

Respect Life Bulletin – Respect Life Sunday

October 3, 2022

Obstacles to Conversations About Life Issues

October is Respect Life Month nationally. Top of mind for many is the US Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision overruling *Roe v Wade*. It has intensified attacks on Church teaching, not just on abortion but on other life issues as well.

As a result, more than ever we Catholics are being called upon to explain and defend our Church's positions on issues such as euthanasia, physician assisted suicide, racism, conscience rights, immigration, just wages and safe working conditions, inclusion, desecration of the environment, transgenderism, deconstruction of the family and, of course, the preeminent matter of abortion.

Respect Life Sunday is an opportune time to highlight some significant impediments to constructive exchanges on these issues. Recognizing and understanding them can help us navigate around them and enhance the exchanges.

Consider four:

1. No Shared Universal Truths

The Church teaches there is a ***universal natural law*** by which each of us can apprehend the types of actions which are good and which are bad on life issues. In other words, ***there are objective truths and we can know them***. That's how we're ***all*** able to understand, for example, that every member of the human family has intrinsic, equally shared dignity and that racism offends that dignity.

Many contest this understanding. For example, one school says ***there are no universal truths***. Rather, ***each of us*** autonomously and without reference to any shared governing principle, ***defines what's true for ourselves***: there's my truth and yours and only by happenstance may they be the same. Another camp says ***only empirical knowledge is true knowledge***: if you can't see and measure it, demonstrate it by the scientific method, it can't be known and hence can't be accepted as a basis for discussion on the life issues. These are just two of many opposing lines of thinking.

2. Rejection of Logic & Consistency

Credible debate that doesn't invoke faith claims requires logical coherence, meaning conclusions logically drawn from provable premises. Today, however, as Matthew Petrussek, Associate Professor of Theology at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles, observes, secular culture views reasoned argument as an "arbitrary and oppressive social construct" such that "even basic consistency is no longer a prerequisite for making moral and political arguments." Personal feelings about behaviors related to life issues are now entitled to trump what logical analysis would otherwise conclude about their moral merit.

3. Vocabulary's Loss of Fixed Meaning

Words essential to conversations about life issues have lost their once fixed

meanings. Archbishop Emeritus of Philadelphia Charles Chaput explains:

[T]he deeper problem, the one that's crippling us, is that we use words like justice, rights, freedom and dignity without any commonly shared meaning to their content.

We speak the same language, but the words don't mean the same thing. Our public discourse never gets down to what's true and what isn't, because it can't. Our most important debates boil out to who can deploy the best words in the best way to get power. Words like "justice" have emotional throw-weight, so people use them as weapons. And it can't be otherwise, because the religious vision and convictions that once animated American life are no longer welcome at the table. After all, what can "human rights" mean if science sees nothing transcendent in the human species? Or if science imagines a trans-humanist future? Or if science doubts that a uniquely human "nature" even exists? If there's no inherent human nature, there can be no inherent natural rights—and then the grounding of our whole political system is a group of empty syllables.

4. **Dissent Pathologized**

Opponents of Catholic teaching on hot button life issues like abortion, marriage, transgenderism, conscience rights and inclusion sometimes frame those teachings as "dissenting" from mainstream thought. They seek to suppress this dissent by personal vilification. Professor Petrusek again:

One of the greatest threats to freedom in our age is what we could call the "pathologizing of dissent." Rather than saying, "I think differently from you," or "Your position is false," or even, "You are wrong," it is increasingly common to hear from those with whom you disagree that you suffer from a phobia or are motivated by "hate."

A charge of phobia or hatred or "mental stupidity" or "deliberate ignorance" can preemptively exclude unwelcome viewpoints from a conversation and excuse those making the charge from submitting their own views to rigorous examination.

The takeaway from all this? Be aware of impediments and don't let them stand in the way of the search for and defense of truth.

For more information about Respect Life Month, see the website of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, <https://www.usccb.org/events/2022/respect-life-month>.