

How St John the Compassionate Mission is like abortion

by Constantine Pappas

Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize of 1979, Mother Teresa delivered an acceptance speech that must have unsettled her audience. The intent of awarding her the Nobel must surely have been to stress the threat the abject poverty of the developing world presented to world peace. Mother Teresa usurped these expectations: the “greatest destroyer of peace today”, she explained, is abortion.

Seizing on these famous words, the writer Christopher Hitchens has since accused Mother Teresa (with his characteristic teeth bared eloquence) of being less a lover of the *poor* and more a lover of *poverty*.

Consider the recently held UN summit on the ‘Right to Food’, held in Rome, Italy, where UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s opening remarks included this sobering statistic: “on the opening day of the summit more than 17,000 children will die of hunger - one every five seconds - six million children a year”. Predictably most of the leaders of the wealthiest nations did not attend, predictably because establishing a right to food simultaneously imposes an obligation to feed. Even the wealthiest nations balk at the cost and responsibility of ensuring that no child starves. (In anticipation of the summit, CBC Radio interviewed two honorary delegates that had survived famine and with the keen instincts to intuit what every listener wanted to know, and the shamelessness to go ahead ask, the host hounded the two with the question ‘what is it *like* to be *that* hungry?’). In the end, Ban Ki-moon concluded that the “world is impatient for us to make a difference”.

The essence of Hitchens critique of Mother Teresa is that, by virtue of her opposition to abortion, she hinders this impatience. To remove the arrow of abortion from the world’s quiver, as Mother Teresa insists he believes on doing, is akin to ensuring this problem of feeding the world’s children will be more intractable than it needs to be. After all, one can feed a hungry child or cause it never to have been born to begin with. If you hope for a world with no hungry and poor, argues Hitchens, then you err in admiring Mother Teresa. He believes this critique ought to turn the admiration the world has for this labourer for the ‘poorest of the poor’ into contempt, or, more accurately, bring to the fore the latent contempt he is certain is already there for her: *the reason you love her is the reason you hate her*.

In the letter St John the Compassionate Mission received from our Life Chain protest critic, ‘Michelle’, she explains she has been a “supporter of (the Mission’s) work with the homeless” but that she no longer believes that the Mission can “objectively support people during hard times”. With the message ‘Abortion Kills Children’, the Mission has proven it is no friend of the weak and vulnerable- an accusation no different than the one Hitchens levelled at Mother Teresa. ‘Michelle’ condemns the Mission’s abortion message because she sees abortion as an *ally* (or, at least, as no hindrance) to the work of the

Mission. After all, one can assist the weak and vulnerable or cause them never to have been born to begin with. **While the Mission may be a ‘problem solver’, so to is abortion.**

Abortion, then, is essentially about *hope*; a hope in an end for which abortion seems a necessary means.

This end might best be described as *humanist chilianism*: a looking to the future with *expectancy*; where people will live together in peace; in a just social order; in a secular utopia (think John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’). This hope motivates the world - and especially the young- into concrete, and even selfless, action on its behalf and has simply been the most cherished end of the political ideologies of our time (Marxist and Liberal Democratic alike). Yet it is also a hope that is a parody of the Hope which rests on Christ and His eternal Kingdom.

The world acknowledges that Mother Teresa and the Mission undertake the work that is needed to fulfill its hope but that it finds too onerous, too intransigent, and too costly to undertake. Yet the goodwill this generates is a double edged sword - action that is motivated by fidelity to Christ also excites utopian hopes by hinting at their ultimate success. What Hitchens managed to do was to tease apart these two distinct hopes and point out how hopelessly at odds they are with one another; loyalty to one means disloyalty to the other. Where once ‘Michelle’ had seen the Mission as a fellow labourer, it has now been exposed as an opponent.

If there exists any common ground between these two hopes when it comes to abortion it might be found in the concluding call of the film ‘The Silent Scream’ to “stop the violence”. Our liberal democracies want to achieve their ends with means that are not incongruous with those ends. Thus the ‘prophets’ of non-violent struggle like MLK and Gandhi are admired while Stalin and Pol Pot are condemned. Perhaps abortion, then, will eventually be seen for what it is - a gruesomely violent act that no end can justify.

Yet, consider the Allied bombing of Hamburg during WWII (nicknamed *Operation Gomorrah*). During the last week of 1943 it killed roughly 50,000 civilians and practically destroyed the entire city, creating a 1,500-foot-high tornado of fire in the process. To have spoken out against this decision, to have pointed out the wrongness of deliberately targeting the civilian population, would have opened oneself to a charge of hypocrisy- this campaign had been judged *necessary to win the war* (or, less charitably, necessary to the Allied vision of the post-war peace). Similarly if abortion is judged necessary to secure woman’s human rights and equality than objecting to the wrongness of the means employed just seems like a hypocritically concealed opposition to this end. For those whom the need to secure woman’s emancipation is as passionately felt as the need to defeat the Nazis was, the ‘mere’ gruesomeness of abortion will be no obstacle. As U.S President Barack Obama said in his own Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech “a non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler’s army”.

What is needed, then, is an answer for why the world should abandon *its* hope for *ours*. We need to show - by our very lives - that there is indeed no rival for a Hope rooted in the Lord Jesus Christ and his eternal Kingdom. In this regard, the Mission has a *unique* voice that needs to be heard.

The uniqueness of this voice is best demonstrated by an example of its counterfeit. A magazine article I read recently detailed the adventures of a group of students from an evangelical college in the southern United States who had headed down to Florida during 'Spring Break'. Their intention was to confront the bacchanalia of the festivities with God's Truth. While their witness had the virtue of requiring courage to undertake - they deliberately provoked anger; endured being mocked as prudish - it was also *odious*. The reader could not help but conclude (as the writer had intended) that their desire was to coerce consciences. These young people, while certainly Christian, were not very Christ-like; they were *representatives* of God but not *of* God. The writer of this piece - I suspect - does not believe that God is real yet she is right to have essentially concluded that to view other human beings as unclean, as these students clearly do, makes a mockery of Christ's commandment to "love one another as I have loved you" [John 13:34].

The patrons of the Mission - St John the Compassionate and St Silouan - were both men whose love for others made them, in turn, impossible not to love. Only in rejecting a witness like theirs are the true opponents of God exposed.

Behind the anger directed at Mother Teresa and the Mission is this truth: the meaning of the Incarnation that they are a witness to - that human life has sacred value - poses an existential threat to abortion and the hopes it furthers. When these voices stand up for the intrinsic worth of human life they are felt with the force of thunder - because they represent the lived reality of this truth. In the case of the Mission's witness there is also now a place for anger - *to let people know that there is someone named Marie and you killed her; it was in this spot that her life was ended*. As Mother Teresa concluded in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, there can be no peace if one is not even safe from violence in the sanctuary of the womb. "Because", she explained, "if a mother can kill her own child - what is left for me to kill you and you kill me - there is nothing".

While he draws the connection to disparage, Hitchens is right that there indeed is an elegant link between abortion and the work of the Mission. In Father Roberto's office there is a painting of Christ with halo hidden in a bread line - perhaps one could paint a similar picture of a fetus in the womb adorned with a halo.