

Social Policies and Moral Clarity

By Bishop Victor Galeone

This month's message is from a commentary that I came across some two months ago, dealing with the importance of evaluating key moral issues. It was written by Regis Nicoll, who kindly granted permission to reprint it here.

First Sight

Probably each of us has had an experience that awakened our conscience to an evil or injustice - an experience that forever changed the way we looked at the world and ourselves - a moment of moral clarity that made us reflect, "I was blind, but now I see."

As a young boy growing up in the rural South, water fountains labeled "White" and "Colored" were as normal to me as men and women restrooms. So when my grandmother took me to Woolworth one day, what caught my eye was not the separate lunch counter for "Colored"; it wasn't even the fact that the "Colored" counter was located on a mezzanine just below the one for whites - which was a social statement, in and of itself. No, what was out of place was the "white" man sitting among all of those black people.

"Grandma, what is that white man doing there," I asked. Grandma quickly surveyed the lower counter and then turned back in a whisper, "Oh, he only looks white. He's just very, very light, son."

Somehow her answer failed to satisfy my young mind. I stole another look at the mezzanine to study the man. But try as hard as I could, the man was not "colored," he was white. Noticing my confusion, Grandma leaned in to explain how differences in skin pigmentation can make one appear white.

For the next half hour, between sips on my cherry Coke, I glanced down at the mezzanine. It didn't help that there were customers in our section darker than the man below. I was puzzled... Nevertheless, it would be much later before another experience would bring me full-face with the evil underlying my faulty thinking.

The West Wing

For Dr. Richard Selzer, a moment of moral clarity came in the west wing of a university hospital in 1976. It was there that he witnessed the abortion of a 19-week-old fetus involving a needle injection technique. In the Esquire article, "What I Saw at the Abortion Clinic," Selzer writes,

I see something! It is unexpected, utterly unexpected . . . I see a movement - a small one. But I have seen it. And then I see it again. And now I see that it is the hub of the needle in the woman's belly that has jerked. First to one side. Then to the other side. Once more it wobbles, is tugged, like a fishing line nibbled by a sunfish. . . .

Dr. Selzer goes on to say that the vision of the fetus struggling for life will be ever etched in his mind; and that whatever language is used to defend abortion is powerless to erase that image. "For what can language do against the truth of what I saw?"...

A Moral Touchstone

Throughout this election year we have heard candidates from both political parties voice their convictions on such things as global warming, abortion, energy independence, health care, marriage, and the war on terror. For citizens confused over which policies should have primacy, it is important to realize that while they all have a moral dimension, they have different moral weights.

The bedrock of our rule of law is equality and the endowed rights of every individual - the most basic of which, is the right to life. Consequently, policies that most directly and widely uphold the "sanctity of life" take precedence over all others.

That does not mean that affordable housing, environmental protection, and the national debt are not important; they are - extremely so. Each impacts the quality of our lives in one way or another.

It means that protecting the unborn, aged, infirmed and other vulnerable from being marginalized as "non-persons" is morally superior to advocating animal rights. It means that fighting slavery, sex-trafficking, AIDS, genocide and hunger has a higher moral value than fighting global warming. It means that saving one million children a year from the holocaust of abortion has a higher moral value than the reproductive "rights" of women.

It means that eliminating racial prejudice has priority over eliminating off-shore drilling. It means that liberating the poor from the grip of the welfare state is morally superior to policies that create a permanent underclass. It means that protecting traditional marriage - proven the best institution for the care and well-being of children - takes precedence over the desires of adults to express their sexual freedom. In summary, it means that the moral value of any social policy should be judged by how profoundly it guards and defends the endowed rights for all people, especially the right to life.

In the coming weeks, the moral rhetoric of both parties is sure to reach fever pitch. But for people who would "see," - the "sanctity of life" will rise above the soaring orations as the touchstone of moral clarity.

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