The Catholic Thing

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Political Distraction Among the Catholics

By Hadley Arkes

Is it a certain madness, a certain distraction of mind, induced by the sudden onset of summer heat? The polls in early June find Barack Obama notably behind among Evangelicals and whites, but--wonder of wonders--actually holding a slight edge, of a point or two, among Catholics.

Some of our readers know that I was associated with the drafting of the “most modest first step of all on abortion,” the bill to preserve the life of the child who survived an abortion. It was called, in that awful legislative style, the Born-Alive Infants’ Protection Act. When it finally passed the Congress in 2002, not a single Democrat in Congress voted in opposition. But Barack Obama, as a Senator in Illinois, actually led the opposition to the comparable measure in that state, and as the chairman of a legislative committee managed to kill it. How does one explain then this close division among Catholics, with a tilt actually in his favor? And what is the worse account: that most Catholics in the country simply do not know about his radical, pro-abortion position, or that American Catholics by now have heard about Obama’s position, and they don’t especially care?

The latter account would surely mark the graver state of affairs. And the signs seem to be pointing in that direction, as seen in the positions reported recently for two prominent Catholic academics, both thoughtful, sensible people, moving in those circles I move in myself. Douglas Kmiec, a good friend, had been Dean of the Law School at Catholic University and Cathleen Kaveny, is a professor of law at Notre Dame. Kmiec joined a meeting of Catholics with Obama and pronounced him a “natural for the Catholic vote.” Kmiec became persuaded that Obama, radically pro-choice, would nevertheless be open to serious measures for “reducing the number of abortions.” Kaveny could hardly be unaware of Obama’s position on abortion, and yet she thinks that other parts of Obama’s program would fit a Catholic vision--most notably, "ending the unjust war in Iraq, providing decent jobs, ensuring affordable health care for all, and working for comprehensive
immigration reform."

On the matter of reducing the number of abortions, imagine that there is a wondrous scheme for diverting women from choosing abortions: Let’s suppose that, in counseling centers, we find that playing “You’d be So Nice to Come Home To” had the wondrous effect of stirring 90 percent of the women not to abort their babies--especially if the music is accompanied by the offer of a DVD player. Surely it would be a boon to save those lives, but we should tremble at what the move reveals about the terms of principle on which we live our lives together. For what is left intact is the understanding, deeply absorbed by our people, that there is nothing less than a “right” to order the killing of an innocent human being for reasons that need not rise beyond convenience or whims, and with no felt need even to offer a justification. To offer this state of affairs as a gain is to celebrate a law that has the most pronounced effect in misshaping the souls of our people.

And the candidate who offers us this “concession”: Why should we even trust him to seek a reduction in abortions when he could not possibly share with us any ground of principle to explain why these human lives command our respect and our obligation to protect them?

As for the matter of “balancing” abortion with other issues, does that balancing not betray the most skewed principles of judgment? Put aside the case to be made for the why the war in Iraq was amply justified. Two days of abortion produce more deaths than the number of deaths suffered by Americans in the entire war. A year of abortion, at 1.2 million, dwarfs the number of Iraqis who have died in the conflict. Do we measure the “common good” --or what Prof. Kaveny calls “affordable health care”--by the convenient device of simply screening out those humans killed in abortion as persons that just do not count any longer in the reckoning?

During the debate between Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, Douglas suggested the diversity of goods at work in our national life: Maine had oysters, Indiana had cranberries, and some of the states used slave labor. Are we being asked now to adopt a similar state of mind, in which the killing of the innocent, on a massive scale, is regarded as just one of several “goods” that our people are equally free to choose, one no better in principle than the others?

To put things on the same plane, in that way is to betray a scheme of judgment with no sense of moral weighting or discrimination. Doug Kmiec and
Cathy Kaveny share the vocation of teaching, but from either angle they would teach their fellow Catholics now that the central concern for the taking of innocent life is no longer, in the scale of things, that much more important than anything else. Even the most thoughtful among us may not always get things right, and at those times the office of friendship may be to call our friends to their better judgment.

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