

A Pro-life Professor of Nursing at a Catholic Jesuit Institution of Higher Learning

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THIS PAST SEMESTER I attended an all-university presentation by a Catholic moral theologian on the topic of the Christian response to end-of-life care and, in particular, the Terri Schiavo case. The thrust of the presentation was that both the pro-life and the pro-assisted suicide groups do not offer a genuine Christian response when advocating their respective positions. The presenter offered the passion and death of Christ as the paradigm to follow and gave the example of the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin's response to the sexual abuse accusations made against him and his struggle with terminal pancreatic cancer. She essentially said the Christian response should be one of prayer and reconciliation, not confrontation and litigation.

At the end of her presentation, I went to the microphone and stated that, as a Christian nurse, if I were taking care of a patient like Terri Schiavo, I would pray for my patient and family and I would try to help them to reconcile, but that, as a Christian nurse, I could not refuse to provide food and water to a patient who was not dying. After the presentation there was a reception in the lobby of the auditorium. As I was standing there, everybody seemed to ignore me. I felt isolated and wondered "What did I say?" "Was I that off base in my response?" My overall feeling was one of isolation and loneliness—feelings that I have had for many years at Marquette being identified as a pro-life professor.

I have been a professor at Marquette University for 26 years. I am a tenured full professor, and I have had the experience of being labeled "pro-life" throughout my teaching career—as a vulnerable untenured assistant professor, a tenured associate professor seeking a higher rank,

and now as a full professor.

In my presentation I will describe my experiences as a pro-life professor with students, faculty, and administration. I will end by offering positive approaches to the felt loneliness, alienation, and anger that can be experienced as a pro-life professor at a Catholic Jesuit University.

PRO-LIFE RESPONSE WITH STUDENTS

I preface my experiences with nursing students by stating that the nursing profession is often where life issues are played out in reality. Professional nurses, students, and faculty are confronted with issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia at the hospital bed side, in the outpatient clinic, at the nursing home, and in the community. I can relate many stories of how my students—both graduate and undergraduate—have been confronted with life issues in course content, in clinical placements, and in clinical practice. One vivid example occurred when one of my undergraduate nursing students accidentally hydrated an unconscious terminal cancer patient who was deliberately being dehydrated to hasten his death. Within thirty minutes of being hydrated, the patient woke up and was sitting at the bed side and talking coherently with my student.

I have been both open and subtle (with my pro-life views) in presentations of life issues in classroom teaching throughout my career. I have taught a senior-level trends and issues class in which we covered major ethical issues, including abortion and euthanasia. Since those topics were part of the content of the course, I had the opportunity of presenting those issues in what I thought was a fair manner, using the code of nursing ethics as the base. However, I don't think my students thought that I was fair. I probably was one of the first professors to challenge their thinking about these issues in a context other than one of moral pluralism, relativism, and patient autonomy. I remember one class in which I simply read from an abortion website that described the types of third-trimester babies the abortionist was willing to destroy in the womb and then explained how he terminated unborn babies' lives by injecting potassium chloride into their hearts. One student was disturbed because I called the physician an "abortionist." I thought: if abortions were such a good medical procedure, why would that name "abortionist" be an insult? I was removed from teaching that course after two semesters.

One of the courses that I teach most often is graduate research. The content of the course is research methods, research design, and statistics. There is, however, a unit on research ethics. As such, I have the opportunity of discussing the Nuremberg Code, ethical violations that were carried out in Nazi Germany by health professionals, and I give examples of how nurses carried out the euthanasia injections. I try to subtly point out that the same reasons for ethical violations in Nazi Germany such as “life unworthy of life” or “I was just following orders” or “the end justifies the means” are being used today in our health-care system and in research. The response I usually receive from the students in this course is one of silence.

Every semester I simulate the research process in my graduate research course by partially replicating a simple research project that was published in the scientific literature. I use this as a practical teaching pedagogy. Last year we replicated a study from the University of Washington on the willingness of advanced practice nurses to participate in abortion services. The results were presented at last year’s University Faculty for Life (UFL) conference. These simple research projects enable me to discuss life issues from a research design and methods standpoint, but they also open the eyes of my students to broader ethical issues.

I should point out that according to my polling approximately 50% of my students are pro-choice, and some of them are very reactive and hostile to the pro-life stance. Every so often, however, students will write notes or come up to me to say how much they appreciated my support for a pro-life ethic. I would categorize my approach to students as one of respect, gentle dialogue, careful not to impose my views, but at the same time not afraid to bring up issues and offer my point of view when asked. Leading students to logical conclusions and consistency in thought about violations of vulnerable life is important.

PRO-LIFE RESPONSES WITH FACULTY, AND ADMINISTRATION

My visibility as a pro-life professor came to be well known across campus when a group of faculty formed a UFL chapter at Marquette University in 1994. I was elected president of this unofficial group. We received permission to form the group from the Academic Vice President based on the notion that faculty have a right to gather and discuss issues in a

scholarly manner. Each year our chapter hosts nationally known, academic pro-life speakers and provides less formal lunch hour discussions on pro-life topics. To increase academic credibility we co-sponsor speakers with academic departments or colleges.

Every two or three years we send out an invitation to all faculty members to join our UFL chapter. I know the invitation offends some faculty and I suspect some administrators. Of approximately 700 professors at Marquette, we are able to generate a membership list of about fifty faculty members, a small but vital group.

I believe that I have been punished in the past for my pro-life views by some administrators. A former Dean removed me from courses I taught and from my administrative responsibilities. She gave me little or no pay raises during her tenure as Dean. She subsequently placed me in an acute hospital nursing setting and had me teach undergraduate physiology and medical surgical nursing—courses that I had never taught before. I would add that there was and still exists an underpinning of pro-choice feminism within the nursing profession and among faculty at the College of Nursing.

At the University level, life issues are presented in a context of being equal to other social justice issues, sometimes downplayed or simply ignored. They are often supplanted by the issues of diversity, racism, gender equity, and globalization. Year after year we choose Mission week speakers and give honors to individuals that are strong on social justice issues but, at the same time, support pro-choice on abortion and other life issues.

SOLUTIONS

My approach to existing as a pro-life professor in a not always welcoming environment is to have a strong faith life. Daily prayer, Mass, and frequent use of the sacraments are central to my life, and (I would add) very accessible on our campus. As a Christian, I am called not to only be pro-life but also to pray for, dialogue, befriend, and love those who are not pro-life. A conscious decision to love and work with pro-choice faculty is at heart of the Christian response as is having a positive attitude, being active on committees, working towards changing the curricula, hiring faculty that are pro-life, and fostering dialogue.

One of the most important ways of coping with being a pro-life professor in a not always pro-life academic environment, and not feeling alone and marginalized, is being with other pro-life faculty. Having a UFL chapter at Marquette has made a big difference. Bringing together pro-life faculty from across campus, although a small group, makes a difference in knowing you have someone with whom to talk over issues and to seek advice and to dialogue. In like manner, the chapter has served as a bridge to the pro-life student group at Marquette, allowing faculty to be mentors with them, to help plan pro-life programs, and to co-sponsor events.

Although being a pro-life professor often brings times of loneliness and ridicule, the pro-life view is also one of stimulation, opportunity, and privilege. Several years ago, the US Conference of Jesuits issued a statement on abortion titled “Standing for the Unborn.” I was heartened by the statement and by the approach it advocated—to propose and not impose the pro-life view on a pluralistic society—is one to which I hold and one that fits with the philosophy of UFL. In conclusion, I would agree with the moral theologian mentioned in the beginning of my presentation that my response as a Catholic Christian faculty should be one of prayer, reconciliation, and dialogue, but I would add that my response should include seeking truth and justice.