

Commentary on Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA) by Thomas J. Allio Jr.

For more than 35 years, no issue has polarized U.S. politics and its citizenry more than the question of abortion. As we embark upon a new year and the historic inauguration of Barack Obama, this issue is certain to receive heightened attention. Much of that is due to Obama's reported statement that he would look forward to signing the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA). This has drawn the attention of the U.S. Catholic Bishops who have launched a massive campaign this month (January 24-25) throughout most of the 18,992 parishes across the nation. The essence of the campaign is to inspire action from some 70 million Catholics that would result in pushing back any attempt by Congress to enact FOCA. The centerpiece of this campaign is the distribution of millions of post cards that would then be forwarded to the U.S. House Representatives and U.S. Senate. Such an "all out call to action" has a sense of urgency and priority that is unprecedented in the recent history of the Bishops' Conference.

In a November 12, 2008 statement by Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Cardinal voiced a desire to work with the new administration "for the common good of all." He specifically sighted the work of economic justice, immigration reform, education, health care, religious freedom and peace at home and abroad. All of which merit greater leadership from our elected officials, from the Church and from all Americans. However, he added: "Aggressive pro-abortion policies, legislation and executive orders will permanently alienate tens of millions of Americans, and would be seen by many as an attack on the free exercise of their religion."

FOCA is at the center of these concerns. It is not a new legislative concept. In fact, it has been around, in one form or another, since 1989. In brief, FOCA would create a "fundamental right" to abortion throughout the nine months of pregnancy. If passed, no governmental entity at any level could interfere with this right or to discriminate against its exercise in the provision of services, benefits or information. The fear is that FOCA would eliminate a full range of laws, including: informed consent laws, parental notification laws, abortion clinic regulations, conscience protection laws, partial birth abortion laws, as well as, other important safeguards for the unborn and the mother. In a letter sent last September to all members of Congress by Cardinal Justin Rigali, chair of the Bishops' Pro Life Committee, the Cardinal said: "Despite its deceptive title, FOCA would deprive the American people in all 50 states of the freedom they now have to enact modest restraints and regulations on the abortion industry," and would "counteract any and all sincere efforts by government to reduce abortions in our country."

The campaign to defeat FOCA coincides with a recent nationwide survey, commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Bishops that has found that 82% of U.S.

adults think that abortion should either be illegal under all circumstances (11%) or would limit its legality. According to the survey that was released on December 30, 2008, thirty eight (38) percent would limit abortion to the narrow circumstances of rape, incest or to save the life of the mother; and an additional 33 percent would limit abortion to either the first three or six months . Only 9 percent agreed that abortion should be legal for any reason and at any time during the pregnancy.

People of faith who believe in the sacredness of all human life have a responsibility to take action to defeat radical laws such as FOCA. The defeat of unjust laws and the promotion of public policies that protect human life and promote human dignity are both necessary responses. I truly believe that opposing FOCA merits the strong call to action being urged by the U.S. Bishops. For more information on the campaign to defeat FOCA, visit www.nchla.org.

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