



Father Frank Pavone is National Director of Priests for Life. In 1999, the Daily Catholic named Fr. Pavone among the Top 100 Catholics of the Century. He serves on Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family Institute. He is the recipient, for the year 2001, of the Proudly Pro-life Award of the National Right to Life Committee. In 2002, in recognition of his pro-life work, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the Franciscan University of Steubenville. In 2003, Fr. Pavone was elected to be the President of the National Pro-life Religious Council, a coalition of groups from many different denominations working to end abortion.

How To Preach About Abortion

by Fr. Frank Pavone, National Director, Priests for Life

"Father, I came into this Church this morning being totally pro-abortion, and the homily changed my views completely."

"Father, I had an abortion, and sometimes it hurts to hear about it, but please keep up the preaching! I gladly endure whatever pain I have, because I know the homilies will keep some other woman from ever going through what I have gone through from the abortion itself."

"Hi! I'd like to begin this letter by thanking you for last week's homily. I was deeply moved and so was my younger brother. I'm 17 and he's 12. We did not fully understand what goes on in abortion till your homily. We both would like to get on the mailing lists of pro-life organizations."

These are three of the thousands of reactions I have received after preaching about abortion over the last several years. The reactions cited above are characteristic of the content and tone of the others as well.

How do we preach on abortion? What are we trying to accomplish? How do we awaken our people to this immense evil? How do we handle reactions of anger and disagreement?

Where are our people on abortion?

A good place to start answering these questions is to examine the attitudes of the American people on abortion. Sometimes we hear that "Most Americans are pro-choice." The statement is meaningless until the term "pro-choice" is

defined. A more helpful way to understand what most people think is to ask them the specific circumstances in which they think abortion should be legal.

That is precisely what was done in a survey conducted by the Wirthlin Group in June of 1999. About 11% said they thought abortion should be prohibited in all circumstances, and about the same number said it should be legal at any time during pregnancy, and for any reason. There were four other positions. Most of the remaining people said abortion should be legal only in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother's life, with a somewhat smaller number saying it should only be legal to save the mother's life. The other two positions were that it should be legal for any reason but not after the first three months of pregnancy, and that it should be legal for any reason but not after the first six months of pregnancy.

By the admission of the Alan Guttmacher Institute, the abortions in cases of rape or incest account for about 1% of the total abortions. By the testimony of many medical experts, furthermore, abortion is *never* necessary to save a mother's life.

Conclusion? Most Americans oppose 99% of the abortions taking place, while the current policy on abortion (available through all nine months) is supported by about 11% of the public.

We likewise see the curious phenomenon that among the majority of Americans who would oppose most abortions but permit some, there is a growing number of those who are willing to admit that the abortions they would consider justified are the killing of human beings. In a 1989 *Los Angeles Times* poll, in fact, 57% called abortion "murder," including one-fourth of those who also said they "generally favored abortion." In 1998, a CBS/*NY Times* poll indicated that some 50% of the respondents were willing to call abortion "murder," yet one-third of those people said it is sometimes the best course of action for the woman to take.

What is going on here? Why are there so many abortions when most people oppose them and even admit what they are?

First of all, people have gotten the message from the pro-life movement that abortion kills a baby. They have also gotten the message from the abortion-rights side that sometimes abortion benefits women, who should not be deprived of the benefit. Having accepted both messages, the majority of Americans belong to the "conflicted middle." Where this group ultimately goes is where America will ultimately go on abortion.

The other phenomenon at work is denial fueled by pain. There are more each day who are directly involved in an abortion decision, and are therefore at least initially not eager to get involved in an effort to either expose what it is or stop it.

There is an even larger number, however, whose pain over abortion is not because of direct personal involvement, but because of a dilemma that was best described by one who said, "*When people know enough to realize that to learn a little more will involve some risk, it is amazing to see how little they want to learn.*" People know abortion is happening, but also realize that if they look at it too directly, they will not be able to live at peace with themselves unless they start to do something to stop it. At the same time, they know that if they try to stop it, there will be a price to pay. They may lose friends or face other kinds of opposition. They don't want to make the sacrifice necessary to confront injustice. What, then, is their solution to this dilemma? *Ignore the problem altogether.* Denial protects them from the pain of the situation. This is why some people become angry when the topic of abortion is raised. They were succeeding in ignoring it and someone brought it to the surface.

What Do We Need to Convince People of?

Given the attitudes people have on abortion, and the dominant images they have about the pro-life effort, we can begin to trace several themes we need to communicate as we preach on this topic.

People need to know that we are on their side. A discussion of abortion, whether in private or public, should acknowledge the pain that most of us feel about it, whether we describe ourselves as pro-life or not. The psychological attitude to take and to convey is, "You are not my enemy. We are in this painful situation together, and need to help each other out of it." The individual who may react angrily to a pro-life homily is best approached with a frame of mind similar to which we care for those afflicted by personal disasters. We are dealing with good people who have pain, not with enemies.

People need to know that to be pro-life is to be pro-woman. The difference between "pro-life" and "pro-choice" is *not* that pro-lifers love the baby and pro-choicers love the woman. The difference is that the "pro-choice" message says you can separate the two and the pro-life message says you cannot. Pro-lifers are criticized for being "fetus-lovers" who are insensitive to women. But one cannot, and pro-lifers do not, love the child without loving the mother. Abortion defenders claim they are loving women, even as they admit they are

killing their children. But one cannot love the woman without loving the child. Nor can one harm the child without harming the mother.

The message must be clear that to be pro-life means to be pro-woman, and that the challenge the pro-life movement gives to society is, "Why can't we love them both?" One reason why many who think abortion is wrong will not actively oppose it is that they think they have to make a choice between defending the rights of the baby or those of the mother, or that they have to consider the baby as more important than the mother. But the authentic pro-life message is a message of equality. It is a challenge to *expand* the circle of our love, welcome, and protection. This insight helps resolve the conflict of the "conflicted middle" who see the evil of abortion but think it benefits women.

People need to know that to oppose abortion does not mean to oppose those who have them. An aspect of the pro-woman theme of our pro-life preaching is the healing and forgiveness the Church and the pro-life movement offer to those who have been involved in abortion. In most of my homilies, I mention the real case of a woman who had 24 abortions, and proclaim that even for her, the doors of the Church are open!

The Church has the perfect spiritual and psychological balance necessary for those who have been involved in an abortion. The last thing such a person needs to hear is, "What you did is no big deal." The nature of post-abortion grief is that the individual involved in the abortion has begun to realize precisely what a big deal it was! Now this person needs someone to tell her that she should not feel silly for feeling sad, that there is indeed reason for the grief in her heart, and that what her heart is telling her is true: her child was killed. A great disservice was done both to her and her child when someone convinced her that the abortion would be "no big deal." Accepting that line was a major act of denial. Healing now begins when she breaks out of denial and calls the evil what it is. The clear preaching of the Church about abortion helps her to do this.

At the same time, the other line she does not need to hear is, "You are rejected; there is no hope." As she realizes the evil that has occurred, she will be tempted to say this to herself. The Church, however, contradicts that despair with the clear message of forgiveness, echoed recently by the Holy Father in *Evangelium Vitae* #99. The Church accompanies all who have been involved in abortion, whether the mother, father, grandparents, or even the abortion provider, to the forgiveness and healing Christ offers.

Those in the pain of abortion are not helped by silence. Some refrain from preaching about abortion out of the sincere motive of not hurting women who have had abortions. Yet that silence does not interpret itself. The person grieving over abortion can infer from our silence that we do not know her pain, or that we do not care, or that there is no hope. None of this is true. By our clear and compassionate homilies we can break through the silence which led her to this disastrous choice in the first place.

People need to know that abortion is their business. The key challenge in presenting our people with the abortion issue is not so much convincing them that it is wrong, but rather convincing them that it is *any of their business*. Abortion defenders will say, "If you are against abortion, fine...don't have one. But leave the rest of us alone to exercise our own beliefs and make our own choices." Many people who oppose abortion will therefore lament it, but will feel out of place trying to *stop* it. They see it as wrong, but as a *private* wrong, with which it is *none of their business* to interfere.

One of the key tasks necessary here is to *de-isolate* the issue. People understand that we have to intervene to help the poor, the AIDS victim, the drug addict, the victim of crime and war. Even if we do not know their names, or have never seen the faces of these victims, we know it is our business to help them. We do not hear people say, "I would never abuse my child, but if the other person wants to do so, that's her choice." The reason people do not say that is that they realize that *some choices have victims*. When somebody's choice destroys or threatens somebody else's life, that's everyone's business. It is, after all, the business of love, which intervenes to save our brothers and sisters in need. There, precisely, is the reason it is both our business and our privilege to work to stop abortions.

People need to know that there is something they can do to stop abortion. All of the above is not yet enough. Many oppose abortion but do not think anything can be done. If we awaken people to the evil but do not guide their response, they will either end up depressed or perhaps act irresponsibly. The problem is not that there is nothing that can be done, but that there are not enough people doing the perfectly legal, peaceful and effective activities they can do to end abortion. Presenting such options in the homily, and following up on them through well-organized parish respect life programs, will overcome another obstacle to the involvement of many in this cause: they think of the pro-life movement as an extreme and fanatical movement characterized by activities they want nothing to do with.

How do we convey all this in 10 or 15 minutes? -- Three Elements for a Pro-Life Homily

A very convincing homily can be given in ten minutes conveying the points mentioned above and incorporating the strategic elements I have explained. (Priests for Life offers specific homily training in the form of written materials, audio and video tapes, and seminars, and has been quite well received in dioceses all over the country.)

The basic homily structure I have used around the nation consists, in conjunction with the readings, of three major points in the following order:

1. *There are alternatives to abortion.* Those who procure abortions do not do so because of "freedom of choice," but rather because they feel they have no freedom and no choice. Many are "pro-choice" not because they like abortion but because they ask, "How can the woman live without it?" The good news is that the Church and pro-life movement are providing better choices than abortion, and that a wide range of help is available for anyone who needs it. Thousands of helping centers provide financial assistance, medical services, legal advice, counseling, a place to live, jobs, education, and assistance to keep the child or to place the child for adoption. People at Mass can be asked to take a handout which has phone numbers of abortion-alternatives which they can pass on to those who might need them. It is amazing to see how many people who know that the Church opposes abortion are unaware of the Church's willingness to provide alternatives. This makes them feel good about being a Catholic and about helping the pro-life movement. By mentioning the point about alternatives first, a major objection is tackled before it arises: "What are you who oppose abortion going to do to help the woman who needs it?"
2. Stress that the Church offers forgiveness and healing after abortion. This is critical, because so many feel they cannot be forgiven. If all the abortions ended tomorrow, the mission of healing will have only begun. The Gospel of Life is a Gospel of Mercy. The hope of mercy, furthermore, prevents additional abortions, since there are significant psychological dynamics whereby despair leads to repeat abortions. (Some 46% of abortions in America are repeat abortions.) Furthermore,

many hesitate to become active in the pro-life movement because they think that to oppose abortion means to oppose those who have had them, and they do not want to compromise their relationship with their sister, cousin, or friend. If they see that being pro-life means embracing these women with forgiveness, they may be more inclined to join the effort. There is a National Office for Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing at 1-800-5-WE-CARE.

3. Help people to see through the slogans which make tolerance of abortion seem so reasonable. The term "Pro-choice," for example, fails to point to what is chosen, and would never be applied to child abuse or violent crime. Some choices have victims, including the choice of abortion. "Safe and legal abortion" is a slogan which misleads people into thinking that if it is legal, it must be safe, and to keep it safe we need to keep it legal. Yet the abortion industry is the most unregulated surgical industry in the nation, and regularly destroys the health and lives of the women who procure it in legal facilities. Also focus on some basic facts that most people do not know: there is an abortion every 20 seconds in America; it is legal and happens through all nine months of pregnancy; less than 1% occur because of rape or incest.