



Forum

Political Divisions and the Consistent Ethic: Can Bernardin's Vision Unify Catholics Toward a Common Mission?

by Rachelle Kramer¹

In the Nicene Creed every Sunday, Roman Catholics proclaim faith in “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” And yet, we are all well aware that when it comes to political beliefs, those of us sitting in the pews each Sunday are far from being “one” or “holy” in our discourse with each other on these matters. How can faith in the same Jesus lead to divisions and even vitriol among ourselves when it comes to politics? This is an admittedly complex problem, and I would like to explore one particular cause I see at work. I also would like to suggest that Catholics of different political persuasions come together, not to attain conformity in political party affiliations, but to seek understanding and find common ground for how we might bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the kingdom he proclaimed to our country and world.

It is no secret that the decades following the Second Vatican Council have led to extreme divisions in our Church. The Catholic Common Ground initiative, an organization that seeks to foster dialogue among members of the Church, notes this:

[P]arty lines have hardened. A mood of suspicion and acrimony hangs over many of those most active in the church's life...Across the whole spectrum of views within the church, proposals are subject to ideological litmus tests. Ideas, journals, and leaders are pressed to align themselves with preexisting camps, and are viewed warily when they depart from those expectations.²

I imagine many of us have personally experienced these conditions. If not, the election of Donald Trump to the presidency has certainly brought to the fore the extreme polarizations that exist in the Church. Hostilities between members of the faithful seem to be at an all-time high. While many factors are at play in this phenomenon, there seems to be one major point of contention that divides Catholics politically: concerns surrounding respect for human life and dignity, and which “life” issue(s) should take greatest priority. While some Catholics contend one cannot be a faithful Catholic and vote for a pro-abortion candidate, others claim the same for candidates who cut government funding for the poor or support high military spending. Unfortunately, healthy dialogue has eluded us, and shouting matches rage on about who is right and the “better” Catholic.

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2 National Pastoral Life Center, “Called to Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril,” Catholic Common Ground Initiative Founding Statement, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.catholiccommonground.org/called-be-catholic>.

In 1983, the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin introduced a concept that attempted to bridge the gap between these opposing camps and dismantle the false binaries Catholics had unknowingly created. In a lecture given at Fordham University, he introduced a philosophy called the *Consistent Ethic of Life*. He posited that Catholics must apply an ethic that defends the sanctity of human life for *all* people: the unborn, the elderly, the hungry, the homeless, those affected by war, etc. Bernardin noted:

If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus, then our moral, political and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker....Consistency means we cannot have it both ways. We cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous public policy to protect the rights of the unborn and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of the society or are beyond the proper scope of governmental responsibility.³

In his statement, Bernardin opened the door for a broader understanding of what it meant to be “pro-life.” While not diminishing the importance of the abortion issue, he reminded Catholics that all of human life is sacred and must be defended from the “womb to the tomb.” Thus, he called on Catholics to foster an attitude that insists on including “all of the church’s ‘pro-life’ moral positions rather than treat[ing] them as separate causes.”⁴

More than thirty years after Bernardin’s address, it appears most Catholics have not embraced the Cardinal’s *Consistent Ethic*, and the deep polarizations continue. Some fear his philosophy could be co-opted and used to “allow or at least to justify turning a blind eye to instances of abortion.”⁵ Others worry the pro-life (anti-abortion) movement will fracture and die if the umbrella of life issues is expanded too greatly.⁶ There is no question these concerns come from a place of unwavering commitment and passion for an extremely important life issue.

That being said, I do believe a return to Bernardin’s *Consistent Ethic* possesses the potential to bring greater dialogue and understanding among Catholics to advance our common mission of creating a culture of life. The challenge lies not in the concept: the majority of Catholics believe human life is sacred and must be protected and defended whenever it is assaulted. The challenge lies in being able to come together to dialogue and *truly listen* to one another for the sake of our common mission, not attempt to change another’s political views. Our bishops rightly remind us that “the Church is not partisan...our cause is the defense of human life and dignity and the protection of the weak and vulnerable.”⁷ Many Catholics have particular life issues they are most passionate

3 Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American-Catholic Dialogue” (Gannon Lecture presented at Fordham University, Bronx, New York, December 6, 1983). More recently, Pope Francis has echoed Bernardin’s sentiments: “The scourge of abortion is an attack on life. Leaving our brothers on the boats in the Sicilian channel is an attack on life. Death at work is an attack on life because it does not respect the minimal security conditions.” Junno Arocho Esteves, “Pope Francis: Civilization’s Progress Is Measured by Its Ability to Protect Life,” *Vatican Radio*, May 30, 2015, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/05/30/pope_francis_civilization%E2%80%99s_progress_is_measured_by_its_abi/1147952.

4 Kenneth A. Briggs, “Bernardin Asks Catholics to Fight Both Nuclear Arms and Abortion,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1983, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/07/us/bernardin-asks-catholics-to-fight-both-nuclear-arms-and-abortion.html>. The article goes on to note: “Many church leaders have noted tensions and isolation between foes of abortion, on the one hand, and critics of nuclear arms on the other.”

5 See Jimmy Akin, “Intellectual Dishonesty and the ‘Seamless Garment’ Argument,” *National Catholic Register*, January 25, 2015, <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/jimmy-akin/intellectual-dishonesty-and-the-seamless-garment-argument>.

6 See Kathy Schiffer, “Pope Francis’ Seamless Garment. HE’S RIGHT – But Does It Hurt the Pro-Life Cause?” *Patheos*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/kathyschiffer/2015/06/pope-francis-seamless-garment-hes-right-but-does-it-hurt-the-pro-life-cause/>.

7 The United States Catholic Bishops note, “The Church is involved in the political process but is not partisan. The Church cannot champion any candidate or party. Our cause is the defense of human life and dignity and the protection of the weak and vulnerable.” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States with Introductory Note,” Washington D.C. 2015, 58, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/upload/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship.pdf>.

about, and this is a good thing. But we must remain consistent in our message and remember that whenever lives are destroyed through the horror of abortion, bombs are dropped on innocent civilians, or economic systems deprive people of basic human needs such as food, shelter, and medical care, Catholics must speak out on *all of these issues*. If we can work together to support each other's efforts to create a culture of life, rather than fighting about whose "life" issue is more important, I believe we can build a stronger movement. But we can only do that together.

I have no doubt the divided camps of Catholicism have much to gain and learn from each other. Simply perusing the Internet to read others' opinions greatly expanded my own vision. The task is daunting, but it can be done if we presume that those with whom we disagree are acting in good faith and remember that other people's love for the Church is as deep as our own.⁸ No one deserves labels or pre-assigned motivations. It is both unfair and un-Christian. Most importantly, we must not let our political differences divide us as a Church, for this is a great scandal and "weakens the credibility and effectiveness of our work in evangelization."⁹ We must, therefore, strive to be one as Jesus so fervently prayed to the Father (John 17:20-23), not for the sake of unity alone, but for the sake of bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

⁸ See "Called to Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril," for more insights into building a culture of dialogue within the Catholic Church.

⁹ Francis, "General Audience," Rome, Italy, January 22, 2014, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140122_udienza-generale.html.