

The Controversy about Showing Abortion Imagery to Students and at Marches

The following communication is being shared as a teaching tool addressing objections to showing students abortion imagery. CCBR's executive director, Stephanie Gray, spoke to a group of grade 7 and 8 students and the following day a mother complained about Stephanie showing 2 still images of aborted children for 5 to 10 seconds.

The principal of the Catholic school, who did not hear the live presentation (but was later given a similar recording), told the mother he wouldn't allow such abortion imagery to be shown in future. Stephanie tried to meet with the principal to discuss this in-person and over the phone but his schedule did not permit it. And so, Stephanie composed the e-mail below to address the concerns he'd sent to her.

The principal had not only questioned the age-appropriateness and effectiveness of the graphics, but he built his case by appealing to the Alberta Catholic bishops' withdrawal from the March for Life in Edmonton because of the possibility of the presence of abortion graphics. Below is Stephanie's reply. The principal's name has been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Dear Mr. Jones,

Thank you for your e-mail on Friday. I hope the delivery of your second child goes smoothly this week! Congratulations ☺

As I mentioned, I thought phone would be a good place to start but since your schedule is rather packed, I'll respond by e-mail and if you wish to talk after this, please do let me know.

Now before I address the concerns from your first e-mail, I should address your second e-mail—for if that is your primary concern, all other points are moot.

Regrettably some clergy like the bishops of Alberta have tried to play a morality card by stating the images “do not honour the dignity of human remains and dignity of the human person,” as you cited in the article you sent.

If that were true, wouldn't we have heard that sentiment expressed a long time ago by our clergy regarding images of the deceased from the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, or starvation victims in third-world countries?

It doesn't make sense to *accept* showing images of dead born people if one *rejects* showing images of dead pre-born people. Such a position is not consistent or logical. The dishonouring of the human person occurs with the *act* of injustice, not the *image* of injustice. If it were the latter, we'd hold photojournalists to the same standard as perpetrators of genocide.

Furthermore, of all churches, it is the Catholic Church which routinely puts dead bodies of saints on display—and publishes photos of them. Catholic charities routinely show disturbing images of poor

peoples' plight in order to convict us to donate. And given the propensity for displaying crucifixes in almost all of our churches and schools, it is highly likely that if photography existed in the time of Christ, we would have the actual image of His crucifixion on display.

In your e-mail you mentioned some bishops refusing to participate in the March for Life because of the possibility of abortion graphics being there. To clarify, this is not the March in Ottawa, but rather the March in Edmonton. **This was a decision by the Alberta bishops, but not a decision held by all bishops in Canada.** In fact, regarding the Ottawa march, Archbishop Prendergast said he would still be attending that March.

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Also, in 1999, **then-bishop, now Cardinal, Raymond Burke**, wrote an endorsement of my colleague Paul Kulas saying, **“I ...support fully his work with the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform.”** He specifically recommended our very graphic campus outreach exhibit, Genocide Awareness Project, in his endorsement (attached).

A very similar—graphic—campaign called Justice for All received support from Archbishop Charles Chaput (attached).

So as you can see, there are varied opinions by Catholic clergy when it comes to the strategy of graphic visuals. **Simply put, something can’t be immoral in one diocese and moral in another; so what’s going on here is a debate about strategy, not morality (tragically, Archbishop Smith’s quote erroneously turns this into the latter).**

[Note: Stephanie’s specific commentary on the importance of graphics at pro-life marches (“A March for the Victims—that *Excludes* the Victims?”) can be read online here: www.unmaskingchoice.ca/publications.html]

So that brings me to your first e-mail expressing concern about the strategy of using graphics. I will respond to your objections below:

I share your concern about age-appropriate material. **We have different graphic visuals for different audience maturity levels.** When I speak to university audiences, I play a video which shows abortions in-progress. In high schools, I show a video that just shows aborted children after the procedure. To grade 7 and 8 audiences, I show one or two still images of aborted children.

(As an aside, I did show graphics at [named school]. [That principal] asked me, mid-presentation, to not include them and we negotiated down to one image instead of two. Furthermore, I showed those same two images in my presentation at [another school] the year prior—the presentation which was so well received it led to all these others being booked.)

When it comes to showing graphics in our presentations, the general philosophy we run by is this: **if someone is old enough to have an abortion, they’re old enough to see abortion.** By the time students are in grade 7, fertility, sexual activity, and pregnancy are a possibility. Granted, the likelihood of pregnancy and abortion at that age versus in grade 12 is less because sexual activity at that age is less compared to later ages, nonetheless it is a possibility.

In fact, **the younger the mother who faces an unplanned pregnancy can mean the greater the pressure for her to abort** because it seems even more scandalous and difficult to raise a child.

Whether we like it or not, young people today are growing up in an environment of promiscuity. So, as Catholics forming them to live morally, we need to equip them to make wise choices to begin with (e.g., save sex until marriage) and to make wise choices when unwise ones have already been made (e.g., don’t have an abortion if you’ve already had sex).

We live in a culture that thinks and learns visually, and social reformers throughout history who want to change peoples’ understanding of injustice inevitably exposed that injustice, bringing what’s in darkness into the light:

We’ve already written and taught extensively on this topic so if you don’t mind, I’ll point you in the direction of resources

we’ve compiled:

[A list of resources explaining our strategy were provided from www.unmaskingchoice.ca and from www.Youtube.com/CanadianCBR.]

You spoke about a scaffolding approach, which I’m all for. There are concepts and images I just didn’t (and wouldn’t) introduce in a presentation to that age group. If I hadn’t included those 2 images, would you have said everything else about my presentation fit with your scaffolding approach? If so, then how do those 2 images drastically change that?

In 1999, then-bishop, now Cardinal, Raymond Burke, wrote an endorsement of my colleague Paul Kulas saying, “I ...support fully his work with the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform.”

If it was appropriate to teach them about abortion (which involves at least telling them that it kills children), then why not show a still image of it, knowing that this generation has short attention spans and learns visually? **A key to good teaching is recognizing that for a message to stick it should be visual and interactive.**

Again, these students are of an age where unplanned pregnancy is possible—either for them or their peers or siblings. **What’s worse: that these students see abortion or have abortions?**

Just last week a baby boy was born in Calgary because his mom saw what abortion looked like last August and cancelled her abortion. Had she not seen the truth, the fate of her son would have been the fate of the children pictured in our images. Isn’t being uncomfortable worth it if lives are saved?

I’m wondering if you listened to my presentation on the Youtube link? If so, you’ll have heard (accompanied with the Powerpoint you were given) precisely when the photos were introduced. I had built upon several important points before showing the graphics, and when I did show them it was literally for 5 to 10 *seconds*. I gave them warning but wasn’t dramatic about it because the exposure was for so short a time. I did not keep them up extensively as I do for older audiences. I made the point and moved on.

Furthermore, **I included a very important story of 15-year-old Hannah Taylor who saw a graphic image at the age of 5. People don’t complain that she saw injustice. Instead, they praise her for responding to injustice.** Why the double standard with abortion? You can read more on Hannah here: www.unmaskingchoice.ca/graphic-children.html

Interestingly in my Powerpoint I showed a very bloody image of Jesus on the cross—why no complaints about that massacre of the innocent? Again, there seems to be a double standard.

Mr. Jones, you said the images would be more appropriate for [named high school] but do you know upon my arrival there I was asked to avoid graphics (thankfully in the end the teacher agreed on the still

images). People tell us to go to universities but then universities say, “Those graphics aren’t to be publicly displayed here.” Abortion advocates may say to keep them amongst pro-lifers, but then the bishops in Alberta won’t go to the pro-life March where graphics could be. **It seems everyone is saying, “Everywhere but here,” but the problem is, with so many people everywhere, it means the pictures would effectively be shown nowhere.**

In your letter you told me this is what I have to consider when I present: **“What’s the most effective way to get my message across in the short time that I have to change hearts and minds?” On this you and I agree. And it is that question which prompts me to show graphic visuals.**

Trust me—facing some bishops publicly criticizing what I do, who can tear down in one sentence what takes paragraphs and pages to re-build, facing some parents or teachers or principals or pastors who close doors to the message is far from pleasant—the easy thing for me to do would be to exclude graphic visuals. And if ease was my goal, I would. But it’s not (and you’ll notice the concept of “easy” versus “hard” was an important theme in my presentation to your students). Again, ease is not my goal. Effectiveness is. And it’s because of effectiveness I’ll endure all that for the sake of changing minds and saving lives.

I have been speaking for 11 years on this topic and have thousands of pages of surveys from students. **Time and again they write about changing their position on abortion and about the power of the graphic visuals. Most of these are from Catholic schools where alarming numbers of self-proclaimed Catholics identified as pro-choice prior to the talk (the encouraging thing is many of them became pro-life after).**

I was therefore very saddened to learn that you didn’t, and won’t, distribute these surveys for the students to fill out. Right there we would have written reaction from the students themselves. I can tell you that after my second talk at your school, a group of girls surrounded me, praising the presentation. One said, “You’re so inspiring,” and

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the other said, “That was the best presentation I’ve ever heard.”

Mr. Jones, I don’t say this to draw attention to myself, but to make the needed point that there was positive reaction to the presentation. Interestingly, I’ve heard that parents had concerns and teachers had concerns, but what, specifically, were the concerns of the students? I don’t just ask that rhetorically. I’d genuinely be interested, and helped, if I knew what the concerns were from the students themselves.

When I’ve spoken to that age group, students have asked, “Why do people have abortions?” or “Why don’t they just give the baby up for adoption?” It’s so obvious to that age-group. But the older students get—later in high school and beyond—the more jaded they become. These students in grades 7 and 8 have functioning consciences. Their sensitivity to injustice is a good thing, the way the aforementioned Hannah Taylor’s sensitivity to homelessness was a good thing. Hannah wrote,

“My mom told me that sometimes when you worry and feel sad about things, if you do something to change the problem, your heart won’t feel so sad. She was right. I don’t worry so much anymore because I know I can help and so can you.”

Maybe your students worried and felt sad about abortion after my presentation. Maybe heeding the advice of Hannah’s mother, not hiding the reality of injustice, would do well in this situation.

And we could consider, **Is this about the children, or the parents? Is it about the children not being able to handle the images, or us not being able to explain why adults have allowed the injustice?**

Last summer I was standing on the streets of Calgary with my staff as we displayed graphic abortion images. I spoke to a woman who was staring in silence and shock at the images. Eventually she shared with me, through tears, that she had had an abortion. After hugging her and expressing my

sorrow for her loss she said, **“Nobody told me it looked like that.”**

Nobody told her it looked like that. Mr. Jones, I don’t want any more women—or girls—to be able to say what she said. She would have made a very different choice if someone showed her abortion looked like that. **I refuse to be part of the cover-up that enables women to kill their children and leaves them with a lifetime of regret.**

I was saddened by a remark in your final paragraph to me—that my use of the images was “heavy-handed and inappropriate.” Again, I wonder if you listened to my presentation and the way I communicated to your students, emphasizing the beauty of the pre-born while just touching on the ugliness of abortion (for 5-10 *seconds*), **conveying the importance of following the example of inspiring people and doing what’s right even when it’s really hard**, and reminding them that we have a loving and merciful God who will forgive us when we repent.

Were the images “grotesque” as you say? Yes, but **I care more about your students *being good than feeling good*.**

I hope my e-mail is received well by you, Mr. Jones. While I don’t deny my challenge, it comes in a spirit of charity and respect.

I look forward to hearing from you.

In Christ,

Stephanie Gray

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