Invective, Irony, Sarcasm and Other Negative Tropes in Pro-life Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT: Invective and other negative rhetoric is common enough in both secular and religious efforts to eliminate abortion in our society. Standard Catholic moral analysis places limits on its use, especially in public, antagonistic debates. A more personalist analysis, emphasizing the effect that the rhetoric has on the speaker and the existing and potential bonds of communion between the speaker and the hostile hearer, even further limits the situations in which such rhetoric may be used.

PRO-ABORTION RESPONSE TO RHETORICAL TROPES

Some friends and I were recently discussing whether the phrase "pro-aborts" is inflammatory. On the one hand, the label itself reveals most directly the actual position of those it is designed to designate, and therefore should not be offensive. I don't think that I would be insulted by being called "pro-fetus keeper" or "pro-embryonic cell saver," or even "pro-product of conception," although the latter is a minimalist description since I believe that the "product of conception" is a human being.

We have a psychological fact here. Pro-lifers do not mind their real position being made explicit in labels. Pro-abortioners, or whatever we call them, have to hide behind euphemisms. For pro-life advocates, the more clearly the label reflects their actual position, the happier they are. On the other hand, there is no honest label that one could use for people who want other people to be able to kill their babies legally that would not be inflammatory.

The phrase "pro-choice" is a shell game. If people do not believe that unborn children ought to be protected by law, if they want abortion to be an option in our society, even if the procedure is not something that they are enthusiastic about, they are pro-abortion, because unless it is

illegal it will be provided. Would we say that someone who is not enthusiastic about murder but did not think that it ought to be illegal in our society is neutral about murder? If there were poison in someone's water and one knew something about it and did not actively seek to eliminate it, and if people started drinking this water, would that person not be rightly called "pro-poison"? Why does calling advocates of legal abortion "pro-aborts" make them angry? Are they so irrational that being labeled truthfully makes them unable to think clearly about the issue?

On the other hand, there is something about the tone of the phrase "pro-abort" that is jarring. Does the label do something more than simply reflect the admittedly immoral position of the person so labeled? Does it attempt to injure the person and therefore constitute a sin? This got me to thinking about the tone of some of the other pro-life rhetoric that I have heard over the years.

As a result I have developed a set of questions that I would like to address in this essay. What is the value of polemics in general and of invective and irony in particular within human interaction, and especially within Church life and evangelization? Are there times and circumstances where negative rhetoric is useful, where invective is inappropriate, where irony, or even sarcasm, might help to promote the Gospel of Life? If invective is useful, to what degree? What are the rules? How does one know? Do we draw the line at the other person's taking offense? Why or why not?

In order to begin to answer these questions, I will first look at the current trend toward negative rhetoric in our culture, and then at the use of negative rhetoric in the pro-life movement. I will do a standard moral analysis of the object, the intention, and the circumstances that are involved when one is using negative rhetoric as a way to help distinguish between sinful and non-sinful uses of such rhetoric. Finally, by looking at the question from a personalist perspective and by focusing on the spiritual impact that negative rhetoric has on the acting person, I will draw some preliminary conclusions. I suggest that we should be extremely cautious in using even legitimate negative rhetoric in any public forum. For the sake of our own souls, we should be cautious about this in our more private interactions and in our own interior discourse.

AN AGE OF PERSONALLY NEGATIVE RHETORIC

Our Culture in General. While preparing this essay I read a book by Al Franken called *Lies (and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them): A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*.[1] In one of the first chapters Franken takes on conservative commentator Ann Coulter. He not only accuses her of lies but also criticizes her and many other politically conservative commentators of poisoning the atmosphere of public discourse with personally demeaning and destructively negative rhetorical language. Three chapters of the book are devoted to an analysis of this tone. The ironic part of this criticism is that Franken himself employs such negative rhetoric throughout the book. For instance, the title of the second chapter is "Ann Coulter: Nutcase." His argument seems to be something like "They started it" rather than "I'll take the high road."

Rhetoric nowadays, especially in the new media, relies heavily on invective, irony, sarcasm, and the like to achieve an emotional reaction. The sneering tone is often referred to as "snarky." It demonstrates a presumption of intellectual superiority that is captured in the label that some liberal commentators have tried to pin to themselves, the "brights." Al Frankin and Ann Coulter define the atmosphere. Many others liberal and conservative talk radio personalities and bloggers exhibit it as well.

The trend to negative rhetoric appears to be a part of a general culture shift in the last few decades away from even pretended civility in personal or public conversation and dialogue. For instance, Leslie Savan devotes the largest of her ten chapters in her book on pop phrases[2] to the ubiquitous presence of negative rhetorical jibes in our everyday speech. The chapter called "Don't Ever Think about Telling Me 'I Don't *Think* So': The Media, Meanness and Me" takes up one third of the book.

The Pro-life Movement and Negative Rhetoric. There are some

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[1] Al Franken, *Lies (and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them): A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right* (New York NY: Dutton, 2003). The title is ironic. Franken is not pretending to be fair and balanced in the book. He is making fun of the slogan form typical of the Fox News Network.

[2] *Slam Dunks and No-Brainers: Pop Language in Your Life, the Media, and Like...Whatever* (New York NY: Knopf, 2005).

signs that this negative rhetoric is affecting the broad pro-life movement. On the one hand, the most important public pro-life activists avoid the use of invective and irony in their rhetoric. A perusal of the webpages of National Right to Life[3] and of Healing the Culture,[4] for instance, turns up very little of it, although the language is direct. Their approach appears to focus primarily on argumentation, reason, and vivid presentation of the truth.

On the other hand, other public promoters of the pro-life cause, especially in the secular media, use the negative rhetoric that is the stock-in-trade of those media. Ann Coulter, for instance, uses irony to insinuate the stupidity of the members of the Supreme Court when she says, "With even liberals backing away from *Roe*, apparently the last group of people on Earth to realize the Supreme Court's abortion jurisprudence is a catastrophe is going to be the Supreme Court."[5] She is renowned for having said, "Abortion is the sacrament [of the Democratic party] and *Roe v. Wade* is Holy Writ."[6] Rush Limbaugh coined the phrase "feminazis" to refer to "any female who is intolerant of any point of view that challenges militant feminism. [He] often use[s] it to describe women who are obsessed with perpetuating a modern-day holocaust: abortion."[7] Other examples of such rhetoric can be found in common epithets such as "Dr. Death" for Jack Kevorkian and the phrase "Planned Barrenhood" as a substitution for Planned Parenthood.

Not all uses of such rhetoric are in the secular press. If you have ever read the blog of Catholic apologist Mark Shea, you know that he is an expert at pithy and pointed headlines. He is specifically known for his frequent links to articles that he headlines, e.g., "Gay brownshirts on the march!" Following the example of his literary mentor, G.K. Chesterton, he often uses rhetorical juxtaposition to point out a real connection

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[3] http://www.nrlc.org/.

[4] http://www.healingtheculture.com/.

[5] "Abortion Stops a Bleeding Heart," January 25, 2006. http://www.anncoulter.com/cgi-local/article.cgi?article=97.

[6] Ann Coulter, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism* (New York NY: Crown Forum, 2006).

[7] See http://www.ontheissues.org/Celeb/Rush_Limbaugh_Abortion.htm.

between two realities that are apparently unconnected, such as in a recent post entitled "The Abortion Industry: Finishing What Hitler Started,"[8] in which he discusses abortion in Israel. For Shea, the abortion industry is "Murder, Inc."[9] Even my fellow blogger on the HMS Weblog resorts to invective, as when he called an actress from the television series *Grey's Anatomy* "Planned Parenthood's Hollywood spokesbimbo."[10] One often finds such rhetoric on bumper stickers: "'Vote Pro-Choice' Satan,"[11] "Abortion: A Doctor's Right to Make a Killing,"[12] and "I Think... therefore I'm Pro-Life."[13]

Negative Rhetoric in the History of the Church

Ecclesiastical Writers. Negative tropes in rhetoric, of course, are not something newly discovered by American conservatives or liberals in the 1990s. Their value, affirmed in ancient textbooks on rhetoric, reveals a long and distinguished history, even in Christian literature. For example, the following is a passage from Patriarch Alexander of Alexandria's letter to Alexander of Thessalonika concerning the activity of the priest Arius and his accomplices in the fourth-century Trinitarian controversy:

> The ambitious and covetous calculation of rascally men has produced plots against the apparently greater dioceses. Through intricate pretenses such individuals are attacking the orthodox faith of the church. Driven wild by the devil at work in them for pleasures at hand, the skipped away from every piety and trampled on the feat of God's judgment.[14]

One of my students even calls Athanasius's *Oration Against the Arians*

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[8] http://markshea.blogspot.com/2008_05_01_archive. html.

[9] http://markshea.blogspot.com/2008_05_01_archive.html.

[10] http://www.exceptionalmarriages.com/weblog/BlogDetail.asp?ID=39751.

[11] http://www.christianshirts.net/bumperStickers.php/.

[12] http://www.childrenoftherosary.org/bumpmain.htm.

[13] Ibid.

[14] "Alexander of Alexandria's Letter of Alexander of Thessalonica" in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, ed. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 33.

a "rant." St. Thomas Aquinas also used pointed irony, as Jean-Pierre Torrell remarks:

> If we feared, for example, that he may have been too timorous in the troubled university situation, these writings do not lack in vigor or firmness or even, as M.-M. Dufeil has underscored, in a "sarcastic irony which bursts forth at intervals" in the *Contra Impugnantes*.[15]

The Bible. Invective and irony appears frequently enough in the Bible. Saint Paul spares no rhetorical venom when speaking of those who would require gentile converts to be circumcised: "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh" (Phil. 3:2)[16] and "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" (Gal. 3:1). "Would that those who are upsetting you might also castrate themselves!" (Gal. 5:12, RNAB).

Jesus himself was not immune from such rhetoric. "And [Jesus] said to them, 'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?'" (Lk. 24:25). The New Testament prize for invective, however, has to go to Jesus's diatribe against the scribes and Pharisees:

> "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, ...hypocrites! ... hypocrites! ... blind guides, ... You blind fools! ... You blind men! ... hypocrites! ... You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! ... hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity... hypocrites! ... whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.... So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity... hypocrites!... You serpents, you brood of vipers." (Mt. 23:13-33)

Although Jesus did not use biting sarcasm, some argue that he used

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[15] Jean-Pierre Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Vol 1: *The Person and His Work*, trans. by Robert Royal, revised ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2005), p. 91.

[16] All biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

irony, such as when he named Simon bar Jonah "Peter," knowing full well what an unstable and unreliable character Peter was. He certainly was being ironic when he called Nathaniel a "true Israelite, a man without guile" since Jacob himself was a man with a great deal of guile, as shown by the ruse that he used to deprive Esau of his father Isaac's blessing.

The fact that various Church Fathers and Scholastics, not to mention Christ and St. Paul, used invective, irony, and even sarcasm, would seem to justify its use in pro-life activism. But a close moral analysis will reveal severe limits on its use, especially in light of the specific nature of the pro-life movement itself.

Moral Analysis, Definitions, Invective

First, let's define our terms. Invective is defined as insulting language.[17] It is usually called *contumelia* in Latin theology. It is a label applied to a person, institution, idea, or event that highlights some negative aspect of that person or things. It is usually personal. To say "Mark is an idiot" is more clearly and directly insulting than saying "Mark's idea about shoes is idiotic." The first is more easily interpreted as an offense against charity. But even the second is often interpreted as a personal attack because we tend to identify ourselves with our ideas.

Irony and Sarcasm. Rhetorical irony is saying the opposite of what one means. This can be distinguished from situational irony, where an event occurs that is contrary to what one would expect in a situation, and dramatic irony, where the audience knows the true significance of the events on stage when the character or characters in the play do not.[18] An example of rhetorical irony occurs when a golfer has been boasting about his skill at the game of golf and has a high score. A fellow golfer might say, "Boy, you sure *are* good at golf!" Our culture is very confused about what irony is, and often uses the word "sarcasm" for irony. Sarcasm comes from the Greek word for flesh-tearing. According

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[17] Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary. "Of, relating to, or characterized by insult or abuse." http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/invective.

[18] John da Fiesole, http://disputations.blogspot.com/2008_03_01_archive.html; http://disputations.blogspot.com/2008_03_01_archive.html.

to *Merriam-Webster*, it is a "harsh or bitter derision or irony, ...a sharply ironical taunt; sneering or cutting remark."[19] The difference between irony and sarcasm is that sarcasm is always personal and relatively harsh, whereas an ironic remark can be about an impersonal situation and need not be harsh.

The Use of Language. The fundamental theological principle about human language, flowing from the Incarnation of the *Logos* and the basis of the eighth commandment, is that human language is meant to express the truth and to build up others and society. It is not intended to cause injury. As A. G. Sertillanges said:

> When we want to awaken a thought in anyone, what are the means at our disposal? One only, to produce in him by word and sign states of sensibility and of imagination, emotion and memory in which he will discover our idea and make it his own.[20]

The bible warns repeatedly about using language to harm another: "But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother [says to him *raca*!] shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire" (Mt. 5:22). "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:29). Language is supposed to be edifying, to impart grace, not to cause harm:

> With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. (James 3:9-12).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* warns journalists specifically not only to be devoted to the truth, but to communicate the truth in charity:

> By the very nature of their profession, journalists have an obligation to serve the truth

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[19] Dictionary.com, Unabridged (v. 1.1). Random House. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sarcasm (accessed: January 25, 2008.

[20] Sertillanges, p. 34.

> and not offend against charity in disseminating information. They should strive to respect, with equal care, the nature of the facts and the limits of critical judgment concerning individuals. They should not stoop to defamation. (§2497)

OBJECT

Moral analysis considers the three sources of the morality of an act: the object, the intention, and the circumstance. I would like to consider each one of these and its impact on the morality of the use of invective, irony, and sarcasm. First of all, formal invective and sarcasm by nature intend an injury. According to St. Thomas, who considers verbal injuries inflicted extrajuridically in his *Summa theologiae* II-II, qq. 72-75, "reviling" (contumelia, q. 72) dishonors a person in the sight of a third party but "derision" (q. 75) intends to instill shame in the person derided.

Reviling (*contumelia*) is to dishonor a person, by word to deprive a man of the respect due him from another: "a man's faults are exposed to the detriment of his honor" (II-II, q. 72). In reply to objection 3, St. Thomas points out that it is a moral fault that is highlighted. One doesn't just say "you are blind," but "you are a thief." Derision, on the other hand, is intended to elicit shame in the hearer, not dishonor from a third person (q. 75). Formally to sin in using these tropes one must intend injury. In this case the intention to injure is part of the object.

Sarcasm by nature seems to include an *ad hominem* component, an intent to injure, especially in the context of hostile exchanges. Author Oswald Sobrino gives us a great lesson about sarcasm, the twin sister of that other personal and cultural poison, cynicism:

> [S]arcasm is a force for evil in our lives. Even if we do not know its exact origin in each case, it is surely certain that Satan delights in the harm it causes everyone concerned and the division it brings among Christians and thus uses and exploits sarcasm to advance his cause.

Yet, sarcasm, in spite of its obvious toxic effect on us and others, is quite common and often appears as a compulsion and habit that the sarcastic person himself can fail to recognize.[21] Some would even argue

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[21] Sobrino, "The Spirit of Sacrasm," Wednesday, Jan. 23, 2008. http://catholicanalysis.blogspot.com/2008/01/spirit-of-sarcasm.html.

that any use of irony is contrary to the good. John da Fiesole states on his blog: "Irony has no place in the kingdom of God."[22]

Intention

On the other hand, some would argue justifiably for the use of such language on the basis that the intention is not to injure, but some social good. St. Thomas states that material reviling is not necessarily sinful:

> If, on the other hand, a man says to another a railing or reviling word, yet with the intention, not of dishonoring him, but rather perhaps of correcting him or with some like purpose, he utters a railing or reviling not formally and essentially, but accidentally and materially, in so far to wit as he says that which might be a railing or reviling. Hence this may be sometimes a venial sin, and sometimes without any sin at all. (II-II, q. 72, a. 2)

Calling a Spade a Spade. For instance, some argue that they use such language in order to unveil the truth, to call a spade a spade. There are certain contexts where irony can be an effective device for clarifying the genuine position of the opponent. Such appears to be the case in the phrase "Planned Barrenhood." This purpose is an aspect of the admonition of St. Paul for the Christian to bring the darkness of the sinner to light: "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light" (Eph. 5:11-13). Judie Brown of American Life League says that civility in dialogue must not silence the truth. If others are offended by a frank and direct statement of the truth about them or something they hold dear, that does not mean that one should not speak that truth:

> "Civility" should not require deception. "Civility" should not be based on a false premise of protecting the consciences of those who publicly defy basic Church teachings. "Civility" does not avoid judgment of what is objectively evil, such as the act of abortion and its advocacy by persons in political life. There is no "reasoned" Catholic argument in defense of such atrocious behavior, regardless of what the signers

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[22] John da Fiesole, http://disputations.blogspot.com/2008_03_01_archive.html. A rebuttal by Mike Potemra, on NRO's The Corner, http://corner.nationalreview.com/post/.

[of a statement defending the support of pro-abortion politicians] may think.[23]

Persuasion and Correction. Other uses of negative rhetorical tropes might include persuasion or correction. One, for instance, may use invective or irony to sway public opinion about a person or position. For instance, when St. Paul tries to persuade the believers in Ephesus not to live as the Gentiles, he highlights their depravity:

> Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness. (Eph. 4:17-19)

Note, however, that he does not resort to sarcasm or even irony in this passage.

Humor. Finally, one might use irony or epithets to amuse, rather than revile, as when St. Thomas says:

> It belongs to wittiness to utter some slight mockery, not with intent to dishonor or pain the person who is the object of the mockery, but rather with intent to please and amuse: and this may be without sin, if the due circumstances be observed. On the other hand if a man does not shrink from inflicting pain on the object of his witty mockery, so long as he makes others laugh, this is sinful. (q. 72, a. 2 ad 1).

St. Thomas states that lightheartedness reduces sin (q. 72, a. 2 ad 3).

Double Effect. On the other hand, whatever our intention, negative tropes can have both our intended virtuous effect and an unintended negative effect. In such cases, the principle of double effect applies. Even when we do not intend the second effect, we cannot ignore it. We have to consider whether the positive good achieved by our intended goal is sufficient to justify the unintended negative effect, and whether the unintended injury to the person helps achieve the virtuous end we seek. Language is for upbuilding of all hearers, whether it is taken in jest

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[23] Judie Brown, "Sacrilege, scandal and murder–or civility?", Released November 14, 2007, http://www.all.org/article.

or not. St. Thomas warns:

> Nevertheless there is need of discretion in such matters, and one should not use such words without moderation, because the railing might be so grave that being uttered inconsiderately it might dishonor the person against whom it is uttered. On such a case a man might commit a mortal sin, even though he did not intend to dishonor the other man: just as were a man incautiously to injure grievously another by striking him in fun, he would not be without blame (q. 72, a. 2).

Thomas continues:

> Just as it is lawful to strike a person, or damnify him in his belongings for the purpose of correction, so too, for the purpose of correction, one may say a mocking word to a person whom one has to correct. It is thus that our Lord called the disciples "foolish," and the Apostle called the Galatians "senseless." Yet, as Augustine says (*De Sermone Domini in Monte* ii, 19), "seldom and only when it is very necessary should we have recourse to invectives, and then so as to urge God's service, not our own" (q. 72, a. 2 ad 2).

CIRCUMSTANCES

Another factor to consider in determining the morality of a rhetorical act is circumstance. Do different circumstances justify different usages?

Privacy. When one is in private, one is often more free with using epithets as a kind of verbal shortcut. I will use invective among close friends when I am pretty sure the significance (sign-value) of the epithet will be understood and when I am not intending to malign the person, but only to communicate a certain idea about him. For instance, when I was writing my dissertation a colleague and I would refer to it, in jest, as "Rahner is the Antichrist," because part of my purpose was to counter the influence of a Rahner-inspired interpretation of *Gaudium et Spes*.[24] Now, neither my colleague nor I think that Rahner is the Antichrist: we just said it as a kind of a short hand for our mutually held position on a number of theological controversies.

When can a person let his hair down and use cant, jargon, and

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[24] Robert F. Gotcher, "Henri de Lubac and Communio: The Significance of de Lubac's Theology of the Supernatural for an Interpretation of Gaudium et Spes," Doctoral Diss., (Marquette University, 2002).

verbal shortcuts? An important consideration these days is an unjustified presumption of privacy. Can we get away with it in this internet age? The Internet is a public forum. We need to be aware that anything we say will be known to the opponents of life. Further, what is said in private can scandalize even those who agree. One home-schooling mom, for instance, comments upon some of the things said in private among home-schoolers by saying:

> My husband had been an atheist many years ago and says that if he still was one, what he sees in home-school behavior and what is coming over the home-school email would have made him never want to convert or have anything to do with these people. So in my own life and dealing with fallen away people I am very sensitive over what battles I am going to pick. Because these people catch wind on what we are discussing.[25]

As for a public use on, say, a blog, I tend to avoid being negative for two reasons. First of all there is the possibility that the real meaning of the term used (its sign-value) will not be clear to some of the readers, leading to a situation where I have to explain that "I didn't mean that!" Second, for many people, their only knowledge of the person insulted may be what I have said about them. I prefer to let people represent their own idiocy, rather that people relying on me as some kind of authority who can do the interpreting for my loyal readers. For instance, I might say of a friend, "Kevin Miller is a chowderhead" because of some less than intelligent post he has made. Someone who has never met him might come to think of him as a chowderhead pure and simple. It would be arrogant of me to put myself up as such an authority to be trusted.

Equals vs. Unequals. One must be careful not to use aggressive rhetoric against those who are not as intellectually gifted because it comes off sounding like bullying. Making fun of someone who is intelligent but said something stupid is different from mocking someone who is, in fact, less intelligent. That is snobbery. Even St. Paul, who called the Galatians stupid, also said that we need to be considerate of the weak (1 Cor. 8:7-13).

Public Debate. Irony in the context of a friendly debate where there

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[25] Flying Stars blog. http://mrsnancybrown.blogspot.com/2007/10/is-dumbledore-real.html. Saturday, October 20, 2007.

is fundamental good will on both sides, as irony in the context of an obviously loving relationship between two persons where there is no question of ill will, usually does not come off sounding mean-spirited. Some families have a culture of teasing that is very good-natured. G.K. Chesterton seems to have been genuinely friendly with George Bernard Shaw and others whom he debated, even though they opposed each other with some pretty negative rhetoric: "I am not so much disposed to quarrel as to argue; and I value more than I can easily say the generally genial relations I have kept with those who differ from me merely in argument."[26]

Sometimes negative rhetorical tropes are used in a public forum where the person referred to is not being directly addressed or even present, such as in a speech. Since, however, the forum is public, it is possible for the person eventually to hear the epithet. In our age one must be very careful about using such language, for it is easily distorted and amplified by the media.

Personalist Analysis: The Culture of Life

The previous analysis has been a standard, textbook moral analysis of invective, irony and sarcasm. Such a standard analysis already indicates significant limits on the use of negative rhetoric in pro-life activism. Looking at the question from a more personalist approach, the kind of approach advocated by the Second Vatican Council and by John Paul II in *Veritatis splendor*, we find such language is even more restricted.

The meaning of a personalist morality is articulated clearly in the 1976 *Document on the Theological Formation of Future Priests* of the Congregation for Catholic Education, in a passage that encourages a return to a Thomistic moral reasoning:

> On the contrary, [St. Thomas Aquinas] placed it within the unitary plan of systematic theology viewing it as the study of the process by which the human person, created in the likeness of God and redeemed by the grace of Christ, tends toward his full realization, according to the demands of his divine calling, in the context of the

[26] G.K. Chesterton, *The Thing* (New York NY: Sheed and Ward, n.d.), pp. 8-9.

economy of salvation historically realized in the Church.[27]

John Paul II emphasizes the subjective dimension of personalist morality in a key passage of *Veritatis splendor* §78: "In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person." As John Grabowski describes the more personalist approach:

> [T]his focus on the human person redeemed by Christ and called to communion with the Trinity requires an account of how a person can grow in moral goodness or holiness. It is not enough to offer juridical criteria for analyzing isolated acts that are unconnected from one another and the person who authors them. Rather, one must consider the role human acts play in the *moral becoming* of the person. While human finitude means that there are real limits to the freedom men and women possess, they still possess the ability to define themselves as moral beings through their freely chosen behaviors and attitudes. That is, human beings create for themselves a specific moral character through their free choice and actions.[28]

In this approach one is concerned about the human dignity and the supernatural destiny of everyone involved in a situation, about how behavior affects the growth in holiness of the persons acting, and about the potential and existing bonds of communion between persons.

Icon of the Culture of Life. Two events have had a long-lasting impact on me. The first was a tour that I made of the exhibition hall at the Steele County Free Fair in Minnesota. There were two booths at different ends of the exhibition hall. The one I ran across first was the pro-life booth. It was manned by an elderly lady who was kind, gentle, and not aggressive. On the other hand, the "pro-choice" booth was manned by a young man in a black tee-shirt with a strident slogan. He stood in front of the booth with his arms crossed across his chest and a scowl across his face. One can experience this contrast in front of abortion clinics.

The second was a pro-life march on the capitol building in St. Paul. There were nearly 10,000 people who marched from the Cathedral to the

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[27] Quoted in Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *Morality: The Catholic View* (South Bend IN: St. Augustine Press, 2003), p. 44.

[28] John Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2004), p. xi.

Capitol, listened to speeches, and sang hymns. One also noticed how peaceful the crowd was. What one noticed about the crowd was that it consisted primarily of families–men, women, and children who witnessed to life. One also noticed how peaceful the crowd was. There was no anger, no stridency. It is as if the rhetoric about the dignity of the human person were represented iconically. And this was not a calculated attempt to manipulate, but it flowed from the inner integrity of the persons involved.

On the fringe, however, a group of ACT-UP type homosexual activists were protesting the march. Their behavior was coarse, their slogans and placards were obscene. Their ugliness contrasted with the beauty of the men, women, and children who were standing up for life. The contrast between the grace-filled and the demonic could not have been greater.[29]

The goal of the pro-life movement is not only to stop abortions but to create a culture of life, to be a contrast to the culture of death in word and deed.[30] In fact, individuals and groups in the movement become beautiful icons of the culture of life. This is accomplished not only by being right about life issues but by an interior transformation into the kind of person who respects the dignity of the human person, even and especially the enemy, in word and deed–the cultivation of virtues. The more pro-life activists imitate the harsh methods of their opponents, the less contrast there is. There are three particular characteristics of the culture of life that our rhetoric should manifest–personal holiness, mercy, and friendship.

Personal Holiness. The goal of the pro-life movement is not simply victory, whether in argumentation or legislation, but to create a culture of life. A culture of life begins with personal holiness. Alasdair McIntyre distinguishes between the cultivation of virtue in pursuit of the goods of personal excellence and that of the goods of cooperative effectiveness, in other words, the difference between something that

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[29] I recently asked my twenty-two year old daughter, who was in grade school at the time, whether she remembered this particular march and what she remembered of it. She not only remembered it very clearly, but specifically remembered the obscene things being shouted by the contra-march protesters.

[30] See John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae*, especially §78ff.

increases the goodness of the acting person and something that gets something done.[31] As John Paul II says in *Veritatis Splendor*:

> Human acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them. They do not produce a change merely in the state of affairs outside of man but, to the extent that they are deliberate choices, they give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his profound spiritual traits. (VS §71)

The true aim of Christian moral action is not primarily the establishment of a specific extrinsic state of affairs, even if it is seen as "a better state of affairs for all concerned" (VS §74), but the interior transformation of the acting person and the establishment of the conditions for the movement of others towards participation in the interior transformation–the kingdom. When we say "the ends do not justify the means," we are saying more than a deontological "the rules are the rules." We are saying that personal holiness trumps the achievement of a social end. One has to risk failing to achieve a successful outcome if the means of accomplishing it diminishes one spiritually, whether it is technically sinful or not. Even at the risk of losing a debate and diminishing the chances of an immediate victory in public policy.

The question is: What kind of person does using such language make me? How does it affect my relationships with God and others? According to *Veritatis splendor*, a Christian judges the morality of an act by the Christian's relationship with the Lord:

> The Christian, thanks to God's Revelation and to faith, is aware of the "newness" which characterizes the morality of his actions: these actions are called to show either consistency or inconsistency with that dignity and vocation which have been bestowed on him by grace. In Jesus Christ and in his Spirit, the Christian is a "new creation," a child of God; by his actions he shows his likeness or unlikeness to the image of the Son who is the first-born among many brethren (cf. Rom 8:29), he lives out his fidelity or infidelity to the gift of the Spirit, and he opens or closes himself to eternal life, to the communion of vision, love and happiness with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As Saint Cyril of Alexandria writes, Christ "forms us according to his image, in such a way that the traits of his divine nature shine forth in us through sanctification and

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[31] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1988). He begins discussing the difference between excellence and effectiveness on p. 27 and uses the distinction throughout.

justice and the life which is good and in conformity with virtue... The beauty of this image shines forth in us who are in Christ, when we show ourselves to be good in our works. (VS §73)

Mercy. A pro-life activist first of all shows his interior and profound commitment to the culture of life by being a merciful person, demonstrating an obvious respect for the dignity of every human person, even those who are profoundly wrong and those who are sinners. This precludes ever scoring even a valid point at the expense of the personal dignity of an opponent, including the president of the National Organization for Women and Senator Ted Kennedy.

The use of language should not only be just, but charitable. Negative rhetoric is not the second line of defense after more charitable approaches fail, invective itself is used when it is the most charitable option available in context. This reasoning is similar to the reasoning that is at the heart of John Paul II's argument against capital punishment (*Evangelium Vitae* §56). For John Paul II, the effective exercise of justice requires mercy: "The experience of the past and of our own time demonstrates that justice alone is not enough, that it can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if that deeper power, which is love, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions."[32]

There may be situations in which it is justified to use invective, irony, or even sarcasm, but for the sake of the pro-life activist's soul and for the sake of the culture of life, he may do well to restrain himself in order to show respect for the personal human dignity of his enemies. The "newness" that John Paul II says the pro-life movement is to demonstrate in the culture of life (VS §73) is justice tempered by mercy. In showing mercy to the enemies of the culture of life, by treating them gently when justice might demand a stronger response, is to initiate them into the kingdom.

Friendship. Ever since the time of Plato, philosophers and theologians have emphasized the importance of establishing a relationship of

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[32] *Dives in Misericordia* §12. See Kevin E. Miller, "The Role of Mercy in a Culture of Life: John Paul II on Capital Punishment" in *Life and Learning VIII: Proceedings of the Eighth University Faculty for Life Conference*, ed. Joseph W. Koterski, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: Univ. Faculty for Life, 1999), pp. 405-42.

trust and friendship in persuading another of the truth. I have seen many situations in which the use of invective and sarcasm, while not necessarily being the sole cause, was an exacerbating factor in a quasi-permanent rupture between people whom otherwise agree on important fundamentals. I cannot think of a situation where I have seen invective used in an argument that led to overcoming the barrier of hostility. I have rarely seen a situation in which polemic actually achieved a change of mind on the part of an opponent in a public debate. We are not going to be as open to a person who exhibits hostility. "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1).

A recent book on rhetoric describes the closing effect invective can have during a debate:

> Within limits it is reasonable in persuasion to use connotations that advance the writer's purpose. But when emotional language is carried to the point of name calling, it provokes an unfavorable response from intelligent readers, especially when name calling is substituted for logical thinking.[33]

In rhetoric, one of the three means of persuasion is *ethos*, the character of the person.[34] According to a secular writer's handbook, "*Trustworthiness is the kind of persuasion that comes from the character or personality of the persuader.*"[35] In *The Message in the Bottle*, Walker Percy says that a bearer of news is more easily accepted if he exhibits good faith in his mien.[36] If we have demonstrated a concern for the person by good will, outside of the context of our disagreement, that person is more likely to listen to us. Percy offers a wonderful description of the type of newsbearer who is most easily received by another:

> For if a perfect stranger puts himself to some trouble to come to me and to announce

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[33] James M. McCrimmon, *Writing With a Purpose*, Seventh Edition (Dallas TX: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), p. 212.

[34] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Bk 1, Ch. 2.

[35] McCrimmon, loc. cit.

[36] Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 132-36.

a piece of news relevant to my predicament and announce it with perfect sobriety and with every outward sign of good faith, then I must say to myself, What manner of man is this that he should put himself out of his way for a perfect stranger–and I should heed him.[37]

The pro-life activist is a bearer of good new, the Gospel of Life. One hears many stories of clinic workers converting on a clinic sidewalk because of kindness of sidewalk counselors. The Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* says that the Christian's own behavior is not a little responsible for the spread of atheism (GS §20).[38]

WHAT ABOUT JESUS?

As stated earlier, Jesus himself engaged in negative rhetoric, the most notable example in Matthew 23. What allows him to get away with it and can we imitate him?

Prophetic rhetorical context. The first point to consider is the rhetori-cal contexts of Jesus's world and our own society. Jesus lived in a time and culture in which prophets, like the court jesters of medieval courts, could address political situations. In ancient Israel, what the rulers deman-ded was *evidence of divine authority*. The question of the scribes and Pharisees was not whether Jesus should say the things he did, but whether he had the authority to do and things in the name of God (Mk 11:28).

While an American with a classical liberal education understands that rhetorical context affects significantly the *ad hominem* nature of language used, very few Americans have a genuinely liberal education, and there-fore have no exposure to the rhetorical sciences. In the American culture, language is either true or a lie, gentle or vicious.

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[37] Ibid, pp. 135-36. Percy also reminds us of the importance of sobriety (p. 135) for sharing the good news with others. Another means of showing good faith is to show real knowledge of the person's predicament and to associate the news we bring with their predicament. Hence, a pro-life advocate can show that the pro-life message, the Gospel of Life, addresses the personal concerns (predicament) of a pro-abortion advocate, he may be able to persuade him to the side of life.

[38] In a literary example, one scholar has made the point that in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam's intemperate use of the epithet "sneak" for Gullum may have undercut what little goodness Gollum still had that might have been the basis for his ultimate cooperation in Frodo's quest.

Language that seems negative is taken as personal. For example, it is presumed when politicians resort to negative campaigning, that the opposing side will take offense, be angry, or hold a grudge. The emphasis on campaign reporting, for instance, is often on how the candidates *feel*.[39] Hence, the American context may not be the best context for negative rhetoric because of the presumption that the rhetoric is intended to be personal.

Purity of Heart. The second reason why Jesus was able to use negative rhetoric when others are not able to do so, is that in his use of such language he was free from a desire to harm the other person. Those affec-ted by original sin are less likely to be able to separate their desire for truth and justice from their desire to harm or destroy the enemy. The book of Jonah is instructive. Jonah's attitude toward the Ninevites was one of ill will. His hope was that the Ninevites would be punished, not that they repent and be saved. When they did repent he was disappointed. Purity of motivation in dealing with one's enemies is quite rare and demands a purity of heart that is possible only when one has advanced in the path to holiness. As C.S. Lewis states, human beings find it difficult to distinguish between the sinner and the sin. In his science fiction novel *Perelandra*, Lewis describes the experience of a man who is for the first time able to experience absolutely justified hatred because it is directed not at a human person, but a damned angel:

> Then an experience that perhaps no good man can ever have in our world came over him–a torrent of perfectly unmixed and lawful hatred. The energy of hating, never before felt without some guilt, without some dim knowledge that he was failing fully to distinguish the sinner from the sin, rose into his arms and legs tell he felt that they were pillars of burning blood. What was before him appeared no longer a creature of corrupted will. It was corruption itself to which will was attached only as an instrument. Ages ago it had been a Person: but the ruins of personality now survived in it only as weapons at the disposal of a furious self-exiled negation. It is perhaps difficult to understand why this filled Ranson not with horror, but with a kind of joy. The joy came

[39] "A visibly angry Sen. Hillary Clinton lashed out Saturday at Sen. Barack Obama over campaign literature that she said he knows is 'blatantly false,' while Obama called her outburst 'tactical.'" In "Clinton tells Obama: 'Shame on you'; Obama fires back," CNN, Feb. 23, 2008. http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/02/23/clinton.mailings/index.html (accessed June 30, 2008). Whether a seasoned politicians is *really* angry when he is *visibly* angry is not a question often asked by the average reader.

from finding at last what hatred was made for. As a boy with an axe rejoices on finding a tree, or a boy with a box of colored chalks rejoices on finding a pile of perfectly white paper, so he rejoiced in the perfect congruity between his emotions and its object.[40]

The opposition to the pro-life position is neither as absolutely evil as being the demon who possessed Weston, nor are pro-life activists sure to be of such purity of heart that they can separate their desire to convert the opposition and their desire to destroy it.

Conclusion

Invective and other negative rhetoric are common enough in both secular and religious efforts to eliminate abortion in our society. Standard Catholic moral analysis places limits on their use, especially in public, antagonistic debates. A more personalist analysis, emphasizing the effect the rhetoric has on the speaker and the existing and potential bonds of communion between the speaker and the hostile hearer even further limits the situations in which such rhetoric may be used.

In hostile situations careful argumentation, rather than dismissive or biting wit, is more fruitful and effective because it is more charitable and merciful. Negative rhetoric runs the risk of undermining any hope of communion. There is an *ad hominem* component to it when it is used as a rhetorical device, as well as a certain intellectual arrogance, especially in our culture that is ignorant of the distinction between negative rhetoric and personal ill will. The best way to demonstrate a person's error to himself or to a third party is to simply tell or show what the person did or said, with the addition of whatever moral or technical analysis is necessary, if the error of the words or actions is not obvious.

As Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, in discussing a column responding to his public request that Kansas governor Kathleen Sebelius to refrain from receiving communion, said:

In logic, this type of argument is termed *ad hominem*. It is an attempt to attack personally one's opponent in a debate, rather than make substantive arguments about the issue being debated. It is usually an indication of a weak position by the person

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[40] C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York NY: Scribner, 1972), p. 132.

making the *ad hominem* argument. What is needed is a substantive discussion of this important social and moral issue, not personal attacks![41]

The real question is this: is the pro-life movement intending to influence minds or hearts, to lead others to conversion? Or, is our goal our victory and their defeat our holiness and the inclusion of the enemy in the civilization of love? The movement's use of negative rhetoric will reflect the decision its members make on these questions.

[41] "Archbishop Addresses Questions that Earlier Column Raised," Catholic Culture Webpage, online at: http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.