence. But blogs, social networks, and YouTube channels are thriving. They offer huge prolife opportunities.

Here's the fourth and final do. *Do remember that renewing the culture, not grasping at power, is our real goal. Political and social action is vital. But it's not an end in itself.*

Culture is our "human ecology" -- the environment where we breathe not only air, but ideas, beliefs, art, music, social manners and values. Our job is to carry out, according to the talents and skills God gave us, what John Paul II called the "evangelization of culture."

Many things in American life today fuel a spirit of greed and self-delusion. Our adversaries often have far more resources than the prolife movement can ever hope to muster. It doesn't matter. Culture can be changed in small but powerful ways. But achieving that change demands from each of us a lifelong commitment to education; to studying and really *understanding* the issues that face us in science, medicine, technology and law; to deepening the character formation of our children and ourselves; and ultimately, to personal action and personal witness in the public square. Nobody will do these things for us. The task of renewing our country belongs to you and me. It starts with each one of us individually, and it spreads outward to other people through our personal acts of courage. If we change the environment around us one heart at a time, while we save one unborn life at a time, the day will come when we won't need to worry about saving babies, because they'll be surrounded by a loving, welcoming culture.

I want to leave you with two final thoughts.

Here's the first. Nothing we do to defend the human person, no matter how small, is ever unfruitful or forgotten. Our actions touch other lives and move other hearts in ways we can never fully understand in this world.

Don't *ever* underestimate the beauty and power of the witness *you* give in your prolife work. You may think I came here today to encourage *you*; and of course that's true – I did. But I also came here for *me*, to see your dedication and to draw friendship and strength from *you*. One thing we learn from Scripture is that God doesn't have much use for the vain or the prideful; for big shots or celebrities. But He loves the *anawim* – the ordinary, simple, everyday people who keep God's Word, who stay faithful to His commandments, and who sustain the life of the world by leavening it with their own goodness. That's the work you're *really* doing here today. Don't ever forget it. If you speak up for the unborn child in this life, someone will speak up for you in the next, when we meet God face to face.

Here's my second and final thought. I was in Texas last week, and a friend shared with me the unofficial motto of the Texas Rangers. It goes like this: "*No man in the wrong can stand up against a fellow that's in the right, and keeps a-comin.*"<sup>4</sup> I believe that. I believe it because the message is true. *Virtue* does matter. Courage and humility, justice and perseverance, *do* have power. Good *does* win. And the sanctity of human life will endure. It will endure because people like yourselves *will* remember that if "God so loved the world that He gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16), then the odds look pretty good, and it's worth fighting for what's right.

So let's pray for each other, and support each other, and thank God for the privilege of being together

in His service.

**Endnotes:**

1. Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2002; see pages 185, 204
2. John Courtney Murray, S.J., "The Return to Tribalism," 1961; available online from the Woodstock Theological Center Library
3. Ibid.
4. Attributed to Ranger Captain Bill McDonald, c 1900; reference check by the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, Waco, Texas