

## A Call to Truth-Telling

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**A**S WE CONSIDER HOW TO MOVE ON POST-*DOBBS*, I argue that we must put aside the dichotomous labels “pro-life” and “pro-choice” in favor of speaking the truth to each other. The debate as it has unfolded thus far has been largely co-opted by the two major political parties. That means the focus is far less on supporting the lives of women and their prenatal and postnatal children, and more on shoring up political parties’ wins. In the game of wins and losses, what I think has really been lost is truth-telling. That loss of truth means myriad injustices to women, children, and ourselves.

Winning, especially in politics recently, has meant winning at all costs. Advocates on both sides have aimed to make their “side” look the most attractive—and often this has meant lying by omission. In this realm of two—and only two—sides, people not only fail to tell truths they would prefer to keep silent, they also fail to acknowledge the truths of the other “side.” It is so tempting to lie, or at least to suggest that one side is the only one fully telling the whole or most important truth. In the absence of a full story, having only two options makes the matter look clearer, and the winning strategy more obvious. For example, both sides emphasize polling or social scientific and scientific studies to support their claims. This kind of data appears to be neutral and objectively science-based, and therefore truthful. A key difficulty is that reporting of such data to more popular audiences often oversimplifies what the studies and polls found, and also hyperbolizes how the data support their side. I will here just name two representative examples among many.

The group Catholics for Choice states in its “Just the Facts” brochure<sup>1</sup> that “68% of Catholics support *Roe v. Wade*” and “56% of Catholics think abortion should be legal in all or most cases.” The brochure’s main aim is to let pro-choice Catholics know they are not alone in their support of abortion (and other reproductive issues). At the same time, that stark presentation of “facts” also makes it seem that a simple majority of Catholics are in agreement with each other

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<sup>1</sup> “Just the Facts: Catholic Perspectives on Sex, Gender, and Reproductive Health,” *Catholics for Choice*, 2022, [www.catholicsforchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CatholicsForChoiceJustTheFacts.pdf](http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CatholicsForChoiceJustTheFacts.pdf).

about abortion, which in turn seems to suggest a simple response; namely to let women be responsible for reproductive choices. Yet multiple subsequent surveys from Pew and other organizations demonstrate a much more complicated reality. For example, 41% of Catholics state that abortion should be legal in the first trimester (compared to an overall 23% of Catholics who state it should be illegal). By the third trimester 16% overall say it should be legal while 49% say abortion should be illegal. There are also nuances in relation to rape, incest, and the endangered life of the mother.<sup>2</sup> Polling begins to indicate such nuance, but telling a truthful story requires digging deeper.

A similar example appears in a recent study funded by a pro-life group which examines the impact of chemical abortions on women. The facts of the study are, for the most part, reported truthfully: they found a negative impact of chemical abortions via RU-486 on 34% of women, 24% of women sought help after their chemical abortion, and 82% of women did not know where to go for help after their abortion.<sup>3</sup> The subsequent news releases and narratives about the numbers, however, can overplay both the positive aspects of (in this case) the pro-life argument, and therefore the apparently discounted aspects of the pro-choice side. Both the author of the white paper related to the study, as well as author Matthew Lamb, combined the study percentages for “negative impact” and “seeking help” in order to tout that 60% of women encountered a negative impact. Lamb’s article highlighted the idea that “6 in 10” women needed support and regretted their abortions.<sup>4</sup> To the article and the study authors, this indicated that “these findings are a marked contrast to studies by Planned Parenthood and other abortion providers that report negative emotional reactions to abortion are extremely rare.”<sup>5</sup> The point being made by the authors is that there is much more clarity surrounding abortion regret than some pro-choice groups suggest; the linked Planned Parenthood site does name negative emotional reactions as rare. At the same time, there is some indication from the linked

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory A. Smith, “Like Americans Overall, Catholics Vary in Their Abortion Views, with Regular Mass Attenders Most Opposed,” *Pew Research Center*, May 23, 2022, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/05/23/like-americans-overall-catholics-vary-in-their-abortion-views-with-regular-mass-attenders-most-opposed/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/05/23/like-americans-overall-catholics-vary-in-their-abortion-views-with-regular-mass-attenders-most-opposed/). I wish that the survey data additionally delved into questions about severe disabilities by religious affiliation; severe disability and abortion is another nuance that might follow interesting trends among Catholics.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Smith Dallabrida, “Study Shows Long-term Negative Impact of Chemical Abortion,” *Support after Abortion*, [www.supportafterabortion.com/resources/research/](http://www.supportafterabortion.com/resources/research/).

<sup>4</sup> Matt Lamb, “Study Finds 6 in 10 Women Who Had Chemical Abortions Wanted Help or Emotional Support after,” *LifeSiteNews*, October 12, 2022, [www.lifesite.news.com/news/study-finds-6-in-10-women-who-had-chemical-abortions-wanted-help-or-emotional-support-after/](http://www.lifesite.news.com/news/study-finds-6-in-10-women-who-had-chemical-abortions-wanted-help-or-emotional-support-after/).

<sup>5</sup> Lamb, “Study Finds 6 in 10 Women.”

Planned Parenthood site of a bit more nuance, namely that long term emotional problems are “more likely to happen in people who have to end a pregnancy because of health reasons, people who do not have support around their decision to have an abortion, or people who have a history of mental health problems.”<sup>6</sup> This kind of information from the pro-choice side would be helpful to tease out in the Support after Abortion study.

The above examples focus on the kind of reporting toward a lay audience that often happens regarding polls and studies and is my focus in this brief essay. I think it is worth saying that to the extent academics make use of these kinds of data and support the two-party narrative (as I am still doing to some extent even in this essay, by naming two sides), we too should discern with care what we are omitting from narratives of either our own views or the other side. It is also a kind of omission to fail to address opponents’ questions and concerns.<sup>7</sup> We fail to acknowledge that the other side is not *only* concerned with women or children, though the rhetoric would suggest exactly that pro-life arguments care solely for unborn babies and pro-choice arguments care solely about a mother’s life. Rather, both sides care for both, though often in very different ways.

My overarching concern is not only the ways we lie in the abortion debate, but also the impact that such lying has. First, the lies serve to reinforce two, and only two, apparent sides with little room for complexities. It has the effect of making one side seem perfect and the other evil: woman killers or baby killers. Yet many people who are pro-choice do not seek abortions for themselves, even as many people who are pro-life seek out non-abortive options and support for women, including being foster parents.

As moral theologians, we know that living out moral convictions will likely *not* lead to some ideal life, for that would be a very false

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<sup>6</sup> Planned Parenthood, “How Safe is the Abortion Pill?,” [www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/abortion/the-abortion-pill/how-safe-is-the-abortion-pill](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/abortion/the-abortion-pill/how-safe-is-the-abortion-pill).

<sup>7</sup> Here are a few examples among the myriad published since the Dobbs decision. Suzanne Evans, Rachel Blizblau, Christina Hunter Chapman, et al., “Restricted Access to Abortion, the Dobbs Ruling, and Radiation Oncology: Standing United against Reproductive Injustice,” *International Journal of Radiation Oncology, Biology, Physics* 114, no. 3 (November 2022): 385–389. The authors dismiss colleagues who hold opposing views (and also appear to be unaware of the careful work in Catholic bioethics that might address some of these concerns). Kody Cooper, “The Dobbs Dissent: The Case for Abortion Falls Apart,” *Human Life Review* 48, no. 3 (Summer 2022): 92–96. The author suggests that the argument against abortion should have been so obvious that the Supreme Court vote should have been 9-0. While these positions are heartfelt and to a certain extent draw from sound academic work, they also do not take the opponents’ concerns seriously (which, it should be stated, usually are not concerns about whether or not abortion itself is justified, but more often about material concerns like poverty, disability, coercion, etc.).

sense of the resurrection. Perfection is God's; the reality of our lives, by contrast, is that we live post-resurrection yet still in a fallen world. As Stanley Hauerwas stated in his address to the Society of Christian Ethics in 2012: "To be a Christian does not mean we are endowed with virtues that empower us to bear the terrors of this life without difficulty. ... We are inheritors of histories that involve cruelties so horrible there can be no way to make what was done undone."<sup>8</sup>

That is to say: the entire debate as commonly stated merely sidesteps people's very real wrenching conversations. Casting debate in the rhetoric of sound bites causes us not to hear the cry of the poor who cannot see how to add another person; the cry of many disabled people who see abortion as genocide (even as some disabled people also decry lack of abortion as being disabling to their bodies); the women who are in the throes of an ectopic pregnancy and fear for their lives. Indeed, refusing to hear an opponent's questions neither is compassionate nor does it help us follow the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

If we seek not to lie, especially about truth-telling that opponents speak, that would enable us to love our neighbors—the ones who are debate opponents, as well as the ones in dire need of help. I suspect we shall find that in the midst of complexity there is more that might bring us together than divides us. As *Dobbs* pushes abortion law to the states, can there be a place for coming together to talk about maternity leave, universal preschool and kindergarten, laws that protect women experiencing miscarriages or life-threatening situations like ectopic pregnancies, and more? **M**

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "Bearing Reality: A Christian Meditation," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2013): 17.