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FIRST THINGS

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT ADOPTION

by
Elizabeth Kirk

9 · 15 · 15

In “[Adoption, Abortion and a Message of Hope](#),” J.D. Flynn makes an important point: the choice to place a child for adoption is a heroic sacrifice, borne in suffering, which we must always acknowledge and honor. As adoptive parents, my husband and I wholeheartedly embrace this truth. As I have written [elsewhere](#), a child should never be adopted at the expense of the birthparents.

It is Flynn’s central message, however, with which I take issue. He argues that the pro-life community errs by overemphasizing adoption, leaving the mother with little hope that she could rise to the challenge presented by the gift of her child, and that instead it should do more to “lead with assistance and empowerment.”

Almost twenty years ago, Paul Swope admonished the pro-life community to do more for women in his insightful article, “[Abortion: A Failure to Communicate](#).” Concerned that the pro-life movement’s early emphasis on the humanity of the unborn child was not an effective way to reach the woman in crisis, he urged the movement to “address her side of the equation, and do so in a compassionate manner that affirms her own inner convictions.” That powerful piece had a significant impact on the pro-life movement, both in terms of its rhetoric and the direction of its efforts. Today, though, one can hardly argue that the pro-life community fails to “assist and empower” women given the abundant resources and services provided by pro-life ministries to women and children in need.

But is Flynn correct to say that the pro-life community overemphasizes adoption? If he is, the numbers suggest that we are doing a poor job of it. Over one million children are aborted each year and by the most

generous reports fewer than 20,000 newborns are placed for adoption each year. This disparity exists notwithstanding the support pro-life organizations offer women facing crisis pregnancy. The reality is that, even with that support, some women are unable or do not want to parent. She may not be able to provide safety, stability, or sobriety. The challenge posed by the absence of a father (or the presence of an abusive father) may be insurmountable. Once child rearing is off the table, most women do not turn to adoption. Rather, they believe that abortion is their only *real* choice.

Indeed, adoptions are so rare as to be a statistical blip. Why is this so? There are myriad factors, such as the influence of the media (which loves a sensational negative adoption story) and the prevailing culture, shaped by the perception that abortion liberates women, which makes adoption unpopular. Women considering abortion report “adoption is not a realistic option for them. . . . [T]he thought of one’s child being out in the world without knowing if it was being taken care of or by whom would induce more guilt than having an abortion.” Some argue there is a soft stigma against adoption, or worse, that adoption is an unnatural, heartless choice on the part of the birthmother.

Many pregnancy resource centers intentionally place little emphasis on adoption because they fear that mentioning it will drive undecided women to abort. When adoption education initiatives surface, they are often attacked by pro-choice advocates as coercive tactics of the “adoption industry.” (For my response to such a controversy regarding a proposed Texas law, see here.) But by avoiding adoption, it effectively becomes a non-choice.

This means that over 1 million children each year die because their mothers are not presented with a meaningful alternative to child rearing. That alternative is adoption—and we need to do more, not less, to promote it. We must convince these women that adoption is a more loving, hopeful response to the gift of the child than abortion.

The pro-life community can promote adoption in many ways, starting with correcting the many misperceptions and providing accurate information about contemporary adoption practices. For example, we must correct the mistaken notion that a woman “gives up” her baby for adoption to a couple she knows nothing about, never to see her baby again. We must explain the difference between adoption and the troubled foster care system, and reject the “abandonment” script that dominates the popular

imagination about adoption. The choice of adoption does not make a woman a bad mother or mean that she is abandoning her child to an uncertain future.

Similarly, options counseling must include accurate information about adoption, presented in an empathetic way that responds to the woman's legitimate concerns and fears. Birthmothers themselves can be powerful witnesses for the redemptive potential of adoption, as [videos like this one by BraveLove](#) demonstrate.

We must promote awareness of adoption in every relevant venue. School sex education programs should include accurate information about the option of adoption. Church marriage formation programs should include adoption in discussions about the vocation to parenthood. Media campaigns should prioritize adoption as a meaningful option. Social scientists should identify the dynamics that exist when women consider and choose adoption, and pregnancy resource centers should use such information to train counselors in effective adoption counseling techniques. Theologians can more fully explore ways in which adopted children are the embodiment of marital love and what this tells us about marriage and parenthood. Legal scholars should analyze the impact of adoption legislation on the incidence of abortions and promote effective laws. Hospitals and medical professionals should ensure that they treat birthmothers with empathy and support.

Finally, we can do more to strive for a cultural recognition that, as St. Pope John Paul II described it, “we are at our best, we are most fully alive and human, when we give away freely and sacrificially our very selves in love for another.” It is only in such a culture that it becomes possible for women to have the courage to embrace the difficult choice of adoption.

Flynn rightly urges the pro-life community to do the good work of providing resources and support to women and children in need. But, with over one million children aborted each year, we should do more to provide pregnant women in crisis situations with access to accurate, complete, and non-coercive information about the loving choice of adoption.

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