

## **'Consistent life ethic' is inconsistent**

By ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER

*Editor's note: The article below is excerpted from a talk given Oct. 7 to a Pax Christi conference at Loyola Marymount College in Los Angeles.*

In July President Bush signed an order forbidding stem cell research that involves the destruction of embryos. In the same month he continually opposed a cease-fire in Lebanon in a war that was clearly disproportionate and resulting in a high level of deaths of noncombatants. Cartoonists had a field day with the contradiction between such exacting reverence for life at the level of fertilized eggs while disregarding the value of the lives of born human beings. One cartoon had Bush saying, "Israel has a right to defend itself," and, in the next breath, "as long as there are no embryos involved." Another showed Bush receiving the casket of a fallen American soldier, with the attending military person saying, "Don't worry, Mr. President, it is not an embryo."

The question I want to pose is whether the Catholic campaign in favor of the protection of fetal life from the first moment of conception does not help produce this same contradiction. Despite its claim to a "consistent life ethic," in fact Catholic teachings use very different kinds of moral reasoning when it comes to questions of war than when it deals with abortion. This contradiction was pointed out 18 years ago by Catholic ethicist Christine Gudorf, in her article, "To make a seamless garment, use a single piece of cloth," in a book called *Abortion and Catholicism: The American Debate*.

-- NCR photo/Toni-Ann Ortiz  
An anti-abortion memorial at St. Thomas More Parish in Kansas City, Mo.

I want to deal first with the problems of the absolutist moral reasoning applied by Catholic ethics to unborn life and then turn to the inconsistencies of its lack of moral rigor when it comes to threats to human life due to war, poverty and environmental destruction. My own view is that abortion should be "legal, safe and rare," to quote President Clinton's phrase. I do not believe that there is a "human person" present from the first moment of conception, nor do I believe that the Catholic tradition actually teaches this or follows this in its pastoral practice, as is evident from its refusal to baptize even late-term miscarriages.



Rather, Catholicism, following an Aristotelian view of human nature as an integral union of body and soul, traditionally taught that the human soul is present only when the body of the fetus has reached a certain level of human physical development, traditionally placed at about five months. Today we might see this as the point where brain development reaches the level of sustaining viable human life outside the womb. Certainly to claim that a fertilized egg within days of conception is a human person is a totally platonic view of the human person. It means there is a human soul fully present in a tiny speck of germ plasma. Despite its rhetoric, the Catholic tradition has never actually taught this, as Catholic philosophers Dan Dombrowski and

Robert Delite show in their book, *A Brief Liberal Catholic Defense of Abortion*, published in 2000.

Although I don't believe a fertilized egg, or even a three-month fetus, is a human person on the same level as a born person, it is not "nothing." Rather it is a potential life that is in process of actualization. Except in those relatively rare situations where an abortion decision is made in the case of a fetus whose conception was desired but proved to be severely deformed or whose continued development would threaten the life of the mother, most decisions for abortion are taken in the context of unchosen pregnancies. Despite the argument that when women choose to have sex, they choose the possibility of pregnancy and thus should be responsible for the results, in fact we know that women's social and cultural context in our society and throughout the world means that much of the time women do not really chose the conditions under which they have sex, even in marriage.

### *Involuntary pregnancies*

Even when women want to use contraception, including so-called natural family planning, men often do not cooperate. For a variety of reasons, women many times find themselves involuntarily pregnant. Although many women are able to adjust to this unwelcome news, especially if they have a stable marriage and sometimes even outside of marriage, many others feel deeply threatened by a situation in which psychologically, socially or economically, or all three, they are not in a position to bear and raise a child. This situation will only be worsened by coercive legal measures to make abortion illegal and criminal. Such measures will not only put women in legal jeopardy but will assure that abortion becomes clandestine, unsafe and hence likely to result in women's deaths or injuries.

This has become the case in El Salvador, where an Opus Dei archbishop and a campaign by right-wing Catholics has resulted in a national law criminalizing all abortions. The result has been a large number of clandestine abortions mostly among poor women -- the wealthy can get abortions from private doctors or in other countries -- in which many die or are injured. When they go to hospitals or otherwise seek medical care, they are taken into custody and may be imprisoned. The penalty for the abortion provider is six to 12 years, two to five years for someone who helps the woman, and two to eight years for the woman herself in the first trimester and 30 to 50 years thereafter. One desperately poor mother who aborted an 18-week fetus has been imprisoned for 30 years, even though she has three small children dependent on her as their sole parent. This is clearly an example of absolutizing the value of the life of the unborn and disregarding the value of the lives of the born.

Catholic ethics needs to recognize that the decision for or against abortion is one of conflicting values of life. It is not simply a matter of the "murder of innocent life" in which there are no values of life on the other side that are equally and sometimes more imperative. In the case of the woman in El Salvador, in desperate circumstances of poverty she chose the value of survival for herself and her three children for whom she was the sole providing parent rather than bearing yet another child she could not afford to support. Women are caught in situations where their ability to function economically, psychologically and otherwise has to be weighed against the value of a potential child.

If ethicists are serious about reducing abortions, and I believe the instances of this should be reduced as much as possible, this will not be done by coercing women to bear children they feel they cannot raise but by helping women as much as possible not to become involuntarily

pregnant. This is the root of the issue “pro-life” advocates avoid. To really help women avoid unchosen pregnancies is a very complex problem. It certainly has to do with making effective and safe contraception readily accessible. But it also means addressing all the cultural issues that put women in the position of having less than fully chosen sex: lack of adequate sex education about how to avoid pregnancy and, above all, lack of full moral agency to enforce their preferences about sex and birth control.

Catholicism both denies the moral permissibility of effective birth control (and “natural family planning” is not effective birth control for most people) and disparages women’s moral agency as autonomous persons. It is clearly a force that helps to produce the conflictive situations of involuntary pregnancy that cause some women to decide for abortion. In sum, Catholicism both forbids abortion under any circumstances and is a major cause of producing the situations that cause it.

### ***Lack of moral rigor***

While absolutizing the right to life of the unborn, even of fertilized eggs in the first days after conception, Catholicism has little moral rigor when it comes to the vast carnage that is causing human beings between birth and old age to fall victim to untimely death due to war, poverty and environmental devastation. While theoretically Catholicism forbids the direct taking of innocent life at any stage of life, the most rigorous sanctions are applied to taking unborn life, while there are no sanctions applied to killing noncombatants in war, selling toxic waste to farmers as fertilizer that causes people to sicken and die, favoring military spending over social welfare spending that is impoverishing the majority of the world’s population, and any number of other actions that have the consequences of unjust and untimely death. One almost has the impression that only unborn life is really “innocent,” while people lose their innocence and become fair game as soon as they are born, perhaps an odd expression of the doctrine of original sin.

As Chris Gudorf pointed out in her article, Catholic ethics uses an absolutist version of deontological natural law ethics when it speaks of abortion, while when it speaks of war it shifts to a consequentialist ethic that carefully balances conflicting values. In the first case, it allows no debate and applies coercive sanctions, excommunication and the demand for criminalization. In the second case it draws on a multiplicity of perspectives, allows for various opinions and relies on persuasion, not legal sanctions, ultimately leaving matters in the hands of individual conscience. Where is the bishop who would say that soldiers who massacre civilians are excommunicated? Where are bishops who would suggest that those who manufacture nuclear weapons are excommunicated and should repent by leaving such forms of employment? There were two Mexican bishops some years ago who declared that torturers were excommunicated, but they were maverick leftists whose views were unsupported by the rest of the bishops and by the Vatican. In short, Catholicism speaks softly and carries no stick when it comes to untimely and unjust death after birth.

Let me summarize a few issues on war, poverty and environmental devastation to make clear what a horrendous threat of death and destruction humanity is facing at this time, and the leading role of the United States in these crises. First, on chronic war. Since the U.S. creation of the atom bomb and dropping them on two Japanese cities in 1945, the world has been held hostage to fear of the possible use of “weapons of mass destruction.” The United States has continually taken the lead in producing new nuclear weapons of greater and greater

destructiveness and has expressed its willingness on several occasions to actually use them on a first-strike basis.

Today this threat has arisen in relation to Iran. The “bunker busters” or so-called “tactical” nuclear weapons that the United States is contemplating throwing on Iranian uranium refining facilities -- which Iran claims have to do with peaceful and not military use -- would not just explode underground, having little effect above ground. Rather, it is estimated by Physicians for Social Responsibility that an attack by these weapons on two buried Iranian research facilities would generate a blast in which 2.6 million people would die in 48 hours and a million more suffer immediate injuries. Radioactive dust would be carried east to expose 10 million more to deadly fallout. Where are voices of the bishops or the Vatican warning against the danger of using such weapons?

### *The global arms race*

In addition to continued development of nuclear weapons, which itself fuels a continual nuclear arms race around the world, the United States has built the most enormous military system in world history. It also has continually armed nations it considers its allies, sometimes arming both sides of regional conflicts, as in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. As a result, vast stockpiles of arms and chronic war characterize the world. The United States is ringing the world with military bases. Since the invasion of Iraq, there are 109 military bases in that country alone, including four very large and apparently permanent ones the size of small cities. Any serious quest for world disarmament cannot simply focus on disarming America’s rivals, a strategy that only fuels the desire of other countries to have such weapons to prevent an American invasion. Real disarmament must be disarmament of all sides, not just North Korea and Iran but the United States and its allies too.



U.S. military spending, as well as military spending around the world, consumes half or more of our and other nations’ national budgets, starving every social program. Reducing spending for war is essential if humans are to address issues of poverty, health, education, renewal of basic infrastructure and repair of environmental devastation.

The Christian churches seem to be fixated on a kind of navel-gazing, seeking to return women to passive acquiescence to male domination and absolutizing the lives of embryos while ignoring the thousand-pound gorilla in the middle of the room that threatens to squeeze us all against the wall.

This does not mean there are no values to be defended in relation to the unborn, but these must be appropriately balanced in relation to the enormous threats to the lives of the born. Catholic ethics needs to be somewhat more consequentialist about the decisions of women to reproduce or not reproduce children and more principled when it comes to defending life after birth and sanctioning those whose policies are causing untimely death.

In relation to reproduction, Catholics should not only recognize the need for effective birth control but also support women’s moral agency in sexual and reproductive choices to reduce as much as possible the likelihood of women finding themselves involuntarily pregnant in

situations where they feel they cannot bear and raise a child without grave threats to their own well-being and future development. When such unchosen pregnancies do occur, Christians might hold out the ideal of encouraging women to be generous in caring for an unexpected child in stressful circumstances, but this must be a matter of persuasion, not coercion. Sacrificial generosity can only be voluntary; it cannot be forced.

Moreover, if Christians are to call such women to generosity, they must be willing to help provide some of the support services that would lessen conflicts that are at the root of problems with bearing an unchosen child. How about a Christian community entering into a relationship with a pregnant woman in which they help her find a better job, medical care, and education and daycare for her children? In other words, how might those who hold out such values actually help relieve the distress that causes a woman to make a decision that she might prefer not to make if she was in less stressful circumstances? But, finally, one must be willing to trust women to make the decision that is best for them, precisely what the Catholic church hierarchy has been least willing to do.

### *Acting against war*

When it comes to the threat to life posed by war, poverty and environmental devastation, Christians need to be more principled and more willing to urge sacrificial action. While recognizing the ambiguities of threats to life on both sides of conflictual situations, the churches must be willing, at the very least, to condemn atrocities, where there is a direct massacre of civilians or where there is disproportionate violence that is killing large numbers of noncombatant men, women and children. They must be willing to call for sanctions when such atrocities occur. Those who massacre or torture should be put on trial, imprisoned, put out of the Army.

But the churches must also analyze more forthrightly the patterns of militarism, the unjust monopolization of power and wealth that are causing so many humans to sicken and die and are affecting the earth itself. They must be willing to call for Christians to take sacrificial measures against such destruction, refusing to pay taxes for war, refusing to accept the call to fight in war, or to make weapons of mass destruction, even if such decisions might bring imprisonment, social marginalization or loss of employment. Again, such sacrificial action must be voluntary. It cannot be coerced. And people should not take risks alone. They should be part of support communities that help alleviate the costs of such risks. Church leaders could present the possibility of such actions in a persuasive and attractive form as an appropriate calling of Christian faith, rather than seeking only a minimalist ethic that does not challenge the unjust status quo of the dominant global system.

Putting the ethic of life before birth and life after birth more in sync with each other would help overcome the credibility gap from which Catholic teachings on ethics now suffer. Only by putting these two ethics more in sync with each other can we genuinely speak of a “consistent life ethic” that is not simply a code word for an absolutist rejection of abortion in any circumstances while ignoring the myriad threats to the life of the born. A “consistent life ethic” is a nice slogan. But we are very far from a realistic and truthful understanding of what that would mean in Catholic ethical teachings and practice.

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