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BEING CATHOLIC IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

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The nature of our faith often places us at odds with established order, and the specificity of our values may cause us to run afoul of secular sensibilities. What follows is a collection of writings by National Catholic Bioethics Center president, Dr. Joseph Meaney, exploring our place in the public square, the proper way to respond to government driven injustice, and some specific instances in which the current administration has infringed or threatened to infringe upon the conscience and religious rights not just of faithful Catholics but of members of many other religions as well. Some parts of these essays have been edited to fit in the space allowed. Each appears in its entirety on the NCBC website.

The Ethics of Protesting

There are ethical rules for protesting, just as there are for everything else that one does. Resorting to violence and vandalism are two of the most unethical actions associated with modern protests. I have participated in many marches, life chains, and other public denunciations of abortion over the years. Peaceful protesting is a valid and even meritorious way to make one's concerns and beliefs known to the wider public in a free society. In fact, we have an ethical duty to not simply allow injustices to continue.

When we face deeply entrenched and gravely unjust laws, civil disobedience in the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. can be ethically acceptable. To nonviolently break a law as a form of protest of unjust laws and accept the arrest and punishment that follow can be a form of heroic witness. It signals to authorities that this situation is a crisis and will not simply go away if ignored. Pro-lifers in huge numbers peacefully used their bodies to block the entrances to abortion centers and were arrested and jailed in the rescue movement in the United States for many years, showing their deep commitment to ending the killing of abortion.

Sadly, what we have seen from extremely liberal groups in the United States in recent years is an alarming tendency to lash out violently. Black Lives Matter protests and similar protests/counter protests degenerated at times into the smashing and even stealing of property and attacks on people. Some, unhappy with the *Dobbs* US Supreme Court decision reversing *Roe v. Wade's* declaration that abortion was a constitutional right, vandalized Catholic churches

and pro-life centers. Conservatives have at times fallen under the bad influence of this culture of violent protest, as happened on January 6, 2021, at the US Capitol building. It is of fundamental importance to the functioning of our institutions and civil society that political disagreements and protests happen peacefully and in ways that respect the rights of others.

Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes commonly use the police power of the state to unjustly prohibit political demonstrations and civil protests. The use of violence or tyrannical actions like making it illegal to march or rally peacefully were hallmarks of dictatorships on both ends of the political spectrum. When it is not possible to protest openly, there is a danger that anger and frustration can build up until they explode as mob violence or even insurrection.

Catholics know that one must use good means to a good end for our actions to be moral. Just because one is trying to end an injustice does not make it ethical to use unjust means to achieve that goal. Peaceful protests and civil disobedience are some of the tools we can use to move towards a better world. Destroying property or attacking people verbally or physically are not the Christian way to effect change in our societies. The use of violence tends to provoke retaliation in kind as well as escalation that can spiral out of control.

This all relates back strongly to abortion as Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta commented prophetically, "Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching its people to love, but to use any violence to get what they want. This is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion." It is not surprising that many of those who passionately support abortion on demand react with violence to the banning or restricting of killing preborn babies. After all, to justify killing the most innocent humans of all at the request of their own mothers and fathers makes it very easy to accept other forms of violence. Mother Teresa summed it up succinctly when she said, "If abortion is not wrong, nothing is wrong."

Respect and even love for those who passionately disagree with us is the Christian and ethical path to follow. Allowing the rule of law to be violently undermined, however, is not "turning the other cheek" but rather sliding from civilization to chaos and barbarism. It only leads to worse problems, because order will eventually be restored but usually in a way that takes away fundamental freedoms. Violent protests are the way to anarchy or dictatorship. Those who embrace "Rules for Radicals" rather than our Judeo-Christian ethical tradition of never using evil to achieve what is right are a tremendous threat to the common good. We must firmly and steadfastly defend society against violent radicals. Almost a half century of peaceful protests and political engagement by pro-lifers yielded results. These results, as well as the rights of religious freedom that we are promised by the Constitution, must be defended against not only the fury of angry mobs and destroyers of peace and a just social order but also the growing overreach of our own government.