

Culture of Life, Culture of Death

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KUFM Radio Commentary

April 6, 2005

The two major news stories of the last few days—the deaths of Terri Schiavo and of Pope John Paul II—can be connected by a single phrase: the culture of life. This phrase—along with its opposite, the culture of death—was coined by the Pope in a document called *The Gospel of Life*. In the Schiavo case, the phrase was employed most notably by certain political leaders who believed that the brain-damaged woman ought to be sustained over her objections as related by her husband. Insofar as this concept is now coming to define a moral and political agenda in this country, it is worth reflecting on what it actually might mean for us if we were to take it seriously.

The phrase, culture of life, just happens to be convenient for American politicians because the words “culture” and “life” appeal directly to those who wish to heighten the so-called culture wars that seem most evident around issues of abortion and sexual practices. President Bush used the phrase in his response to the Schiavo case, and in no less an occasion than his recent State of the Union address. He suggested that the essence of civilization is the duty that the strong have to protect the weak. Is this duty only to embryos and people in persistent vegetative states?

The Pope developed the concept of the culture of life primarily to illuminate Catholic teachings on abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty. But he does so by looking at the various ways in which a culture itself does not support life. He sees opposition to life, for example, in that which mutilates individuals and assaults their dignity, including “subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons.” All these things, he concludes, poison human society.

He defines a culture of death as one in which the only goal is the pursuit of one’s own material well-being, with quality of life interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the neglect of the more profound dimensions of existence. The Pope in turn calls for governments and various agencies to create economic, public health, and cultural conditions that ensure greater opportunities and a fairer distribution of wealth.

This probably isn’t what some politicians have in mind. In this view, the culture of life isn’t merely about abortion and euthanasia. As important as those issues are, they are symptoms of broader conditions that we seem not quite willing to tackle as fully as we might.

Without attempting to interpret the Pope’s view on this matter, I might nevertheless suggest that a culture of life would seem to require the following sorts of steps.

We would do well, for example, to eliminate the increasingly well-documented cases of arbitrary imprisonment and torture of those captured in the war on terrorism. We might take significant steps to end the genocide in Sudan. We might enact legislation to provide health care of all people, saving the more than 18,000 lives lost each year because of lack of health insurance. We might spare the proposed \$15 billion dollar cuts in Medicaid that support the poor and elderly, some of whom are on feeding tubes. We might actually strengthen environmental protections to prevent life-threatening diseases and harm to the very ecosystems that support life and health. We might elevate our position from last in foreign aid to help other countries overcome poverty. We might develop taxation policies that lessen rather than heighten the growing division between the rich and poor. We might find ways to measure quality of life in terms other than material consumption. We might eliminate the death penalty. We might refuse economic arrangements that value profit and efficiency over fostering family life.

To be sure, as much as we might promote life, it is not an absolute value. Even the Pope recognized that war and killing in self-defense are sometimes justified, because one is not directly killing innocents, and other values are at stake. Other values sometimes require other choices, not that all such choices are ethically valid. For some people the alternative value is self-defense, for others, reproductive responsibility, and for others, tax cuts.

But regardless of where one stands on the teachings of Pope John Paul II, one way to honor his ideas would be to avoid using them merely for political gain, for demonizing other people, or for conveniently ignoring what a more comprehensive respect for life might entail—personally and politically. If we want to take life seriously, there is more to it than that.

This is Mark Hanson of The Center for Ethics at The University of Montana.