



Public Servants and Moral Reasoning:
A notice to the Catholic community in northern Colorado

Monday, Sept. 8, 2008

To Catholics of the Archdiocese of Denver:

When Catholics serve on the national stage, their actions and words impact the faith of Catholics around the country. As a result, they open themselves to legitimate scrutiny by local Catholics and local bishops on matters of Catholic belief. In 2008, although NBC probably didn't intend it, *Meet the Press* has become a national window on the flawed moral reasoning of some Catholic public servants.

On August 24, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, describing herself as an ardent, practicing Catholic, misrepresented the overwhelming body of Catholic teaching against abortion to the show's nationwide audience, while defending her "pro-choice" abortion views. On September 7, Sen. Joseph Biden compounded the problem to the same *Meet the Press* audience.

Sen. Biden is a man of distinguished public service. That doesn't excuse poor logic or bad facts. Asked when life begins, Sen. Biden said that, "it's a personal and private issue." But in reality, modern biology knows *exactly* when human life begins: at the moment of conception. Religion has nothing to do with it. People might argue when human "personhood" begins - though that leads public policy in very dangerous directions - but no one can any longer claim that the beginning of life is a matter of religious opinion.

Sen. Biden also confused the nature of pluralism. Real pluralism *thrives* on healthy, non-violent disagreement; it *requires* an environment where people of conviction will struggle respectfully but vigorously to advance their beliefs. In his interview, the senator observed that other people with strong religious views disagree with the Catholic approach to abortion. It's certainly true that we need to acknowledge the views of other people and compromise whenever possible - but not at the expense of a developing child's right to life. Abortion is a foundational issue; it is not an issue like housing policy or the price of foreign oil. It always involves the intentional killing of an innocent life, and it is *always, grievously wrong*. If, as Sen. Biden said, "I'm prepared *as a matter of faith* [emphasis added] to accept that life begins at the moment of conception," then he is not merely wrong about the science of new life; he also fails to defend the innocent life he already knows is there.

As the senator said in his interview, he has opposed public funding for abortions. To his great credit, he also backed a successful ban on partial-birth abortions. But his strong support for the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* and the false "right" to abortion it enshrines, can't be excused by any serious Catholic. Support for *Roe* and the "right to choose" an abortion simply masks what abortion is, and what abortion does. *Roe* is bad law. As long as it stands, it prevents returning the abortion issue to the states where it belongs, so that the American people can decide its future through fair debate and legislation.

In his *Meet the Press* interview, Sen. Biden used a morally exhausted argument that American Catholics have been hearing for 40 years: i.e., that Catholics can't "impose" their religiously based views on the rest of the country. But resistance to abortion is a matter of human rights, not religious opinion. And the senator knows very well as a lawmaker that *all law* involves the imposition of some people's convictions on everyone else. That is the nature of the law. American Catholics have allowed themselves to be bullied into accepting the destruction of more than a million developing unborn children a year. Other people have imposed their "pro-choice" beliefs on American society without any remorse for decades.

If we claim to be Catholic, then American Catholics, including public officials who describe themselves as Catholic, need to act accordingly. We need to put an end to *Roe* and the industry of permissive abortion it enables. Otherwise all of us - from senators and members of Congress, to Catholic laypeople in the pews - fail not only as believers and disciples, but also as citizens.

*+Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
Archbishop of Denver*

*+James D. Conley
Auxiliary Bishop of Denver*