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View From the Choir

2 Catholics duke it out over abortion

• There's plenty of heat but little light in arguments by women representing opposite sides of fiery issue

Usually, wild horses couldn't drag the Choir Lady into the middle of an argument between a woman lobbying to overturn the



ly urgent and acrimonious dispute. Besides, as both sides agree, abortion is just generally a subject that provokes feelings that are guaranteed to bring you right down.

S u p r e m e
Court's Roe v. Wade abortion decision and a woman who wants to keep the Roe decision intact.

There appears to be little future in this increasingly

But this week, the guests for this column were irresistible. Jane Reilly, national network coordinator for Catholics For a Free Choice, was in town for a program on "Catholic Pulpit vs. Catholic Practice" at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Akron. Her visit came just over a week before Helen Alvare, the national director of planning for the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pro-Life Activities, will come to St. Joseph's Melkite Church for the March 5 annual gathering of Right to Life of Greater Akron.

As members of the same church and the same sex, their debate predictably begins with accusations of shame . . . and ends with claims of higher levels of respect for human dignity.



Alvare



Reilly

"I question their use of the term 'pro-life,'" Reilly said in an interview. "How dare they say that when they don't have the same concern we have for the life of women?" She noted that her research sources find a woman dies every three minutes of every day, worldwide, from complications of unsafe or illegal abortion procedures.

Citing an Alan Guttmacher Institute finding that one in 1,000

U.S. abortions is performed for the extreme case of saving the life of the woman, Alvare charges back: "As women, they should be ashamed to base their fight for freedom on oppression of another class of human beings, no matter how small these humans are, or weak. For women to do this offends me deeply."

As expected, this is an excruciatingly emotional debate. Catholics for a Free Choice and the Catholic Bishops' Pro-Life office have only met once in a public dialogue — last April in Newton, Mass., and both sides say they probably will not do it again soon. It is a painful process.

Sisters in the same church, which for decades has been on the front lines of the anti-abortion movement, Reilly and Alvare have the unenviable task of show-

CHOIR

- In the abortion debate, which side can claim to be more-feminist-than-thou?

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ing which of them is more-Catholic-than-thou.

Reilly, of Cleveland, is 46. She tells of growing up the oldest of 11 children in an Irish-Catholic family, of attending parochial elementary school, of her one-time interest in becoming a nun, and of recent work as a pastoral assistant in a Lakewood hospital. She notes her ace status as a mother of four children.

Alvare, of Washington, is 31. She has no childbearing yet under her belt, so she tells of growing up as one of five children in a tight-knit Catholic family in which all of the women — sisters, cousins, aunts, the lot — believe the same about abortion. She is a candidate for a doctorate in theology.

When talking about other Catholic women, the two recite the Battle of the Polls, which involves a great mound of survey data about Catholics' attitudes and behavior concerning abortion.

If we have any sense, we skip these numbers; there are just too many versions of the story being trotted out on each side. Trust the Choir Lady on this.

Besides, we all know that the Roman Catholic Church does not operate on the basis of referendums when it comes to matters like abortion.

Then comes the *de rigueur*

scuffle over which of these two women can claim to be more-feminist-than-thou.

For Alvare, feminism protects the weak from attack and looks toward a society that will not punish women for bearing children. And she has a version of the slippery-slope argument, which holds that once society begins discounting various groups of marginally useful or even socially costly human lives, the value of women's lives will be discounted more than men's.

Reilly goes for the raw realism that increasingly characterizes the abortion-rights viewpoint: If abortion is outlawed, women will be forced to breed or face death in the back alleys. That decision, she says, can be made only by a woman in charge of her own conscience.

Neither of these women has had the experience of undergoing an abortion. Both do get personal, though, and abandon the argument on its merits when push comes to shove. Reilly points out that Alvare is just a mouthpiece for the bishops' conference, an all-male group with all-male prerogatives.

"Helen Alvare is visible in a public-relations effort for the bishops, but no women's viewpoint contributes to church teachings on these issues," she said. "... Church teaching is the exclusive domain of ordained male celibates at this point in church life."

Alvare, who said she does not like to attack the messenger instead of the message, was goaded by this charge. She said of Reilly, "Her group was founded by a man and run by a man."

Jesus wept.