Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

8

WHY CATHOLICS CAN'T VOTE PRO-LIFE

Brett Salkeld, Canada

The Ideal Candidate

After the 2002 midterm elections, I attended a private dinner for Harvard Fellows in Cambridge. Our speaker was a Republican political strategist who had just won all the major senatorial and gubernatorial election campaigns in which he was involved. Needless to say, he was full of his success and eager to tell us about it. This very smart political operative said that Republicans won middle-class and even working-class people on the "social" issues, those moral and cultural issues that Democrats don't seem to understand or appreciate. He even suggested that passion on the social issues can cause people to vote against their economic self-interest. Since the rich are already with us, he said, we win elections. I raised my hand and asked the following question: "What would you do if you faced a candidate who took a traditional moral stance on the social and cultural issues? They would not be mean-spirited and, for example, blame gay people for the breakdown of the family, nor would they criminalise the choices of desperate women backed into difficult and dangerous corners. But the candidate would decidedly be pro-family, pro-life (meaning really want to lower the abortion rate), strong on personal responsibility and moral values, and outspoken against the moral pollution throughout popular culture that makes raising chil-

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

dren in America a countercultural activity. And what if that candidate was also an economic populist, pro-poor in social policy, tough on corporate corruption and power, clear in supporting middle- and working-class families in health care and education, an environmentalist, and committed to a foreign policy that emphasised international law and multilateral cooperation over pre-emptive and unilateral war? What would you do?" I asked. He paused for a long time and then said, "We would panic!" (Story of Jim Wallis)[1]

In the United States, the question of fundamentalism is generally associated with a Christian religious right wing. I agree that the position of the Christian right in the United States is often fundamentalist, but perhaps not in the sense that most people who level the charge intend. Fundamentalism is, popularly, associated with religious fervour, but a sincere, devout, even fervent, practitioner of religion is not necessarily a fundamentalist. Moreover, fundamentalism can exist without religion at all. Seculars, whose arguments suggest that the separation of church and state implies that anyone whose conscience has been formed by a religious community and tradition is unfit to participate in the public forum, showcase a non-religious fundamentalism.

While I leave the comprehensive definition of fundamentalism to others at this conference, my own working definition does not see fundamentalism as an overwhelming commitment to a position, religious or not, that insists that those opposing the position are wrong. Dare we label Ghandi a fundamentalist? Or Martin Luther King? Or Mother Theresa? Firm convictions do not a fundamentalist make. Instead, I propose, that one aspect of fundamentalism is in the narrow application of broad principles. Non-Muslims are told that Islamic terrorists do not, in fact, practice authentic Islam. Rather, they have isolated certain ideas

[1] Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why The Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005, 72-73.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

from their broader context and, in applying them so isolated, violated Islam's own principles.

The right wing in Western democracies is identified, both by itself, and its opponents, as pro-life in the sense that it rejects abortion and euthanasia. But this demographic also tends to be more supportive of government policies that seem pointedly anti-life, such as capital punishment or aggressive military endeavours. To me, the heart of their fundamentalism does not lie in their opposition to abortion, but in the fact that their conviction about the sanctity of human life does not extend to convicted criminals, Iraqi civilians, or even the poor and oppressed in the streets of their own cities. The broad principle that all life is sacred is narrowly and selectively applied. The left, for its part, is no better in its narrow application of this principle; it merely makes the opposite selections. The United States, as a two-party system, provides an excellent example of the way in which the political spectrum in many Western democracies views some life issues as concerns of the left, and others as concerns of the right.

In this paper I will: 1. Discuss the problem of voting pro-life in the United States; 2. Investigate an example in which one pro-life voter's pro-life positions are compromised; 3. Propose that the division over the "life issues" in Western democracies is rooted in misapprehensions of the Christian conceptions of A) Sin, B) the Human Person and C) Salvation before suggesting that the D) Christian Concept of God provides a useful corrective for these misapprehensions. Finally in 4., I will call on makers of public policy to overcome the ideologies based in these misapprehensions and to value human life in all their policies. This is my Hope for the Future.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

1. The Problem

I admit that the title, "The Ideal Candidate" is a bit subjective. The person described might be Jim Wallis's ideal candidate and it might even be my own, but this is not, perhaps, enough to justify the use of the definitive article. Still, ideal or not, such a candidate would garner a lot of votes in the United States (and elsewhere) and, even if you wouldn't vote for such a platform, you probably know people who would. There is a large constituency of voters who are very frustrated with the left-right split in the political spectrum of Western democracies (I speak with experience of North American democracies in particular) and who do not feel that their values are represented by either group.[2] For many of these voters the most difficult aspect of deciding how to vote is determining which life issues they will be able to support and which they can afford to oppose.[3] The hypothetical candidate described above would allow pro-life voters to elect someone who truly represents their values on many of the issues that concern them the most. Nevertheless, such a candidate remains a hypothetical one. This paper is, at root, about why such a candidate does not exist.

At this point it must be noted that this paper is, as has probably been ascertained, decidedly pro-life. It must also be noted that the term pro-life is used here to indicate an entire platform which rejects any reason for artificially ending human life that does not stem from the protection of other, innocent human life, and not simply to mean anti-abortion.[4] In

---

[2] Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why The Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005, 76.

[3] See, for example, Mary Jo Bane, Eugene McCarraher, and George Weigel, 'You Catholic? Here's How to Vote,' *Commonweal* CXXVII, no. 18 (20 October 2000), http://www.commonwealmagazine.org.

[4] For instance, such a platform does not automatically reject the possibility of killing in self-defence or similar, though not parallel, possibilities such as just war, capital punishment when necessary to protect the broader public, or operating on an ectopic pregnancy.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

a pluralistic society where we can find so many things that distinguish us from one another, we cannot use such distinctions to determine whose life is less valuable than someone else's – not race, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, size, criminal record, health, stage of development, wealth, handicap, or location (in the womb, or next to a munitions factory). It is my philosophical conviction that appealing to any of the above categories to demonstrate that one person's life is less valuable than another's is the most severe violation of the principle of equality that must underpin a pluralist society. Furthermore, it is my religious conviction, as a Roman Catholic, that every human life is sacred and derives its dignity from being made in the image of God.

Despite the concerns of many citizens about many life issues, in contemporary North American political discourse the term "pro-life" has been manipulated to refer to a single issue, that of abortion.[5] The position of the Catholic Church on this issue is no secret. What many people, including many Catholics, do not realize is that the Church's stance as a pro-life institution extends far beyond this one divisive issue. Even a cursory reading of magisterial documents on such matters indicates that the Church is anti-abortion, anti-euthanasia, anti-death penalty and anti-war. Catholicism presents a vision that is comprehensively and unapologetically pro-life in the widest sense of the term. To give an example of this breadth, while researching this paper I came upon the entry for "Respect for Life, Dignity of Life" in the New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality. There was no article following but rather a collection of other entries listed which the editors found pertinent to the topic. It said, "See Confrontation and Protest; Ecological Consciousness; Environment; Justice; Peace; Pregnancy; War, impact on spirituality.." The Church sees all of these as life issues and always argues that approaches to any of these topics must regard the dignity of human life as a primary value.

[5] On occasion the issue of euthanasia is included in this discussion.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

Unfortunately the structure of our political systems does not reflect an overarching concern for human life as fundamental to human society. Rather, the two poles of the spectrum, referred to as right and left, embrace diverse ideologies whereby those on the right tend to be pro-life in that they oppose abortion and euthanasia, while those one the left manifest a pro-life attitude in their opposition to war and capital punishment and even by their environmental concerns. Neither position reflects the broad vision of the sanctity of human life which is espoused by the Catholic Church.

Before the 2000 Presidential election in the United States, Commonweal magazine ran a feature entitled, "You Catholic? Here's How to Vote".[6] It was made up of three smaller pieces, each written by a Catholic, encouraging their fellow Catholic voters to support, in turn, the Democrats under Al Gore, the Republicans under George Bush, and the Greens under Ralph Nader. Mary Jo Bane, who advocated supporting the Democrats, opened her section by writing, "I would like to vote, this year or sometime, for a ticket and a party that is pro-life, pro-family, and pro-poor."[7] What followed was an anguished justification for her choice to vote Democrat. She laments the "rabidly pro-choice"[8] Democratic primary, but eventually concludes that the Democratic Party "even . . . shows more appreciation for the preciousness of life across the whole life cycle, especially in the lives of the very vulnerable",[9] than their Republican adversaries.

Catholic Christians are, as a whole, quite invested in the fight for the recognition of the dignity of every human person. Depending, however, within which context that fight takes place (i.e. within debates on war or

---

[6] Mary Jo Bane, Eugene McCarraher, and George Weigel, "You Catholic? Here's How to Vote", *Commonweal* CXXVII, no. 18 (20 October 2000), http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

debates on abortion) Catholics are forced to one side or another of the political spectrum – a political spectrum that does not reflect Christian categories of thought that treat human life as a fundamental value.

The present political organisation which surrounds life issues, and forces Catholics and other like-minded citizens, into supporting some policies to which they are radically opposed, also serves to erode the sense of the sanctity of human life amongst Catholic voters. The Church proclaims the dignity and value of every human life, but it is difficult not to find some justification for voting, say pro-abortion, when one is forced to support either that or a war which one feels is unjust. It is less rare than one might hope, to hear pro-life Catholics excuse voting for pro-choice politicians with specious arguments about how, though one would never get an abortion oneself, one could not prevent anyone else from getting one, as if taking life were simply a matter of personal preference.

Such situations tempt Christians in North American democratic societies to fall into the trap of identifying one end of the political spectrum with Christian interests. The propensity for such identification is, due largely to the Republican's successful self-representation as the pro-life party, more prevalent among conservative Catholics than liberal ones. Many Catholics in the United States who had traditionally voted Democrat supported the Republican Party under George W. Bush largely due to his strong stance against abortion. While there is clearly not a problem with a Catholic voting against abortion, problems arise when the support given to the Republican Party leads to justifying other Republican platforms – platforms that are pointedly anti-life.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

2. An Example

Catholic leaders and ethicists have roundly condemned the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq as unjust[10], and the predictions of civilian casualties have proven accurate. Nevertheless, those Catholics who have come to identify conservative policies with Christian policies end up supporting a war which the *Magisterium* has clearly rejected.[11] What follows below is a brief investigation into the situation of George Weigel, a prominent conservative Catholic writer whose support for the Bush administration's foreign policy has become the subject of some controversy in Catholic intellectual circles. While the Weigel situation is addressed to provide a concrete example of a Catholic identifying the Christian agenda with the Republican agenda, it is important to note that other Christian groups face similar concerns, as evidenced by the 200 theologians who lamented that a "theology of war emanating from the highest circles of government is also seeping into our churches."[12]

Weigel, a widely read and influential voice in conservative Catholic circles and beyond, was one of Bush's most vocal, and articulate, supporters within the Catholic intelligentsia. His support of the war in Iraq has drawn fire from many quarters, particularly from liberal Catholics[13] who, with the backing of most of the Church hierarchy,[14] do not view the war as justified.

With most conservative Catholics, Weigel considers fidelity to Church teaching on issues of morality a fundamental tenet of his Ca-

---

[10] Michael J. Baxter, "A 'Pacifist' Perspective in Seven Points", *The Catholic Citizen: Debating the Issues of Justice,* ed. Kenneth Whitehead (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2004), p. 215.

[11] See, for example, the George Weigel article "Iraq and Just War, Revisited," *http://www.eppc.org/*

[12] Wallis, *God's Politics*, p. xx-xxi.

[13] George Weigel, "Great Bosh", *The Catholic Difference*, 19 March 2003, *http://www.eppc.org/*

[14] Baxter, "A 'Pacifist' Perspective in Seven Points", p. 215.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

tholicism. As such, charges that he is dissenting from Church teaching, or at least from the position of the hierarchy, are not kindly taken.[15] Nevertheless, the preponderance of the evidence suggests that Mr. Weigel's support for the Bush administration has extended well beyond support for issues which coincide with his Catholic values and now encompasses Republican policies which are pointedly at odds with the Church.

While it is the prerogative of the Catholic to decide, upon careful consideration of the evidence available (and not available) to that person – including the informed opinions of the Catholic hierarchy and other Catholic ethicists – whether or not a given war is justified, Weigel's support of the American policy in Iraq seems to stem from his pro-Republican sentiments. It appears that this eminent voice in the American Church is as guilty of following partisan lines, rather than the broad vision of the Church, as so many of the Catholics who vote Democrat, and with whom he disagrees.

This is, especially to someone like Weigel, a serious charge, and so must be supported with more evidence than the simple fact that he happens to disagree with the hierarchy on the justice of a particular war. Recall Mary Jo Bane's situation earlier in this article: this Catholic writer agonized over the fact that there existed no pro-life, pro-family, pro-poor party for whom she could vote in the 2000 presidential election; no party that reflected the broad range of her Catholic concerns.

George Weigel followed Bane's commentary with his reasons for voting Republican. In his comments, there is no careful analysis of how the Democrats and Republicans reflect or do not reflect a Catholic vision, followed by a choice which, though it recognises the imperfection of its object, must be content to choose the best possible option in an imperfect system. Instead, Weigel opens with a litany of Republican

---

[15] See, George Weigel, "Great Bosh," *The Catholic Difference*, 19 March 2003, *http://www.eppc.org/*

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

policies, of which he approves, accompanied by their Democratic alternatives, which he condemns, before focusing on what, for him, is the most significant issue, appointments to the Supreme Court.[16] It is not hard to agree with his points concerning this essential factor in determining what to do with one's Catholic vote. Three or four Gore appointed judges who insist on the abortion-on-demand system and who would take similar attitudes into upcoming cases concerning issues in human reproductive technology, regardless of the will of the American people,[17] is enough to frighten any Catholic voter. The fact remains, however, that, in his analysis of how a Catholic ought to vote in an American presidential election, George Weigel gave no indication whatsoever that certain Republican policies could be problematic for Catholic voters. Even from a historical standpoint this is surprising given that Catholics have traditionally been a Democrat supporting constituency.

The 2000 election was before the war in Iraq, but Weigel's support of this war has taken basically the same tone. His writings seem not to acknowledge the concerns that other Catholics have with the war. In particular, his pre-war writings often dismissed just war concerns known as *in bellum* (like the concerns over civilian casualties), as impossible to predict and logically subordinate to *ad bellum* concerns.[18] He has also been loath to criticise the Bush administration subsequently for civilian casualties, prisoner-abuse scandals and other *in bellum* considerations, of which there have been many.[19]

One gets the feeling that such criticism would have been easier for Weigel to level, had he not so unequivocally supported Bush's campaign for the presidency and his subsequent push for war. Certainly no one

---

[16]Bane, McCarraher, and Weigel, "You Catholic? Here's How to Vote."
[17]Ibid.
[18]Peter Dula, "How Conservative Catholics Got Iraq Wrong", *Commonweal* CXXXI, no. 21 (3 December 2004),
http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/
[19]Ibid.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

would have accused Mary Jo Bane of hypocrisy were Gore to have won the election and then faced her criticism on certain Democratic policies. Weigel, instead, has provided an illustration of a serious problem: Catholic citizens becoming too committed to a particular party stand as consistent with Catholic principles and then being unable to abandon, or even critique, it when a dissonance arises.

Weigel is now in a position of disagreement with the Church rather than the Republican Party line. He holds that a belief expressed in magisterial documents and promoted by most orthodox theologians and senior members of the church hierarchy, up to and including the pope, is mistaken. In other words, he is dissenting. This is not, *de facto*, a condemnation. There is an important role for responsible dissent in the Church. One of the best examples of this is John Courtney Murray, whose dissenting position on religious freedom was formally adopted by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. The problem lies not specifically in Weigel's dissent, but rather in the fact that he rejects any suggestion he is dissenting as "polemics... unworthy of serious people considering serious, life-and-death issues",[20] and that his dissent seems very closely tied to the positions of a political party which he supports for its, ostensible, coherence with Catholic values.

3. A Proposal

If such an intelligent, articulate and serious Catholic as George Weigel can be shown to have followed partisan lines in his discernment of the issues which divide civil society between left and right, it is not surprising that many of the rest of us are often caught in the same problem. Indeed, there must be some deeper logic which underlies the dichotomy placing certain life issues within the purview of left-leaning parties and others within that of right-leaning parties; given our propen-

[20] Weigel, "Great Bosh."

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

sity to follow civil society in this dichotomy, this logic must be infiltrating Christian consciences as well. How is it that no political party has taken a stand as universally pro-life, particularly in a country like the United States where such a stand, it seems, would be welcome by a large part of the electorate? Why is Jim Wallis' ideal candidate hypothetical?

In a country whose politics are as dominated by religious ideology and language as those of the United States, I propose that what divides the life issues between the two major political parties are competing misapprehensions of three basic ideas of Christian theology: sin, the human person, and salvation. One of my professors at St. Michael's college is fond of saying that the true test of any doctrine is to discern what it ultimately says about God. Near the end of this paper I will reverse this test and suggest that what we know about God can help us to correct the misapprehensions of the above concepts. But first, what are our misapprehensions?

3.1 Sin

As I used the topic of war to demonstrate the problem of Christians supporting political positions opposed to what has been called "a consistent ethic of life",[21] I now turn to another "life issue" to illustrate our misconceptions about sin: poverty. Poverty is a life issue because it is so often the result of social injustice and the cause of conflict. The Second Vatican Council states in section 29 of *Gaudium et Spes* that

> "the excessive economic and social inequalities among members or peoples of the same human family are a scandal and are at variance with social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person and, not least, social and international peace."[22]

---

[21] Wallis, *God's Politics*, p. xxvi.
[22] Second Vatican Council: *Gaudium et spes*, no. 29, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, ed. Norman P. Tanner, 1086 (London: Sheed and Ward and Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990).

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

By virtue of its constitutive relationship to peace, social justice is a pro-life issue. Poverty is also closely related to other life issues because the poor are more susceptible to things like death by capital punishment, or epidemic diseases.

Referring to the left and right ends of the political spectrum in the United States, Jim Wallis says:

> I am always amazed by the debate about poverty, with one side citing the need for changes in personal behaviours and the other side for better social programmes, as if the two were mutually exclusive. Obviously, both personal and social responsibility are necessary for overcoming poverty. When this absurd bifurcation is offered by ideological partisans on either side, I am quickly convinced that both sides must never have lived or worked anywhere near poverty or poor people.[23]

My brother-in-law is a social worker and I talked to him about this issue while preparing this paper. As someone who has worked among the poor his comments are insightful. He says that social workers learn, very early on, that if someone is unwilling to take personal responsibility for their lives, no amount of time and effort will help them. Further, he says, social workers get their hearts broken when they see those they work with who have taken personal responsibility constantly failing to turn their lives around because the systematic biases which they encounter are nearly impossible to overcome. Wallis continues:

> That there are behaviours that further entrench and even cause poverty is indisputable, as is the undeniable power of systems and structures to institutionalise injustice and oppression. Together, personal and social responsibility creates the common good. Because we know these realities as religious facts, taught to us

[23] Wallis, *God's Politics*, p. 6.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

by our sacred Scriptures, religious communities can teach them to those still searching more for blame than solutions to pressing social problems.[24]

Blame is a useful political category. If, in your rhetoric, you can convince people whose fault a given problem is, it is easily mistaken for your having proposed a solution. Further, if your political opponent blames one group, it is expedient for you to name another group and set it up in opposition to your opponent's. But, as expedient as this may be for getting elected, it is far less so for solving problems.

Whose fault is poverty (or the environmental crisis, or the war)? Whose mistakes led to the circumstance in question? In this pattern of fault-finding we encounter the ancient Christian category of sin. Sin is the concept by which the Judeo-Christian tradition has expressed the universal human experience that we are not as we should be. This has been articulated in two diverse but interdependent ways. The first is sin as a personal phenomenon whereby the individual falls short of his/her own dignity by damaging themselves and others. Eve ate the apple. The second is sin as a social phenomenon in which all of humanity has become entangled.

The first emphasises personal responsibility, the second structural evil. Both Scripture and Christian tradition demonstrate that the two are inseparable. St. Paul tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but also associates sin with the "world". Individuals sin, but they are caught up in something bigger than themselves when they do it. We are all born into a world full of the effects of the sin of all of those who have come before us, but there is always, by definition, a non-sinful choice in a given situation. That is, to sin, an individual must choose to sin. Thus we are led away from our ideal selves both from

[24] Ibid.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

within and from without. A truly Christian vision of social policy will reflect this insight.

Instead, Republicans have claimed the moral high ground with their emphasis on issues of personal responsibility, particularly those surrounding sexuality and, though shrouded in the rhetoric of the secularist left, the Democrats often more closely reflect the concerns of Christians when it comes to issues of structural evil. The bi-polar political spectrum does not reflect a truly Christian view of humanity, one in which personal responsibility is treated alongside, and in relation to, structural evils. The Catholic Church rejects abortion and euthanasia as sins, but it also recognises sinful structures in society, structures that "do not reveal the truth about human beings".[25] Such structures oppress the poor, leave the needy unaided, and perpetrate violence, "institutionalised" and other, against large segments of the population. It seems that each pole of the current political spectrum can appeal to Catholics voters on the basis of only one of the two traditional conceptions of sin.

Conservatism, politically, has tended towards an emphasis on the individual. It is associated with the more raw forms of capitalism where persons are responsible for only themselves. The larger structures, like those of government, are to have only as much impact on the individual citizens as is necessary to run the state. It is not surprising that, within this framework, the moral concerns which emerge are those focusing on the individual. Many traditional Catholics are likely to support the fight against such individual sins as abortion and euthanasia in part because they are the more likely group to follow traditional Catholic penitential practice, which is highly focused on the individual.[26]

---

[25] Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981), p. 143.

[26] Stephen J. Duffy, "Sin", dictionary entry, Stephen J. Duffy in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, dictionary, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 900.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

The left, called liberal, though hardly to be equated with classical liberalism, is more concerned with the group dynamic in society. It is more comfortable with big government, social programmes, and looking out for those who would slip through the cracks in an each-for-his-own environment. As such, the moral issues with which it identifies most strongly are more likely to be structural types of problems than individual ones. The left, then, appeals to those Catholics who want to fight structural injustice in the world. Sins committed by nation-states, like execution or war, are more likely to draw their political attention than individual sins, like abortion, which are easily passed off as merely a result of poorly organised societies.

Both groups have a corner of the truth. The problem is that such conceptions are incomplete. The Catholic view of sin encompasses both personal and social sin. Further, they are not two independent categories. Nor is social sin just a collection of people committing personal sin.[27] The two categories are, necessarily, integrated. Stephen Duffy writes:

> Sinful structures are created and maintained by sinful persons, and personal sin makes alienating institutions worse by reinforcing and magnifying their impact. But the structures produced by corporate decision assume a logic of their own, inflict alienation by moulding consciousness, and become anonymous agents of social sin. Social sin, in turn, produces an environment in which personal sin is all but inescapable.[28]

An awareness of both personal and social sin is necessary to break such a cycle. The left will never solve the world's structural problems if it ignores personal iniquity, and the right will never succeed in eliminating problems like abortion as long as its focus stays squarely on legislating against individual acts. It is not that trying to solve structural prob-

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

lems or legislating against abortion are erroneous premises. They are just incomplete – as incomplete as the notion of sin which underlies them.

3.2 The Human Person

Further, it should be clear, from the quick portraits of conservatism and liberalism sketched above, that their concerns for particular categories of sin stem from particular conceptions of the human person. To the right-wing, society is a collection of individuals. People are atomised – taken out of their social context. To the left, people are the pieces of a society. People are collectivised – denied their individuality. The further one gets to the extremes of the political spectrum, the more difficult it becomes to maintain a view of the human person that values both individuality and community. These two aspects of humanity are treated as competing rather than complementary.

A look into another "life issue", abortion, will serve to illustrate the incompatibility of a Catholic view of the human person with the current political spectrum. Catholics, being pro-life on abortion, find themselves siding with the right-wing on this issue. Nevertheless, the Catholic position sees the arguments for and against abortion as ideologically confused along party lines. The left insists that women own their bodies and can do what they please with their own property. But does not this appeal to ownership seem awfully capitalistic for the left? In discussing this issue with one of my professors, she suggested that, to her, pregnancy was a beautiful symbol of the interdependence of human persons, and abortion is a rejection of that. But would the left not want to encourage a communitarian view of the human person by valuing pregnancy?

Listen to this excerpt from the entry on abortion in The New Dictionary of Theology:

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

> Those opposed [to abortion] warn of a significant potential for devaluing all human life in an abortion accepting society. They judge abortion to be a symptom of a greater systematic illness in a society which uses and oppresses persons for commercial gain, neglects the elderly and the handicapped, exhibits gender and sexual discrimination, and spends proportionally more for defence than it does to alleviate the societal, educational, medical, and employment needs which lessen the quality of life for many. The presence of these social ills in a society suggests a lack of commitment to the Judeo-Christian ethic which values every human person regardless of age, condition or developmental stage.[29]

Can we imagine such a passage being written by the anti-abortion administration currently in office in the White House?

Such an unlikely scenario demonstrates that the left is not immune from the phenomenon we investigated in the case of George Weigel. Many "liberal" Catholics, in line with Church teaching concerning war, are unwilling to support efforts to legislate against abortion. Because this issue has been so successfully framed as a women's rights issue by its proponents, many left-leaning Catholics, who determinedly support gender equality, often accept a woman's right to abortion as a necessary corollary. Accepting that women have been historically mistreated and continue to suffer in many ways in our societies, and that this needs to be rectified, is not equivalent to demonstrating that a woman owns another human that happens to reside in her body and can do with it what she will. Accepting such logic is to accept the Democratic Party line, and not to give witness to a consistent idea of the value of the human person.

---

[29] Robert M. Friday, "Abortion", dictionary entry, Robert M. Friday in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, dictionary, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak *et al.* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 6.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

3.3 Salvation

If the concepts of sin that place some life issues within the prerogative of the right, and some within the prerogative of the left are, in fact, based in competing, incomplete, and confused concepts of the human person, it is only natural that these concepts should impact the views of salvation of those who hold them. It is not surprising that the right-wing finds support amongst churches whose theologies speak often of a personal Lord and Saviour, and are very concerned with the salvation of each individual soul. Catholicism, on the other hand, rarely invokes such language because, while it is individuals who must ultimately choose God as their highest good, this is usually seen as occurring in the context of a community of faith, from the parents who choose to have us baptised to the members of Christ's body who pray for us in purgatory. As such, the dichotomy in our political structures which pits the concerns of the individual versus those of the community is foreign to the Catholic idea of the human person. The good of one is, for Catholics, ultimately and undeniably, the good of all.

This is as true in this life as it is in the next. Salvation, even though it happens to specific individuals, is a community effort. Heaven is not a location you can go to, it is a relationship with God and all those in relationship with God. This is what is meant by the body of Christ. The logic of heaven also holds for solving societal ills: we must recognise both the inestimable worth of each human individual, and the fact that we are only fully human in relation to one another. Our personhood is, at least in part, defined by our relations to others.[30] If, as religious people, we are aware that every person is irreplaceable in the Body of Christ, but that this is precisely because of their relationship to the whole, then we should not accept the current political debates that suggest personal

[30] Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, Dogmatic Theology 9, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988, 232.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

and social causes are unrelated, and that personal and social solutions are incompatible.

3.4 A Christian Conception of God

That man is both personal and social, and that both of these aspects must be given due appreciation in discussions of sin and salvation (or, in our political environment, blame and solution), should be amenable to the Christian conscience. As believers in the Incarnation, we profess that God became man and dwelt among us; that Jesus Christ, though God, was fully human; indeed, more fully human than the rest of us. When we say that He was like us in all things but sin, this does not suggest that this was the one thing lacking in His humanity. Indeed, it is the thing lacking in ours. When we sin, we are less than ourselves. "Thus Christian anthropology flows from Christology , specifically from that part of Christology wherein Christ is portrayed as the paradigm of the human as intended by the creator. God created humanity to become his 'image and likeness' (Gen 1:26)."[31]

The fully human Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, is the model for humanity, but Christ is also fully God. He is the second person of the Trinity. Christian tradition has come to understand comments such as "I and the Father are one", alongside others such as "Not even the Son knows, but only the Father", as an indication of the plural nature of the one God. That the concept is difficult is evidenced by our necessity of referring to the Trinity as a mystery, but that does not mean we can learn nothing from it. The fully human Christ lived in the community of Israel, and the fully divine Christ exists only as a member of the community that is the Trinity. Still, He is a distinct member of these communities.

If man is made in the image and likeness of God, and Christ has revealed both God as community and man to himself, it is imperative that

[31] Michael J. Scanlon O.S.A., "Christian Anthropology", dictionary entry, Michael J. Scanlon O.S.A.in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, dictionary, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak et al. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 28.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

a Christian view of the human person be both personal and communitarian. Knowing God as both personal and plural teaches us to know ourselves, made in the image of God, as personal and plural. When we seek to understand the problems in our societies and discover solutions we cannot ignore either personal responsibility or social injustice.

4. My Hope for the Future

The views of the left and right in the United States are deadlocked on virtually every life issue, from abortion to poverty, because of the narrow vision of the human person espoused by each group. A truly pro-life perspective, an ideology that values every human person, will need to overcome the current stalemate by presenting a picture of humanity as both personal and communal. This broader vision should allow adherents of the right and the left to find common ground from which to approach the pressing issues of the day, issues that are sharply dividing both civil and ecclesial society. It is my sincere hope that one day soon the perspective of those responsible for public policy, and of those who elect them, will value life above political affiliation and ideology.

Bibliography

Bane, Mary Jo/McCarraher, Eugene/Weigel, George, "You Catholic? Here's How to Vote", in: *Commonweal* CXXVII (no. 18), 20 October 2000, *http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/*

Baxter, Michael J., "A 'Pacifist' Perspective in Seven Points," in: Whitehead (ed.), *The Catholic Citizen: Debating the Issues of Justice*, South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2004, pp. 207-222.

Boff, Leonardo, *Liberating Grace,* Translated by John Drury, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981.

SALKELD, Brett, Why Catholics Can't Vote Pro-Life, in: Hadsell, Heidi and Stückelberger, Christoph, Overcoming Fundamentalism, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 151-172.

Duffy, Stephen J. "Sin" Dictionary entry. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality,* Dictionary, ed. Michael Downey, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993, pp. 889–901.

Dula, Peter (3 December 2004), "How Conservative Catholics Got Iraq Wrong", *Commonweal* CXXXI, no. 21 *http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/*

Friday, Robert M. "Abortion" Dictionary entry. *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Dictionary, ed. Joseph 8434A. Komonchak et al., Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990, pp. 2-6.

Ratzinger, Joseph, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, Dogmatic Theology 9, Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988.

Scanlon, Michael J. O.S.A. "Christian Anthropology" Dictionary entry. *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Dictionary, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak et al, Collegeville, The Liturgucal Press, 1993, pp. 27-41.

Second Vatican Council: *Gaudium et spes*, no. 29, p. 1086, in: *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, ed. Norman P. Tanner. London: Sheed and Ward and Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990, p. 1086.

Wallis, Jim. *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

Weigel, George (19 March 2003) "Great Bosh," *The Catholic Difference*, *http://www.eppc.org/*

Weigel, George, "Iraq and Just War, Revisited," *http://www.eppc.org/*