

Reflections

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Defining a Person in America

One of the seminal concepts that underlies American democracy is that of people or person. The Declaration of Independence states that it is people who dissolved the political bonds with Great Britain. It is people who appealed to Divine Justice to declare themselves free and independent. The signers of the Declaration issued it “by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies.” The Constitution set up the government in the name of “We the People.” President Lincoln described the government as “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

But who are these “people?” What is meant by the term “person?” There has never been a definition of the term that has been commonly and widely accepted. For almost the first century of this nation’s history, slaves in most states were treated as non-persons, considered to be property without rights. In 1787, as the states argued over whether slaves should be counted for purposes of taxation (which the South opposed) and for apportionment of members of Congress (which the North opposed), the Three-Fifths Compromise was reached: a slave would be considered to be three-fifths of a person for both enumerations. This legal view was not changed until slavery was abolished when the Thirteenth Amendment was passed in 1865.

Today, the argument about personhood is focused on when life begins and when it ends. The position of the Catholic Church is clear – personhood begins at conception and continues until natural death, even if the individual’s quality of life is not up to some norm. This belief is rooted in the religious belief that humans have spiritual souls as well as physical bodies, and that their souls are created in the image and likeness of God. It is consistent with the biological fact that the complete genetic identity of the human being is present from the moment of fertilization.

Many people now draw a distinction between when life begins, which is a scientific fact, and when that life becomes a person, which is a social and philosophical construct. This separation is nothing more than a sophistic attempt to justify the taking of innocent life. It is the crucial element in the acceptance of abortion. If the life in the womb is not a person, then abortion -- even to the point of partial birth -- is not the killing of a child, but is only the medical excision of a growth, tissues or cells within a woman. In the United States, this distinction has allowed over 3,500 abortions per day, which amounts to 50 million never-to-be-born children since *Roe v. Wade* was passed in 1973.

The attempt to separate personhood from life is fraught with danger for everyone at every stage of life. The point of separation becomes a decision of those in power, whether a dictator, autocrats or a democratic majority. When a human is declared a non-person because of his or her inability to sustain life independently of others or is not able to perform at a certain level of mental, physical or social ability, a distinction is made between humanity and personhood based on functionality. This can lead, and has led, to

great atrocities. At various times, in many countries, in differing circumstances, slaves, Blacks, Jews, non-believers, and other “inconvenient” groups have been declared non-persons, thus justifying lynching, slavery, ethnic cleansing, genocide, gulags, jihad, and the Holocaust. Do we truly believe that a life is not valuable and worth living if the individual is in a coma, is significantly handicapped, has Alzheimer’s, is severely autistic, cannot live without constant pain, has a genetic defect, or is in a long-term vegetative state?

The issue of personhood was central to the decision to withdraw nutrition and hydration from Terri Schiavo. If she could not outwardly perform as a human being, and the prognosis for change was not encouraging, then she could be considered “dead” as a person and her life functions ended. Many Catholics agreed with this position, even though Pope John Paul II had stated that persons in a persistent vegetative state “retain their dignity in all its fullness” and “the administration of water and food, even when provided by artificial means, always represents a natural means of preserving life, not a medical act.”

If we accept a functional view of person, what will be the next step, for similar reasoning can be used to justify euthanasia, mercy killings, and assisted suicide, as well as abortion at all stages? America is a great nation, providing freedom and opportunity to all. But what will be the future of this nation, as if it moves away from a moral basis to one that is amoral? John Adams cautioned us when he stated: “[W]e have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. . . . Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

As members of the Knights of Columbus, let us strive to bring morality back into the public discourse and consciousness. An excellent opportunity is to participate in the March for Life in Washington, DC on January 22, 2007. Let us demonstrate to our political leaders and the nation-at-large that abortion is a heinous act and that human life must be respected at all stages. Let us assure that every Council and every Assembly -- including ours -- will be represented, either marching individually or behind the Maryland State K of C banner. Let us participate in the many prayers for the unborn that will be said during the March, and give demonstration to our motto, *Vivat Jesus!*



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