

**A RESPONSE TO EMILY REIMER-BARRY’S “ANOTHER
PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT IS POSSIBLE” – POWER,
POLITCS AND THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT**

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“I have heard the President of the United States speak as a pro-life man. If he is a good pro-life man, he understands that the family is the cradle of life, and [its] unity must be defended.”¹ During a midair press conference on September 11, 2017, Pope Francis criticized the Trump administration’s decision to rescind DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), a program designed to provide undocumented immigrants who arrived in the US before the age of sixteen with (1) temporary protection from deportation, (2) eligibility for work authorization, and (3) a social security number.² Revoking the program unleashed personal and familial turmoil among immigrant communities, including among those who have families in the United States. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) also issued a statement criticizing the decision: “It causes unnecessary fear for DACA youth and their families.”³ Speaking to DACA recipients themselves, the bishops affirmed, “The Catholic Church supports you and will advocate for you.”⁴

Here Francis and the bishops are attempting to enlarge the political connotations of the “pro-life” slogan. Redeploying the slogan allows them (1) to confront any threats to the survival of human life and (2) to cultivate a holistic culture that fosters the flourishing of human life, especially of the most vulnerable. As Dr. Reimer-Berry argues, however, untangling the pro-life movement from patriarchal views of women’s bodies and agency requires a fundamental change in how gender and sexuality inform Catholic theology and magisterial teaching. Ivone Gebara argues that it is necessary to reorient the *telos* of women *away from* obedience to men and *toward* participation in

¹ “Full Text of Pope Francis’ in-Flight Press Conference from Colombia,” Catholic News Agency, September 11, 2017, 16, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-pope-francis-in-flight-press-conference-from-colombia-62782>.

² “DACA,” Immigrant Legal Resource Center, accessed June 3, 2019, <https://www.ilrc.org/daca>.

³ “USCCB President, Vice President and Committee Chairmen Denounce Administration’s Decision to End DACA and Strongly Urge Congress to Find Legislative Solution,” The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, September 5, 2017, <http://www.usccb.org/news/2017/17-157.cfm>.

⁴ “Chairmen Denounce Administration’s Decision to End DACA.”

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Jesus’s ministry of justice, mercy, and solidarity.⁵ Similarly, it is necessary to eschew other hierarchical conceptions of human identity that undermine the Church’s teaching about our fundamental dignity created in the image of the Triune God.

Dr. Aquino’s invitation for us to think about the life of social movements in relation to Catholic theology also beckons us to scrutinize efforts to expand the usage of the pro-life slogan within the political context of the movement. As Richard McCormick argues, “pro-life” and “pro-choice” are both political slogans, ones often masquerading “as if they were arguments.”⁶ These slogans signify heterogeneous political coalitions. The pro-life movement is a political coalition more so than a coherent moral position. The movement’s goal is not to offer a nuanced account of the issue of abortion. Its goal is to win. And it seeks champions who are categorically committed to that goal.

The political commitments of the pro-life movement raise doubts about its capacity to extricate itself from patriarchal structures. Rather than pursuing this work in spaces as defined and dominated by the leaders of the pro-life movement, a new movement is required, one capacious enough to address the range of issues that menace human survival and flourishing today. Catholic social thought offers essential resources for cultivating a new movement in this spirit.

The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), with its attention to identifying the leaders, issues, and tactics of movements, offers a helpful framework for studying the anatomy of the pro-life movement. The IAF defines a leader as, “someone with relationships who can deliver his or her followers.”⁷ The bishops are among the leaders of the pro-life movement, with an identifiable group of followers whom they influence. But the movement has other leaders, too, especially from among Evangelicals and political conservatives. These leaders are also committed to delivering their followers to the pro-life movement. While these leaders share the bishop’s goal of making abortion illegal, they do not necessarily share other moral positions, including positions on immigration, health care, ecology, or racism. Differences among the movement’s participants are leveled to unify their rhetoric and agenda on this single issue. Abortion politics are coalitional. And while coalitions are essential to democratic politics in religiously, culturally, and politically pluralistic societies, they do not easily lend themselves to moral nuance.

The pro-life movement’s political coalition also consists of a network of organizations that are integral to shaping its agenda. These leaders are less visible than a Jerry Falwell, Jr. or Donald Trump, but they wield outsized influence on defining the movement’s animating issues and tactics. In the IAF model, a large problem is “cut” into a winnable issue.⁸ According to IAF founder Saul Alinsky, these issues *should be*

⁵ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 87–88.

⁶ Richard A. McCormick, “Abortion: Rules for Debate,” *America*, July 22, 1978, 26.

⁷ Edward T. Chambers and Michael A. Cowan, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 51.

⁸ Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life*, Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 132.

polarizing, pinpointing specific people and institutions as opponents.⁹ In the case of the pro-life movement, the unwieldy problem of abortion has been “cut” to the lone issue of abortion’s legal status. Polarization then allows the movement to identify clear enemies, organizations such as NARAL and Planned Parenthood. But it also creates opponents among those who might share a moral concern for dignity for prenatal life, but who reject the movement’s central issue and tactics, for example, the pro-life feminists that Dr. Reimer-Berry would graft on to their movement. This political strategy requires applying the pro-life slogan as narrowly as possible, limiting its use only to actions as defined by the issue as cut.

Responding to Pope Francis’s comments in 2017, Mallory Quigley, communications director for the Susan B. Anthony List, resisted the idea of including immigrant justice in the pro-life movement, “I think it is problematic to merge all of these issues together into one.”¹⁰ With life issues truncated to a politician’s support for anti-abortion legislation, Quigley finds it easy to praise Donald Trump as a “pro-life” president: “[Trump] has absolutely governed as a president who values the sanctity of life from the moment of conception.”¹¹ The narrow focus of this single issue foregrounds his administration’s anti-abortion wins while obscuring its brutal policies directed at migrant children and families. In this view, the Trump administration is not a moment of crisis for the pro-life movement; it is a victory in the battle over the body politic.

A crucial counterargument on behalf of limiting the scope of pro-life issues is that it is necessary for maintaining a moral distinction between direct and indirect killing. Responding to Pope Francis, Stephen P. White of the Ethics and Public Policy Center argues for disambiguating immigration from abortion, euthanasia, and other issues that involve direct killing. He explains, “What distinguishes ‘life issues’ from other important moral issues is that they involve direct killing of a human being... When pro-life becomes a synonym for ‘just,’ we tend to lose that distinction.”¹² But Dr. White’s reasoning does not account for the harm to human survival and flourishing caused by policies that seek to leverage human lives for political outcomes. The Trump administration uses family separation as a technique to deter border crossings. Psychologist Nim Tottenham describes how parents are the ultimate biological regulators of their children, essential to survival and healthy development. As Tottenham argues, “[We] can think about this parent-child relationship as a single organism.”¹³ Removing young children from regulatory systems vital for their survival is an attack on their lives and flourishing. Limiting issues of life to those that involve

⁹ Saul David Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 133.

¹⁰ Christopher White, “Francis Says ‘pro-Life’ Means Supporting Immigrants, Others Disagree,” *Crux*, September 12, 2017, <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/09/12/francis-says-pro-life-means-supporting-immigrants-others-disagree/>.

¹¹ White, “Francis Says ‘pro-Life’ Means Supporting Immigrants, Others Disagree.”

¹² White, “Francis Says ‘pro-Life’ Means Supporting Immigrants, Others Disagree.”

¹³ Jim Coan, “Children at the Border,” *Circle of Willis*, accessed June 5, 2019, <http://circleofwillispodcast.com/children-at-the-border>.

direct killing fails to provide an adequate framework for cultivating the culture of life necessary to defend human dignity in a clear and consistent manner.

For these reasons, I struggle with affirming the claim that “another pro-life movement is possible,” if only we untangle this one from patriarchy. While there are diverse and nuanced views on abortion among the movement’s grassroots participants, the leaders, issues, and tactics of today’s movement are not ripe for such transformation. A movement that defends the dignity of prenatal life will need to be founded on a different basis, with new leaders, redefined issues, and fresh strategies. It will need to reimagine its whole approach to “opponents” and “wins.” A movement founded in the spirit of the consistent ethic of life will likely have to distance itself more consciously from the leaders, strategies, and yes, the slogan, of the current pro-life movement.

This new movement, as Dr. Reimer-Berry argues, will require listening to the voices of the most vulnerable members of our society. Attention to these voices necessitates that the movement be cultivated on a local, grassroots level. Julie Hanlon Rubio argues for employing local strategies that reduce the abortion rate. Dr. Rubio “recuts” the problem of abortion, emphasizing the reduction of abortion rates rather than fixating on abortion’s illegality. Rubio calls this, “a shift in focus from cooperation with evil...to cooperation with good.”¹⁴ This focus sees pro-dignity work as building up structures of support for women and families to enable cooperation with the good. Such emphasis on the grassroots resonates with Kevin Ahern’s theology of lay ecclesial movements as structures of grace. These movements invite Christians to appreciate the social dimensions of the Gospel and to foster the habits necessary for responding to God’s grace at work in the world. “In such communities,” he writes, “people encounter and learn to imitate love, mutuality, service, and justice.”¹⁵

While local, grassroots organization is crucial, a new movement should not cede the legislative field to either the current pro-life or pro-choice movements. It must develop a holistic legislative agenda committed to the dignity of all life, especially those most vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and death. A creative approach must build a new coalition around all legislation that promotes cooperation with the good, such as paid family leave. This new movement ought to reject dichotomous thinking and callow anthropology that sees the world simply in terms of allies and enemies, wins and losses. It must believe in and imagine Jesus’s promise in John 10:10, that he “came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

¹⁴ Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Hope for Common Ground: Mediating the Personal and the Political in a Divided Church*, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 179.

¹⁵ Kevin Ahern, *Structures of Grace: Catholic Organizations Serving the Global Common Good* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 134.