Opinion
Editorial

An abortion opponent and a supporter of legal abortion square off with megaphones in front of the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington June 24, 2023, the first anniversary the court's 2022 ruling in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, overturning Roe v. Wade, which legalized abortion nationwide in 1973. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

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The alterations to the abortion plank in this year's Republican Party platform provide a telling lesson about political reality and the difference between church teaching and doomed episcopal politics.

The GOP, previously absolute in its advocacy for a national ban on abortion, backed off that once unchangeable position, leaving the matter to the states. The word "abortion" itself went unspoken during the length of their recent convention, according to an analysis by The New York Times. The reason? Politics. Winning elections. The party has come up against the harsh reality that when placed on the ballot in deep red states, voters overwhelmingly approved wide access to abortion. Even in Kansas.

While some viewed the 2022 *Dobbs* decision, which overturned the 1973 *Roe* v. *Wade* decision, as the ultimate culture-war victory, the anti-abortion forces were quickly put on notice that it was merely a battle won and that the war now continues indefinitely on 50 fronts.

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That consequence is, arguably, the unfortunate lasting legacy of Catholic episcopal politics. No other cultural entity has spent as much money and political capital fueling the war over abortion as the U.S. bishops. No other group has staked its identity during the past half century to a single issue to the same degree as the U.S. bishops.

But, amid the endless fighting, any serious teaching, any opportunity to persuade, has been lost. We are faced, instead, with inflexible binary choices that do not reflect the majority of people who would prefer a more substantive societal discussion as well as more nuanced politics and laws on the issue. That broad middle, fairly consistent for decades, has always been the lost voice. It also contains a hefty representation of Catholics.

Church teaching on abortion is not the same as church politics on abortion. Teaching involves instruction, persuasion, example and toleration of errors. Teaching is not accomplished by coercion or threat of punishment. Good teaching also involves encountering and understanding the other.

Politics involves the exercise of power, leverage and self-interest, even if the goal is the common good. In politics, the coin of the realm is compromise in the service of the best deal.

The bishops in the United States long ago decided to turn from the difficult work of finding a persuasive teaching on abortion to the easier work of becoming political operatives. They essentially became part of a political deal that yielded one party a lot of votes in exchange for a one-issue promise.

Abortion teaching and abortion politics have been conflated in the U.S. experience to a degree that some Catholics have come to regard the political strategy of the U.S. episcopacy as an article of faith. It has left too many Catholics captives of a single party and one now searching for wiggle room on what has become, at the state and national level, a losing issue.

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Further, the bishops, as the major force in the anti-abortion cause, have guaranteed that the only winners in their strategy are those who operate the lobbying efforts on either extreme of the issue. A peek at their 990 tax forms will show that those organizations, left and right, bring in millions in donations and their executives pull in extravagant salaries. And the bishops are among those who have given them indefinite job security.

This has all left many Catholics homeless politically. They may care deeply about social justice issues addressed by the Democratic Party but feel more than a little uncomfortable when the issue most talked about is unrestricted access to abortion.

Or they may feel abortion is their most important issue — but are more than a little uncomfortable in a Republican Party which either ignores or opposes most justice issues and is led by a man held legally liable for sexual assault, a convicted felon who paid a porn star and Playboy model for silence and incited an insurrection.

In the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* Pope Benedict XVI gave instruction on the place of Catholic teaching in the public square. It is an instruction you won't find touted by those who wish to have abortion remain the sole non-negotiable.

"This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place: It has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just," wrote Benedict.

"The Church's social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being," he continues. "It recognizes that it is not the Church's responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life. Rather, the Church wishes to help form consciences in political life."

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Benedict's predecessor, St. Pope John Paul II, provided practical examples of such an approach. In January 2001, John Paul personally distributed the Eucharist to Francesco Rutelli, at the time Rome's mayor, a high-profile Catholic and former member of the party that led the battle for legalized abortion in Italy. Two years later, during a private Mass in John Paul's apartment, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair of England received Communion from the pope. He was at the time not only pro-choice but also an Anglican. He has since converted to Catholicism.

The U.S. bishops have been badly used and manipulated in their political bargain. Surveys over decades show they've persuaded almost no one, not even their own flock. Surveys show about 60% of U.S. Catholics say abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

Their primary achievement has been to stoke division within the Catholic community and in the wider culture. As the war goes on, it is time for Catholics to get out from under the unnecessary and unwarranted burden of episcopal politics.

That doesn't mean abandoning concerns or involvement in issues. It does mean recognizing that being a devout Catholic in the United States does not require adherence to a single political ideology or party. This year be involved, be

thoroughly Catholic. Think. Discern. Vote. Do it with an informed conscience, understanding "it is not the Church's responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life."

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.
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