CENTER VALLEY – One side is pro-choice, the other pro-life. Freedom is good; so is living.

One side values the human body and one’s rightful autonomy over it. The other values the coming-to-be of a child and that child’s right to exist. Self-determination is good; so is being.

One side argues from a constitutional right to privacy, the other from the constitutional protection of the unborn person. Citizens on both sides rightly value the due process of law.

Extremists on one side have charged opposing protesters with the crime of conspiratorial racketeering. Extremists on the other have committed crimes of blatant homicide against supportive providers. Zealotry on any side leads to danger.

One side promotes the mission to ensure “that individuals have ... the freedom of choice to determine their own reproductive needs” (Planned Parenthood of NorthEast Pennsylvania). The other defends “the most fundamental of human rights [which] is the right to life” and upon which all other rights and freedoms are dependent (Pope John Paul II).

The debate goes on ... and well it should. The 1973 decision of the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* has sparked a vehement, sometimes vitriolic, public discourse on who we are as persons living in a free and democratic society. And, as Justice Antonin Scalia opined in another case, important questions like these “are to be resolved ... by citizens trying to persuade one another and then voting.”

Though it may appear futile, that task of persuasion is ongoing. After thirty years, its resolution still seems unclear, or at least not clearly acceptable to a vast majority. But nowadays the debate itself is becoming increasingly more difficult to undertake.
At DeSales University, we are trying to organizing a public discussion as part of our “Center Valley Forum” series. We seek to include balanced perspectives from medical, scientific, theological, and personal views. But the two sides remain antagonistic. Some on the one side believe it foolhardy to set foot on the hostile territory of a Catholic university, fearing a papist ambush. Some on the other side believe it heretical for a Catholic university to provide a podium to those who espouse a pro-choice view that is clearly contradictory to Church teaching.

Nevertheless, as a community of scholars who are also citizens and believers, we value the debate that needs to take place. Its purpose is to advance public comprehension rather than promote legal compromise. This is in keeping with the Church’s doctrinal note on political life, which recognizes that “while democracy is the best expression of the direct participation of citizens in political choices, it succeeds only to the extent that it is based on a correct understanding of the human person.”

We encourage the debate because we seek the truth. Historical, cultural, and scientific contexts may vary, but truth endures and comes to be manifest in ways that invite new discovery. Public discourse engages a plurality of viewpoints, but not every outlook on life is of equal value just because it is freely held. What one wants something to be is not the same as what it is.

We welcome the debate because it affords the opportunity to seek the truth in love. This is in keeping with the tradition of the university’s patron, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622). Acclaimed for his erudite and indefatigable defense of the Church’s teaching, this bishop risked giving scandal by dining frequently in the company of persons considered to be heretics. Yet he conversed with them honestly, openly, and without compromise about the very issues that began as theological contention and ended in political and religious reformation. He did this precisely because he loved. And he understood that love is not the repository of mutual interests or of shared points of view. Rather, love is a respectful and gracious comportment toward all others, precisely because they are human persons whose value is inherent to who they are and not dependent on what they think.

Now, as then, courage is required in the expression of religious views and exercise of political prerogatives. So, too, is humility, in our own regard, and gentleness, in regard to other persons with whom we speak.

Nevertheless, this issue demands more than intellectual posturing or organizational maneuvering. This debate, about the body individual (whether mother or child) and the body politic (of free and reasonable citizens), goes to the heart and soul of who we are. For the sake of our very society and nation, it cries out for resolution. Unfortunately, because of Roe v. Wade, 35 million voices in this debate will never be heard.

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