



An Authentic Democracy

"Even as we benefit from the blessings of liberty, we can fall prey to erroneous conceptions about the meaning of freedom, as the rights of some begin to be subtly elevated over the rights of others."



Those of us who have grown up within the womb of a democratic society may not always recognize how radical the idea behind such a society actually is, nor how fragile its structure can be in the face of strident claims regarding individual freedoms. Legalization of abortion, to focus on one of the most strident claims, corrodes the very pillars of our democratic society.

The legalization of abortion means guaranteeing immunity from prosecution for those older human beings who directly end the lives of much younger humans before they are born, or even as they are being born. Such actions constitute a form of injustice perpetrated by the powerful against those who are, by virtue of their extreme youth, the weakest, most vulnerable and most voiceless humans. Laws sanctioning abortion fundamentally confirm the idea that "might makes right." An ordered society, however, and especially a democratic one, can never be built upon such a self-serving, unjust and distorted premise.

This premise runs directly counter to the tradition of our great Western constitutional texts, which arose as a cry for an order of justice superior to the raw exercise of power and domination by privileged individuals and groups. Those texts

were born from centuries of struggle by entire peoples living under various forms of oppression. The order of justice they sought required the clear acknowledgement of the universality of basic human rights, first among which was the assurance that one's life would not be unjustly exploited, attacked or ended. As Monsignor Michel Schooyans has noted, "That is why democratic regimes were founded — first and foremost to protect citizens from arbitrary executions, from the terrorism of despots and their police."

Many of us who have lived in a democratic society for most or all of our lives, never having struggled or fought for its original implementation or continuation, can forget the threatening historical circumstances that led to forging the substance of that democracy. Moreover, even as we benefit from the blessings of liberty, we can fall prey to erroneous conceptions about the meaning of freedom, as the rights of some begin to be subtly elevated over the rights of others. Indeed, every democracy struggles to avoid the treachery of various forms of despotism, as the long and arduous battles over human slavery that culminated with the Civil

Making Sense of Bioethics

An Authentic Democracy

War remind us. At Gettysburg, President Lincoln declared that “a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” was now “engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.”

Preceding those turbulent times, “equality” had certainly been proclaimed and was textually present within various founding documents. It remained, however, fundamentally elusive as laws continued to sanction the inequalities of human bondage and realities on the ground continued to thwart basic human rights. During those dark times, the light of democracy sputtered and flickered, and nearly went out. The widespread practice of abortion today raises a similar threat, as stronger individuals are tempted to establish their liberties upon the ruins of weaker ones. What is most important to recognize is how this existential threat to democracy is actually — without hyperbole — greater now than it was during the times of slavery.

Monsignor Schooyans trenchantly describes it this way:

“The liberalization of abortion laws puts into motion a political process in which the democratic State imperceptibly becomes transformed into a totalitarian State... From the very moment the state reserves for itself the right to decide, through its institutional organs, which human being has the right to protection and which human being does not, it ceases to be a democratic State because it negates the fundamental reason for which it was instituted: the defense of every human being’s right to life. The power such a State exercises becomes arbitrary when it authorizes certain citizens to execute their own equals with impunity...”

One is reminded of the testimonies of certain U.S. soldiers who, upon their return from Vietnam, in the wake of the sexual revolution, were shocked by the seismic shifts in the understanding of freedom that had occurred during their long deployment. Some of them said that they hadn’t stepped onto the battlefield and made great personal sacrifices in order to defend a false liberty

so their fellow citizens at home could descend into promiscuity and abortions with reckless abandon.

The promotion and legalization of abortion inexorably leads to a system of privileges for the powerful that engenders instability and divisiveness as it undercuts the most basic of all human rights. Abortion really kills at least twice. It kills the body of the baby and it kills the conscience of a nation, perverting the very essence of a democratic society.

Legal safeguards for all human life, on the other hand, assure the possibility of liberty, justice and equality — protecting the very core of an authentic democracy.

Rev. Tadeusz Pacholczyk, Ph.D. earned his doctorate in neuroscience from Yale and did post-doctoral work at Harvard. He is a priest of the diocese of Fall River, MA, and serves as the Director of Education at The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia. Father Tad writes a monthly column on timely life issues. From stem cell research to organ donation, abortion to euthanasia, he offers a clear and compelling analysis of modern bioethical questions, addressing issues we may confront at one time or another in our daily living. His column, entitled “Making Sense of Bioethics” is nationally syndicated in the U.S. to numerous diocesan newspapers, and has been reprinted by newspapers in England, Canada, Poland and Australia.

