The Right Choice
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PRO-LIFE SERMONS FROM
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We are called, not to define who our neighbors are, but to be neighbors. Since the first century we Christians have said that women in need and unborn children are our neighbors. It is now time for us to be neighbors. That is how we will become the right answer to the wrong question—even as we continue to say, "The unborn child is our neighbor, and the woman in need is our neighbor."

Michael J. Gorman preached this sermon on January 21, 1994, in the Simpson Memorial Chapel of The United Methodist Building, Washington, D.C. Currently, he is an associate professor of New Testament and the dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology, St. Mary's Seminary and University, Baltimore, Maryland.

I intend to speak in tones of hope. Today I invoke the vision of a new day dawning, of a better day, of a day that pushes back the encroaching culture of death, of a day that holds the promise of help and hope for unborn children in peril, for women in desperation, for a nation in conflict with the truths by which it was conceived and to which it was dedicated. So understand my remarks as a testament of hope, of hope that is the posture of faith toward the future, of hope that is the persistence of love in defiance of all odds. "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).

The pro-life witness is a witness of love. If it ever stops being that, it will cease to claim our commitment. It is a witness motivated by love of God and by love for the neighbor whom others would exclude from the community of caring and concern. Seldom in human history have so many done so much for so long out of no rational reason other than the relentless imperative of love. When we are weary of the struggle, when we are tempted to despair, remember that to us has been given the gift—and with the gift the obligation—of sustaining amidst the darkness the luminous moment of love that is the pro-life witness.
In the past twenty years, the pro-life witness in the United States has received some mighty blows. But obviously, those blows have not been mortal. On the political and legal fronts, our opponents have triumphed again and again. But their triumph is only for a time. We have learned, if we needed to learn, the truth of the psalmist: "Put not your trust in princes" (146:3). It is understandable that some of our company are bitterly disappointed. Those who seek reasons to despair will find reasons to despair. But we have not the right to despair. We have not the right to despair and, finally, we have not the reason to despair. We have not reason to despair if, from the very beginning, we understand that our entire struggle is premised not upon a victory to be achieved by us but upon a victory already achieved. If we understand that, far from cause for despair, we have right and reason to rejoice that we are called to such a time as this, a time of testing, a time of truth. The encroaching culture of death shall not prevail, for we know, as we read in John's Gospel, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5). The darkness will never overcome that light. Never. Never.

**Casey and the Culture War**

The goal of the pro-life movement, as I understand it, is to achieve the maximum legal protection for the unborn that is politically and culturally sustainable. While most of our fellow citizens may not fully share that goal, they do want some kind of accommodation; they do want the law to encourage caring rather than license killing; they do want to give life a chance. But the faction that calls itself pro-choice will not give an inch. It deeply distrusts the American people, and with good reason. In its view, Americans are peculiarly unfit for the practice of democracy when it comes to questions that really matter. One reluctantly concludes that that contemptuous view of American democracy is now supported by a majority of the United States Supreme Court. That was made painfully clear in its 1992 decision *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. In truth, one can claim that the questions raised by *Casey* are every bit as foundational and solemn as those pondered by Lincoln at Gettysburg.

The *Casey* decision is a decision for one side in the culture war in which America has been engaged for some time. More than politics, more than law, more than economics, the great battle in our time is for the culture. What do we mean by culture? The culture is simply the sum of the ideas by which we live; the culture is the moral air that we breathe; the culture is the habits of the heart and the behaviors of the person that form our character; the culture is communities of memory and mutual aid; the culture is the world that we would pass on to our children.

For some time now we have been engaged in a war over the culture. This is nothing less than a war over what kind of nation, what kind of people, we will be. This is not a war of our choosing. This war was declared—and it is daily and exultantly redeclared—by the proponents of myriad revolutions who presume to know better than we how we ought to live. And they do not hesitate to employ the power of government to enforce conformity to their designs. For some time now the United States has been torn into two nations: one concentrating on rights and laws, the other on rights and wrongs; one radically individualistic and dedicated to the actualized self, the other communal and invoking the common good; one viewing law as the instrument of license and the will to power, the other affirming an objective moral order by which we are obliged; one given to private satisfaction, the other to familial responsibility; one typically secular, the other typically religious; one elitist, the other respectful of the common sense of common people.

Of course this description is drawn with broad strokes. Nevertheless, it roughly describes the lines of the culture war in which we are engaged. (That reality is evident enough to anyone who attends to the increasingly ugly rancor that dominates and debases our public life.) The lines of the culture war run through the very hearts of many Americans. And as the *Casey* decision makes evident, the lines run through the Supreme Court. The five justices who made up the *Casey* majority leave no doubt about where they stand. Their decision is a clear declaration of belligerency by one side of the culture war against the other.

**Casey: Triumph of the Self**

*Planned Parenthood v. Casey* endorses the radically individualistic notion of the self-constituted self. The abortion liberty is necessary,
we are informed by the decision, in order “to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” I am told that, among constitutional lawyers, this is called the decision’s “mystery passage.” The justices wax theological about the mystery of human life in total disregard of precisely that, the mystery of human life. For the Supreme Court, the mystery of human life is to be defined by the individual; but for most of us, the mystery of human life is discovered as a gift. For the Court, authentic personhood requires freedom from an encumbering community; but for most of us, to be a person is to be a person in community.

In Casey the Court tells us that freedom requires freedom from family, even freedom from one’s spouse. Thus it strikes down the Pennsylvania requirement that fathers be notified before mothers kill their children. To require notification, says the Court, would be an “undue burden.” The only self known to this Court is the unburdened self, the autonomous self, the isolated self, the self that—in Godlike manner—defines the meaning of the universe and the mystery of life.

In Planned Parenthood v. Casey, unlike Roe v. Wade, the controlling concept is not “privacy” but “liberty”—although the end result is the same. The liberty of the Court is not what the founders of the United States called “ordered liberty,” nor is it liberty directed to the good and formed by communities of care and character. According to the Court, liberty is, without remainder, the liberty of self-will, self-expression, and indeed self-creation. For this Court, that debased concept of liberty trumps every other consideration. Not to be free to choose, no matter the choice, is not to be. Obviously, the unborn, the comatose, the demented, and the senile are not free to choose. The lethal logic from Roe through Casey is that, lacking the requisites of personhood, these people should not be. The muddled language of the Court invites us to infer that, at some deeper level, these people lack being. Only the autonomous self is free to choose and therefore free to be.

When I claimed that the Court waxed theological, I did not mean it simply as a figure of speech. Although the three authors of the majority opinion—justices Kennedy, O’Connor, and Souter—seem to be blithely unaware of it, they are proposing the establishment of what might be called a state religion. Religion is commonly defined as that activity that deals with ultimate concerns. It is hard to get more ultimate than the “concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” In most religions (Judaism and Christianity, for instance) the self is understood in relationship to other realities—in relationship to community, normative truth, even revelation. The court, however, recognizes no other reality than the isolated individual defining his or her own reality.

The Court reinforces the Hobbesian notion that we are a society of strangers, perhaps of enemies, and it is the chief business of the state to prevent others from interfering with or obliging the sovereign self. The Casey decision is a combination of statist tyranny and individualistic license. The result is the community-destroying and potentially totalitarian doctrine that society is composed of only two actors, the state and the solitary citizen. The civic religion proposed by the Court is hardly civic in character and consequence. Rather, it is the undoing of the civitas, of the civil society of myriad persons, associations, and communities of moral tradition interacting within the bond of civility and mutual respect.

Permit me to be entirely candid. The Supreme Court’s depiction of the self, of community, and of what is meant by ultimate meaning is incompatible with Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and every tradition that espouses normative truth. Not incidentally, it is also incompatible with the lived experience of almost everybody on earth. Again, in effect, though not in name, the Supreme Court is proposing a religion. For those of us who already have a religion, the Court’s religion is obviously a false religion. As distressing as this state of affairs may be, we should not be entirely surprised by it.

That New Religion and Abortion

It has been said that if you can justify abortion you can justify anything. There is a deep truth in that. If you set out to justify the attack on something so primordial, so given, so foundational to human community as a mother’s love and responsibility for her child, you have to come up with a new explanation of fundamental reality, a new worldview, and finally a new religion. The Supreme Court of the United States has come up with the Religion of the Sovereign Self.

To be sure, it is not really a new religion. It is the belief to which human beings have been prone since that disastrous afternoon in the garden when humanity began its long and bloody march through
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history singing "I Did It My Way." The creed of the autonomous self was promulgated by the radical secularists of the Enlightenment and is still preached by their disciples today. Against that creed, the founders of this nation declared, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

Convenience and control play a large part in the decision of justices Kennedy, O'Connor, and Souter. We are told that abortion on demand is necessary for women to "order their lives." Thus do they insult the women beyond number who believe that their lives are rightly ordered in exercising the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood. The Court assumes that the abortion license has been a critical factor, maybe the critical factor, in securing greater dignity for women. Nowhere does it note that since Roe, the abuse of women by irresponsible and predatory men has increased; that since Roe, a huge abortion industry, dominated by men, has developed and has exercised a minimum of care in extracting a maximum of profit from the suffering of women.

But women must be free to choose, says the Court, forgetting that without relevant information, without men being held accountable for their offspring, without programs that support women in childbirth and child rearing, without law that at least creates a pause before the destroying of the innocent, the choice is overwhelmingly loaded on the side of abortion. Abortion is a women's issue, says the Court, forgetting that whether or not the fetus is a human life is not "the law of the land." It is, quite simply, one wrong decision of the United States Supreme Court affirming an earlier wrong decision of the Court (Roe v. Wade). And a hundred more wrong decisions will not make that earlier decision right.

We, as a country, have been this way before. Remember that at the time of the Dred Scott decision all three branches of government were in the hands of pro-slavery forces. Before and after he became President, Lincoln strove for the overturning of Dred Scott. He failed, and...
war came. There will not be a civil war like the last one, but the destructive effects of alienation and anger are already evident in our society as a result of law that is divorced from constitutional text, moral argument, and democratic process. As the legal interests of the Sovereign Self advance, the ever fragile bonds of civility unravel. This lawless law, that honors the Sovereign Self, invites lawlessness.

A Confident Word

We have discussed many things. Today I have no doubt tried your patience. So let me conclude with the words with which I ended my address to you eleven years ago. These words, I believe, remain as true today as they were then. And they, I believe, will be as true for the next generation that will uphold the light of life in defiance of the culture of death. I said then, “I do not know if there will again be a new birth of freedom—for the poor, the aged, the radically disabled, the unborn. But we commend our cause to the One who makes and keeps promises, to the Lord of life. In that commendation is our confidence: confidence that the long night of Roe v. Wade is not forever; confidence that the courts will yet be made responsible to the convictions of a democratic people; confidence, ultimately, in the dawning of a new day in which law and morality will be reconciled, in which liberty will no longer wage war on life. Let this be, then, a convention of confidence; not because we trust in our own strength but because, under God, the last word belongs not to death but to love and life—because, even now, our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

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