

# THE 5-MINUTE PRO-LIFER



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Issue #9

## **Worse Than Abortion? The Danger of Social Justice Teaching**

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*To be worse than abortion, how bad would an unjust war have to be? Is it okay to overlook intrinsic evils in hopes of avoiding contingent ones?*

Just prior to the 2008 elections, a kindly nun at a Catholic high school pulled me aside to thank me for speaking to 400 of her students on the theme, “The Case for Life.” In fact, she couldn’t say enough good things about my talk. “I agree with everything you said. It was exactly what our kids needed to hear,” she beamed. However, a moment later it was clear we didn’t agree when it came to applying pro-life principles. In fact, her moral reasoning was deeply troubling. She began our conversation as follows:

**Nun:** If only our students were completely pro-life on all issues. I am consistently for life, and that’s why I’m voting for Senator Obama.

**Me:** Sister?

**Nun:** That’s right, I’m for Obama. He’s the real pro-life candidate. Most people focus too much on abortion. I’m pro-life and care about all life. So does Obama.

**Me:** What do you mean people focus too much on abortion?<sup>1</sup>

**Nun:** I mean Bush with the war in Iraq has killed so many people there is no way I could vote for someone like Senator McCain, who will do the same thing. How can any person who cares about life vote for such a man?

**Me:** Are you suggesting the President unjustly killed innocent people? If so, how?

**Nun:** Yes I am! Think of all those innocent women and children killed in Iraq—over a million of them since we invaded the place six years ago.

**Me:** Did you say over a million? How did you come up with that number?

**Nun:** I heard it someplace. Besides, war is a pro-life issue like abortion and right now it’s even worse than abortion.

**Me:** To be worse than abortion, how bad would an unjust war have to be?

**Nun:** Abortion, war, poverty—they are all bad.

**Me:** Agreed, but are they bad in the same way? Correct me if I’m wrong, but doesn’t church teaching distinguish between moral absolutes and prudential judgments? In other words, the decision to wage war is not intrinsically evil, though it must be morally justified and prudently considered. But the deliberate killing of unborn human beings is an absolute evil and laws permitting it are scandalous. If I understand you correctly, you are willing to overlook Obama’s pledge to uphold an absolute evil because he might help us avoid a contingent one?

**Nun:** I just know war is worse right now.

**Me:** To be worse than abortion, wouldn't an unjust war have to kill more innocent people than abortion does each year?

**Nun:** Yes, that's true.

**Me:** For the record, I don't think you are right about a million deaths in Iraq over the last six years, but suppose it's true.<sup>2</sup> Do you know how many unborn humans are killed by elective abortion each year?

**Nun:** A lot, I know.

**Me:** It's 1.2 million—each year! So even if you are right about a million unjustified killings in Iraq in the last six years, the evil of abortion is measurably worse. Yet you think pro-lifers should support a guy who is going to use the entire resources of the federal government perpetrate an even greater injustice on the unborn.

**Nun:** He won't do that.

**Me:** But he said the first thing he'd do as president—the very first thing—is sign into law the Freedom of Choice Act, which would sweep away all state and federal laws limiting abortion—including parental consent laws, partial-birth abortion bans, and laws forbidding the use of federal tax dollars for elective abortions.<sup>3</sup> There's no denying Obama is deeply committed to the legalized killing of unborn human beings. Doesn't that trouble you?

**Nun:** You are being too harsh. Obama personally opposes abortion—I've heard him say so myself. He wants to reduce it. But unlike Bush, he'll actually do something about it by funding social programs that get to the root of why women abort in the first place. He'll make health care more affordable for poor people. That will help reduce abortion. Everyone knows abortion rates went up under Bush after going down under Clinton.

**Me:** As for rates going up under Bush, that's simply false. They continued to decline.<sup>4</sup> But even so, laws which allow the killing of unborn human beings are unjust even if no one has abortions. Imagine a candidate who said he was personally opposed to rape while he had a 100% voting record in favor of men having a right to assault women. Suppose he told the public that instead of banning rape, he would make it rare with federally funded therapy for sexual deviants. It's no stretch to say the voting public would see right through his smokescreen, even if he favored social programs to treat the underlying causes that allegedly contribute to rape.

**Nun:** But abortion isn't the only issue. We shouldn't be single issue voters.

**Me:** Of course abortion isn't the only issue—any more than the treatment of slaves wasn't the only issue in the 1850's or the treatment of Jews the only issue in the 1940s. But both were the dominant issues of their day. Thoughtful Christians attribute different importance to different issues, and give greater weight to fundamental moral questions. For example, if a man running for president told us men had a right to beat their wives, most people would see that as reason enough to reject him, despite his foreign policy or economic reforms. The foundational principle of our republic is that all humans are equal in their fundamental dignity. That principle is non-negotiable, and yet your candidate for office rejects it. What issue could be more important than that?

Sadly, the kindly nun didn't see the problem. Indeed, many well-intentioned people are confused about abortion because they don't see it as an absolute evil. They view it only as a contingent one that can be explained away in light of other issues. We can't sit idly by and let them get away with it. Here at Life Training Institute, we're gently, yet persuasively, reminding well-intentioned pro-lifers that deliberately killing an innocent human being can never be justified simply because a candidate's foreign policy strategies or economic views are more to our liking.

***To get help defending your pro-life views, go to [www.prolifetraining.com](http://www.prolifetraining.com).***

**Notes:**

1. The questions and comments I posed in this dialogue were influenced by J. Budziszewski's excellent piece, "Ballot Box Blues," *Boundless*, October 28, 2004.
2. The website Iraq Body Count estimates between 88,000 and 97,000 civilian deaths in Iraq from 2003 to 2008. <http://www.IraqBodyCount.org>
3. Obama said this in his July 17, 2007 speech to the Planned Parenthood Action Fund.
4. See "Trends in Abortion in the United States, 1973–2005," Guttmacher Institute, January 2008.