

Should We Show Pictures of Aborted Babies?

Joe Bissonnette

St. Thomas Aquinas remains the model of fairness, because, before stating his own arguments for a position, he would give full voice to the strongest objections to it. This was fitting, because good and serious people often hold differing opinions. Today, many good and serious pro-lifers hold different opinions on whether it is appropriate to show pictures of aborted babies to the general public.

Below are arguments against showing aborted-baby pictures, then arguments in favor of showing aborted-baby pictures and replies to the arguments against.

OBJECTIONS:

Postmodern Irony:

Have we been too politicized, and thus become anti-political? Are we as a culture too desensitized, too jaded, too ironic to be shown pictures of aborted babies? The mainstream seems to be detached from issues and ideas on both the Right and the Left.

I'm a teacher at a suburban college, and my most anachronistically earnest students are vegetarians. They are as if transported from another time. They tend to be quiet and don't mingle freely with fellow students. They are strangers in a strange land.

Each semester a couple of these students choose to do an ethics presentation on animal rights and invariably they show pictures of factory farms, abattoirs, animals maimed and disfigured by tests, tortured animals. All of the class condemn the excesses depicted in the pictures, but over the past few years these pictures have lost some of their shock value, and lately there's been a bit of a blowback against the solemn moralizing of animal-rights types. Moralizers, whether traditional or politically correct, are no longer granted the deference they once were.

Of course this change hasn't taken place just in the classroom. The two most influential shows for teens over the past decade have been devoid of romance, sex, violence, or special effects. They are minimalist cartoon

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depictions of the ironic and iconoclastic. In *The Simpsons*, clear-eyed alertness—not to mention all the best lines—belongs to a pre-pubescent child, the irreverent and mischievous Bart. In *Family Guy*, astute and cutting commentary comes from . . . a baby. Diaper-clad Stewie has world-weary eyes and an aloofly bored middle-aged British aristocratic narrative. He sounds like the effete Jeremy Irons, martini in one hand and cigarette holder limp-wristedly in the other. This use of children as ironizing protagonists implies that irony is the state of nature. It is shockingly, refreshingly iconoclastic, poking fun at sacred cows on both the left and the right.

Bart and Stewie are not bomb-throwing revolutionaries: That's for the "true believer," and for them, both of those words inside the quote marks are too funny to be possible. Bart and Stewie fans have no sense of the holy, as in that which is separate, apart, worthy of respect and reverence. They're not vicious but they are shameless, or almost.

For example, with their biology classes many have seen the traveling exhibit of plastinated human bodies. Skin and fat are stripped away; muscles, tendons, and organs are colorized; bodies are positioned in action-figure poses; and thousands of people a week take in the show and then go on with their daily lives. But these are the bodies of human beings: the mortal remains of persons. These are not plastic images, but actual human bodies plastinated. When I tell this to people, I get no response. They are unmoved. Some of them become a bit uncomfortable when told that many of the bodies come from the People's Republic of China with bullet holes in the backs of their heads.

As a pro-lifer, I find this gives me pause over the use of aborted-baby pictures. Does the initial shock—resonating from the thin outline of natural-law justice which remains on the hearts of the young—give way to callous indifference or even contempt? Will they end up dismissing the pictures or even mocking them?

Civilization and Restraint:

One of the fundamental preconditions for civilization is restraint. We must restrain our base passions if we are to live together, and we cultivate the habit of restraint by restraining our speech and expressions. Our speech and visual expressions in the arts form our imaginations. Speech and images once put forth, even when condemned, are integrated into the furniture of the mind.

There is something fundamentally unrestrained, shocking, indecent, and uncivilized about showing pictures of bloodied animals or bloodied babies.

Does this breach in civility, which initially elicits shock and horror, itself, over time, undermine the civilized sense of boundaries and restraint which is the basis of society?

The above is often expressed in terms of concern for our children. Almost all pro-lifers are intensely aware of the assault on their children's innocence by the broader culture. From TV to music to sex ed to the overall coarse message and manner of our culture, so much mitigates against the formation of a gentle, perceptive, just, and compassionate soul. The simplest and most resonant objection to aborted-baby pictures is that pro-lifers do not wish their own children to see them.

Pictures of aborted babies force the issue too quickly, too unequivocally, and may harden people into a pro-abortion position:

In the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Douglas proposed that a simple vote was the best way to determine whether slavery should be abolished. Lincoln, however, held that the majority was not always right, and did not, by virtue of its choice, determine right and wrong. The rightness of the cause of emancipating the slaves was deeply rooted within natural law. That sense of natural law, of right and wrong, had to be brought into bold relief and highlighted.

Lincoln the trial lawyer knew well the importance of building the foundation of the case before setting the capstone. The final and definitive argument could not be made until objections were disposed of and sympathies redirected. If the final point were made too soon, it could be a provocation rather than an enticement.

The same holds true with abortion today, when arguing in the court of public opinion. The pictures of aborted babies are, themselves, the final and definitive evidence of the wrongness of abortion. Showing these pictures to a pro-abortion populace whose staunch abortion support has not been softened by convincing arguments that reawaken the natural-law sense of justice is to bring the argument to its final, conclusive point much too fast. Before this point is reached, where definitive opinion is immediately demanded, the coarsened soul must be rehabilitated.

Further, the imprudence of forcing the issue too soon is not only rhetorical and political, but also psychological and spiritual. Like an ablution before entering the temple, like the 40 years in the desert before entering the Promised Land, there must be an emptying, a repentance, a reconstruction before one has eyes for the holy.

It is imprudent and uncharitable to show aborted-baby pictures without

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first doing the groundwork, because upon seeing pictures of aborted babies some people do remain resolute in their support of abortion. And if someone can be in favor of abortion after seeing a picture of an aborted baby, they have made a commitment far beyond the abstraction of argument; they have posited a position so dramatically at odds with the facts that their new commitment to abortion is existential in an almost irrevocable way. Their souls have been dangerously and dramatically darkened and so has the prospect of saving the lives of future babies from abortions.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF SHOWING ABORTED-BABY PICTURES:

And yet, faint-hearted reluctance belies the urgency of the issue. If a murder has taken place, show the body.

The power of pictures:

The most powerful evidence against abortion is pictures of actual aborted babies which show the aborted baby as a person like the rest of us.

Pictures of born babies, ultrasound images of babies within the womb, in utero scope photography of unborn babies, only show what the aborted baby *is like if he is not aborted*. These pictures are evidence against abortion by analogy. But no trial lawyer would limit himself to evidence by analogy when direct evidence is available. Pictures of particular babies who have been aborted are direct evidence. And seeing is believing.

It is pictures of actual lynchings under Jim Crow, and then actual civil-rights protesters assaulted by fire hoses and attack dogs, that we remember more than abstract arguments about the injustices of slavery and segregation. It is pictures of actual starving and murdered Jews in concentration camps, or actual Vietnamese children scorched with napalm, or car accidents caused by drunk drivers, or lungs blackened by cigarettes, that have turned public opinion.

The Personal over the Abstract:

A key theme in sociology is the increased poignancy of the personal as mass culture has become more remote and impersonal. Nothing is more poignant and personal than the human face. It is through seeing their faces that we realize the unborn are like us and empathy is awakened. According to philosopher Emmanuel Levinas we think and feel and live within an interpersonal context, and it is through the face of the other that ethics begins,

that our moral sense is awakened. Speaking of St. Paul, Pope Benedict XVI said: “This transformation of his life was not the result of a psychological process of an intellectual or moral evolution, but the fruit of his meeting with Christ Jesus.” That the pope refers to Christ Jesus rather than simply Christ points beyond the singularly spiritual to the personal nature of the meeting.

Most people consider themselves to be, and are in fact, highly compassionate. Studies of the responses of newborns to pictures of faces show that this compassion is not merely socialized, but innate. But promoters of abortion have succeeded in neutralizing compassion towards the aborted baby by directing the argument elsewhere and thereby shielding the public from the face of the aborted baby. We must bring the argument back to the face of the aborted baby. To see the face of the aborted baby is to see the human personhood of the aborted baby.

Most people are shocked and angered when they are shown the face of the aborted baby because their participation in, support of, or indifference to abortion is an indictment of their compassion. They *should* be shocked and angered; and it is to be expected that they will direct their anger at those who show them pictures of aborted babies. After all, we are the ones who are bringing the crisis of abortion to the fore. We are the ones who are disturbing their peace, albeit a false peace.

But this is a transitional shock and anger. The cognitive dissonance of a newly received truth at odds with the life one has lived seeks resolution.

Personalism replacing liberalism:

For 35 years the pro-life movement has relied on the ideas and language of liberalism. The “right” to life is implicitly rooted in a Hobbesian social contract in which each of us is in deadly conflict with everyone else and must agree to respect the rights of the other so that our own rights might in turn be respected. We have not been able to advance the rights of the unborn through this model, because we cannot successfully argue that respecting the rights of the unborn further safeguards our own rights.

But while self-interested liberalism may be the basis of laws, it is not the philosophy that enlightens everyday life. Pope John Paul II was the most engaging personality of the 20th century in significant measure because his anthropology was compellingly rooted in the inherent dignity of the person as created in the image of God. John Paul confronted determinism, Communist and consumerist materialism, and every other mode that reduces persons to objects of control and manipulation. He said that each person is a

subject, and it is debasing to reduce persons to objects; to mere producers or consumers to be manipulated.

The truth of the pope's personalism was foreshadowed and continues to be echoed in some of the most unlikely places. Most advertising is loosely predicated on personalism, though ironically it appeals to our innate sense of the importance of persons for the purpose of reducing us to consumers. Advertisers paint a shallow caricature of the relationships we all long for, and they do so quite obviously for the purpose of selling product. But the hypocrisy of using images of human relationships to reduce us to consumers is the tribute vice pays to virtue.

In *The Minimal Self*, cultural historian Christopher Lasch chronicled the 19th- and 20th-century retreat from religious to political to private man, as technology made the public realm less hospitable for psychic wholeness. Lasch outlines the changes wrought by the industrial revolution. Whereas each Judeo-Christian man had formerly viewed himself and others as made in the image and likeness of God with the world as his rightful dominion, mass production robbed things, and persons who inhabit the world of things, of their particularity. The sheer quantity and uniformity of mass production, where everything was made by a process rather than a person, rendered the world and its inhabitants soulless. This retreat was so thorough, and such a distortion of the grandness which is the person, that it became normative for people to reassert their distinctiveness and individuality by parading their maladjustment. After image-of-God man, after political man, came man as the triumphant victim.

My estranged former sister-in-law has a framed letter from Oprah Winfrey, responding to her offer to appear on the show and talk about her broken life. Oprah, Geraldo, Jerry Springer, and a host of others have traded in the broken, the tawdry, and the perverse, but they have also transcended the contrived artificiality of celebrity personalities: Theirs was a sort of personalism from the ruins. Their "reality show" successors compete for ratings with a host of entertainment shows about the lives of celebrities, but the contrived revulsions, obstacles, and mirth of the non-celebrity reality shows renders them just as fake and soulless as the celebrity programs. The hunger for a sense of man in the image of God is even more acute now for its absence.

David Brooks's essay "Patio Man and the Sprawl People," which appeared in *The Weekly Standard* in 2002, paints a heart-sickening portrait of the shriveled, one-dimensional suburban-consumerist soul. Spouses, children, and friends have the status of components alongside barbecues and patio furniture. Even the self is little more than a caricature, a hollowed-out self, where the peaks and valleys of heroism and tragedy have been made smooth.

Patio man has become arid homeostatic man. But underneath it all, our souls groan in longing for the deplastication of the person.

Abortion will be rejected when we successfully convey the personhood of the unborn child because of our compassion. This will happen because we are moving away from the depersonalization of reductionist mass culture, irresistibly drawn to the Judeo-Christian man in the image and likeness of God.

REPLIES TO OBJECTIONS:

Postmodern irony is not a durable world view: It is sophomoric, wearying, and implodes upon itself. Bart and Stewie have nothing to say about pain, sickness, suffering, and death; so if boredom does not deflate easy irony, the human condition will. Their country of origin is the country with the most freedom to mock and lampoon, but it is also the most religious country in the world.

Neither will the coarseness of aborted-baby pictures undermine *the restraint and refinement* which is the basis of society. To preserve good we must be mindful of how close evil is. History courses teach about injustice and tyranny that we might be mindful of the fragility of justice and preserve freedom. The cross, the instrument of the greatest evil in history, is the universal symbol of Christianity. The crucifix with an image of the crucified Christ upon the cross calls the world to sorrow, gratitude, and holiness.

Free will would be little more than a curse if we were incapable of turning away from evil when shown the good. *Conclusive evidence* that abortion is wrong does not make people more committed to abortion, unless they are already very committed to evil. These people we cannot change. Most, however, are vaguely pro-life, though irresolute because their unease with abortion has been muted by pro-abortion rhetoric. It is a mistake for us to spend too much time answering pro-abortion rhetoric, fighting them on their own ground. Rather, we should show the clearest, strongest evidence that abortion is murder and thereby clear the air of confusing lies.