The Contra-Life Mentality

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The right to abortion, known as the consent given to end an unwanted pregnancy resulting in the death of an unborn child, is one of the many controversial topics discussed by contemporary Catholics. If someone were to approach a Catholic woman living in the twentieth century and inquire as to her position on abortion, it would be almost impossible to predict her response. One can safely say that contemporary Catholicism, within the social sphere, is no longer a single train of thought; it is often characterized by a growing number of movements within the Church based on opinions aiming to redefine Catholic faith.

Hence, as a contemporary Catholic, the question of what is the correct response must always be pondered. What are the Church’s teachings on abortion, and what is the general consensus of the overall Catholic population? One Church father, Pope John Paul II directly addresses what he considers a “culture of death” in his encyclical Evangelium Vitae, by making a papal judgement on various activities that threaten human life. Delving into the many different spheres of Catholic life, I have compared his official view on abortion to that of a more contemporary Catholic – a female secondary school teacher – and to the political views of Senator Joe Biden, Vice-President of the United States. In a comparison between the message of Pope John Paul II’s Evangelium Vitae, my interview with a faithful Catholic and that of another more liberal Catholic on the question of abortion, it is evident that although there is no unanimous agreement on the issue of granting reproductive rights for women or on the steps necessary to improve the moral condition of society, there is an overall consensus on the inherent value of human life, giving witness to the pro-life position of contemporary Catholics that is in accordance with Pope John Paul’s teachings.
In his encyclical “The Gospel of Life,” Pope John Paul II emphasizes the steps necessary to mobilize a “new culture of life.” He claims that through the development of a proper conscience, the chartering of proper rights that defend the dignity of the human being and the fulfillment of the Church’s responsibility to continuously proclaim the Gospel of Life, a “culture of life” may come to fruition. Throughout his letter, John Paul II states that the general public is currently undergoing a severe moral decline. Humanity as a whole is gradually becoming more tolerant of what used to be considered criminal acts due to a decrease in accountability with one another as children of God.¹

To demonstrate the origins of this failing, he references the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis, when Cain shies away from the responsibility of being ‘his brother’s keeper’ naturally endowed to him. Similarly, we as a community today no longer recognize the value of human life or the importance of self-sacrifice because we live a way of life that has become obsessed with scientific progress, efficiency and individualism.

Although Pope John Paul identifies the main threat to human life as being a lack of solidarity, his greatest fear for humanity is the malformation of a proper conscience that occurs from the many lies circulating the world today. In his encyclical he states, “conscience itself, darkened as it were by such widespread conditioning, is finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish between good and evil in what concerns the basic value of human life.”² In the case of abortion, it is the confusion of what constitutes the value of life that frightens him the most. John Paul asserts that we subconsciously buy into the lies

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and scepticism of society that confuse rights with privileges and value with convenience. In his encyclical he discusses the validity of certain reproductive rights movements, stating:

It is not only that in generalized opinion these attacks tend no longer to be considered as ‘crimes;’ paradoxically they assume the nature of ‘rights,’ to the point that the state is called upon to give them legal recognition and to make them available through the free services of health-care personnel. Such attacks strike human life at the time of its greatest frailty.

Pope John Paul therefore speaks a word of caution to many women’s groups that charter for the right to abortion since he believes fighting for theses rights will inevitably lower the value of the woman’s life as well as the child’s. The solution he proposes is in the Church’s mission to declare loudly the Gospel of Life, so that all may be called to one faith in Christ. The only effective method by which human degradation can come to an end is through the proclamation of the inherent value of human life that must forever be celebrated.

After conducting a personal interview with a self-proclaimed Catholic and high school religion teacher by the name of Eleanor Fleur, it is clear that her view of society as a ‘culture of death’ and proposal for changing it into one of life harmoniously agrees with Pope John Paul II’s perspective expressed in Evangelium Vitae. Due to her status as a young woman- and a religion teacher- the topic of abortion is one which has been brought up many times in Eleanor’s lifetime. For this reason, Eleanor is a perfect candidate for my interview. In accordance with the Pope’s message, Eleanor strongly supports the right to life of the unborn and agrees with the claim that there is a dangerous moral problem in

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3 John Paul II. Encyclical: Evangelium Vitae, 694.

4 John Paul II. Encyclical: Evangelium Vitae, 698.
Western culture today. She considers abortion a violation of basic human rights and a great offense to the dignity of the child as well as the woman. Her reason being, “it is God-created life.”

Like Pope John Paul, Eleanor believes it is a lack of solidarity and responsibility which leads people to believe the lies they hear, commenting, “they do not take responsibility for the truth, for each other, or the responsibility to critically analyze the facts given to them.” When asked about what she thinks is precisely the root of abortion, she replies that society has fallen into a lifestyle of ‘situational ethics,’ a constant justification of actions to evade responsibility. From this, she says, morality and truth become relative, preventing one from developing a proper conscience of their own and reducing one’s ability to distinguish between the moral good and the moral evil.

Eleanor uses the metaphor of modern culture as being a sprinkle of water- “a little sprinkle here from an advertisement and a little sprinkle from a Simpson’s episode, and sooner or later you don’t realise your drowning, because you’ve been sprinkled so much your whole life.” The typical response from her students when she asks them about the main negative outcome of pre-marital sex is usually the possibility of the woman being ‘burdened’ with an unwanted baby. The attitude that resonates from her class in their ignorance continues to shock her as it is one of utter selfishness. This observation once again compliments Pope John Paul’s claim of a lack of solidarity, writing, “if the promotion

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of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy.”

In accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church and Pope John Paul II, Eleanor also believes it is necessary to fight the culture of death present in most of Western society today. Although Pope John Paul commends the Church for its responsibility as the mediator of truth, Eleanor argues that the Church needs to do a better job of educating religion teachers in Catholic high schools. Throughout her career Eleanor has had to educate herself on matters such as abortion through independent readings of encyclicals and papal letters. To reduce ignorance Eleanor believes that appropriate education must be administered to create a proper awareness of the value of human life.

Finally, both Eleanor and Pope John Paul II agree that there is perceivable hope for society. Eleanor constantly evangelizes to her students with new stories of life, and their positive reactions always raise her spirits, believing that “once you present them with the truth, their eyes are opened. Seeing over the years certain students becoming more passionate for human life gives me hope.” This is truly evidence of the power of the “Gospel of Life” that Pope John Paul speaks about, reinforcing the Catholic perspective still present in contemporary society that ‘the Truth will set you free.’

Finally, to provide a more political view of the contemporary perspective on abortion, I have compared the writings of Pope John Paul II and my interview with Eleanor Fleur to a second interview with Senator Joe Biden, done by Promises to Keep and Meet the Press. Despite the difference in Biden’s approach to society’s moral condition and granting

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8 John Paul II. Encyclical: Evangelium Vitae, 697.

reproductive rights to women, there is a fundamental agreement within Pope John Paul II’s *Evangelium Vitae* against abortion and on the infinite value of human life. Biden’s approach to abortion is a complicated one. As vice-president, he is forced to make compromises between his role as a senator and as a practicing Catholic. His main argument is that although he is personally against abortion, it is up to individual women to choose whether an abortion is suitable for her, implying that the government cannot interfere.¹⁰

Unlike John Paul II and Eleanor Fleur, Joe Biden does not sense any horrible ethical decline happening in society at all. As a member of parliament, he states in his interview that it is not his job to discern the moral standpoint of society – especially in such a multicultural country where everyone holds radically different beliefs – but rather to ensure that everyone’s needs are met to the best of the government’s abilities. He is not sceptical at all of the new rise of women’s groups advocating rights for reproductive health services. In contrast, he commends them greatly for their efforts and grants them the freedom to have abortions without criminalization.¹¹

However, Biden takes an interesting stance when it comes to funding abortions; he supports women’s access to abortion services but does not support funding by the government, which would force the entire state to accept abortion as morally acceptable. In his interview with the Press he states,

> I’ve stuck to my middle-of-the-road position for more than 30 years. I still vote against federal funding, and I’d like to make it easier for scared young mothers to choose not to have an abortion, but I will also vote against a

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constitutional amendment that strips a woman of her right to make her own choice.\textsuperscript{12}

However, despite his stance on tolerating abortions, Joe Biden continues to hold the traditional Catholic view that life begins at conception.\textsuperscript{13} He has voted no against partial-birth abortions and to prohibiting minors from crossing between Canada and the United States for late-term abortions. These decisions imply a sense of empathy towards the unborn child in its later stages of development and shows that Biden is not supportive of all cases of abortion. In an interview with \textit{Meet the Press} in 2007, Biden states that he is ready to accept his own Church’s beliefs on the unborn based on faith.\textsuperscript{14} It is in this single standpoint in which Biden’s views successfully synthesize the position of my interviewee and that of the Church as represented by Pope John Paul II.

In a continuous effort to defend the right to life, the Catholic Church strives to proclaim its ‘Gospel of Life’ to contemporary Catholics worldwide. Although politically one might sense a losing battle in the realm of abortion and so called reproductive ‘rights,’ there is still hope among faithful Catholics that the Gospel will live on. Continuously referring back to Pope John Paul’s encyclical, \textit{Evangelium Vitae}, and comparing its insight to the viewpoints of an average lay woman and of a political leader endowed with both patriarchal and religious duties, it is evident that although there is no unanimous agreement on which human rights movements charter the dignity of the human being, there is a conformity on the principal of life’s infinite value. This consensus, although not

\textsuperscript{12} Biden, Joe., \textit{Promises to Keep}, 2007. 105

\textsuperscript{13} On the Issues., \textit{Joe Biden on Abortion}. 2010

proficient, is a fundamental starting point that the Catholic Church can work with to bring forth the ‘Gospel of Life’ into contemporary society.
Works Cited

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