

A Torn Fabric in the Public Square: Statement of Helen Alvare on Election of Obama

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The candidacy of President-elect Obama rested upon one of the most dangerous ideas threatening a culture of life within the United States. It is an idea the Catholic Church, via particularly its bishops and its social justice ministries, has been laboring to contradict for a very long time.

It is the idea that it is impossible and unnecessary to hold and pursue integrally and simultaneously, a social justice agenda which promotes justice for unborn human beings and born human beings. Many, many Americans, with Catholics possibly leading the way, have held for a long time that the principles animating justice for born persons — the equality and dignity of persons based upon their equal humanity, alongside the innate fragility of human persons in the world, with their need for food, clothing, shelter, health care, justice and religious freedom — easily apply to all human beings, no matter their stage of development. Out of these ideas, Catholics and many others have expressed real skepticism for politicians or anyone for that matter, who professes a “heart” for some of the dispossessed, but not all. Real skepticism toward those who can’t see in the discarded bodies of the unborn anything to call upon our humanity, similar to the call that comes from the wasted bodies of the poor, the war-dead, and the seriously ill, or the call that comes from the sight of lives wasting away for want of racial justice, education, family stability, and economic opportunity.

About the election and the agenda of Barack Obama, we have witnessed instead, especially in the media, the very opposite of skepticism. There is rather an exulting in his youth, in his breaking of racial barriers, his rhetoric, and his repetition of a truly American mantra, CHANGE! Look where we might in the leading media outlets, and in the results of exit polling, there is almost no one wondering what to make of Candidate Obama’s shredding of an authentic consistent ethic of life.

Almost no one wondering aloud how a man who deliberately turned his back on the killing of newborns in a Chicago hospital, and who campaigned on the promise to make partial-birth abortion and all other abortion restraints illegal, can understand the dignity of other, even desperately vulnerable, persons. Instead, he is hailed as the answer to the needs of the economically downtrodden.

This is not to deny that some social problems can be mitigated (though not likely cured) with the infusions of federal cash President-elect Obama has promised. It is rather to point out that a “social justice” agenda founded on the principle that some human beings are more worthy than others is built on a foundation of sand. Likely voters will get the benefits they demand, for sure. But those on the margins — of life and of death — like the “born-alive” Chicago babies, will always need to prove more than their membership in the human race, before their cries will be heard. They will have to be wanted by



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someone with the authority to preserve their lives, and they will likely also have to demonstrate the potential for a “quality of life,” that satisfies the predilections of those same someones in authority. It’s a scary and fundamentally unjust gauntlet they will have to run. It has no fixed principles for determining which “humans” merit social concern and which do not.

During the coming months and years, Catholics and others will simply have to work harder and smarter to reconnect the torn fabric of an agenda that is both just and inclusive of all members of society. We have significant experience with this message. Only now, and thanks to the candidacy of Barack Obama, it’s a tougher audience out there.

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