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Filling Pews, Speaking Truth: Pro-Life Ministry in a Liberal Catholic Parish

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FILLING PEWS OR SPEAKING TRUTH?
PRO-LIFE MINISTRY IN A LIBERAL CATHOLIC PARISH

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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JONATHAN NEIDORF

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FILLING PEWS OR SPEAKING TRUTH?

PRO-LIFE MINISTRY IN A LIBERAL CATHOLIC PARISH

American Pro-life Christians often paint their work as suppressed by mainstream political and cultural forces (Williams and Blackburn 1996; Maxwell 2002; Munson 2008). American Catholics also experience a sense of marginalization (Weaver 1995; DiSalvo 2008). In this thesis, I explore how participants in a pro-life ministry conceive of their values and work with regard to their parish's left-leaning culture. Upon analyzing the ethnographic data I collected, I found that, amid much ambivalence and complexity, some respondents focused on ways in which their liberal parish culture oppresses the ministry, while others see liberalism as empowering. Respondents used the term "pro-life" as an all-encompassing expression that includes their ministry, as well as the greater movement and ethic, so I will use similar terminology. I will furthermore refer to leftist politics generally as "liberal," as my respondents did not distinguish leftist beliefs into "liberal," "radical," or other categories.

Based on qualitative interviews, observations, and content analysis, I will define St. Gianna's liberal culture as one that emphasizes social justice issues beyond abortion (and, according to some respondents, *instead of* abortion), as well as adheres to an "all are welcome" approach to faith. When this style of worship and ministry is applied to pro-life, the result is a ministry style that I will define as one pushing a narrative of an accepting pro-life. I will show how some respondents embrace the acceptance narrative of Pro-Life Ministry at St. Gianna, thinking it a practical and effective way of discouraging abortion through outreach work and

only occasionally and indirectly engaging politics. I will furthermore show how some respondents oppose the dominant liberal culture at St. Gianna in favor of more confrontational, directly political pro-life practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conservative Christian Feelings of Disenfranchisement in America

Sociologists of religion demonstrate that conservative Catholics in the U.S. feel that their faith and values are at odds with the dominant American culture. They determine the dominant culture to be secular, non-Catholic Christian, or even liberal Catholic (often influenced by the former two). Conservative Catholics since the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), held from 1962-1965, often express that their own Church has been hijacked by the left. Mary Jo Weaver (1995) spent four years interviewing conservative Catholics in the U.S. and writes the following fictional monologue based on sentiments expressed by many of her respondents:

It seems to me that for the past thirty years, the core of Catholic identity has been lost. These people who dissent, who have adopted other sources of authority as their guide for moral life and liturgical consciousness, have thrown away the crowning glory of Catholicism. The genius of the church has always been its ability to shape Catholic identity formed in faith and measured in obedience to the teaching church. I do not want to return to the nineteenth century, or the 1950s, but I am alternately heartbroken and angry at what has happened and deeply conflicted about what to do about it. (4)

Since Weaver and R. Scott Appleby's edited volume from which this monologue is taken was published in 1995, "the past thirty years" referring to the period since Vatican II. The people she interviewed felt that a significant—perhaps even dominant—number of misguided Catholics have assumed control of the Church, compromising many of its values and turning the Church institution itself against conservative values. Weaver and the other authors in her volume do not paint all conservative Catholics as reacting with uniform negativity to Vatican II, but this

moment represents a landmark shift in the Catholic Church toward liberalism. Many conservatives still feel marginalized or excluded by Vatican II and consequential Church trends. Benedict M. Ashley (1995), elaborating on the views expressed by Weaver's character, reports that conservatives interpret progressivism within American Catholicism as "a collapse of Christian moral standards in the church and a disastrous compromise with liberal Protestantism and still worse with secularism" (79). Ashley argues that Conservative Catholics in the United States thus commonly feel that their values are under attack by the Church itself, greater Christian culture, and a trend toward secularism in American society. Like the Catholics Weaver and Ashley present, American conservatives generally tend to long for the morals of an idyllic past. David L. Newman (2017) demonstrates that the desire to systematically return to the morals of the American past is merely a "stereotype" of what once was. An example of a popular conservative argument is bemoaning high divorce rates and variation from "traditional" family structure, resulting in weaker moral foundation for younger generations. Newman points out in his analysis that this popular systemic critique is inaccurate. He explains that family structures have never been universal, and they furthermore are often the cause or result of other, seemingly unrelated social problems like racism and/or poverty (202).

Previous research in the sociology of religion further demonstrates that conservative Christians often believe that their cause is unpopular among other members of the broader culture. Caroline J.C. Maxwell (2002) addresses the process of values conception among Christian pro-life activists. She found evidence that her respondents thought they were not speaking for most Americans. Instead,

[activists'] opposition to abortion was radicalized to some extent by their own ideologically derived perceptions of marginalization. That is, many activists

perceived themselves to be excluded from the mechanisms through which people control and change society. They spoke of their religious values as making them a targeted, disenfranchised minority vulnerable to the havoc wrought by a dominant “liberal,” “humanist” majority. (9)

Perhaps due to her respondents’ regular imprisonment for vandalism or illegal occupation of “abortion clinics” (borrowing from activists’ terminology), they held views that society’s opinions were co-opted by liberals and thus unsympathetic to the pro-life cause. Maxwell finds that activists, despite witnessing legislative shifts in their favor and sometimes saving unborn children from abortion, still feel that their message goes unheard except by a few Christians who are already pro-life and the occasional convert to the cause along the way. Maxwell says that the image pro-life activists had of themselves of being silenced or ignored was “ideologically derived.” Their feelings of disenfranchisement were thus not necessarily reflected in their social standing, but instead were products of their individual experiences, thought processes, and conceptions of their values.

Catholics on the political left often oppose abortion as well, although Elfriede Wedam’s (1993; 1997) works determine that these liberal pro-lifers also sense that the greater culture largely ignores their work in opposing abortion, as well as a liberal approach to pro-life. Wedam studied an advocacy group that represented the consistent ethic of life (CEL), a non-doctrinal Catholic belief which argues that because killing beyond self-defense is immoral, it follows logically that abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, war, and the development of nuclear weapons are also wrong. Given the range of issues covered by the CEL, the position does not align neatly with any position within the American political spectrum as we know it today; we define opposition to capital punishment as liberal, but opposition to abortion is deemed conservative. The CEL was popularized in the U.S. in the 1980s by Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of

Chicago, who said in one address that there are great “intrinsic intellectual difficulties” in practicing the CEL due to its lack of representation in American culture (1983). The respondents to Wedam’s dissertation who followed the CEL saw their organization collapse due to low membership, while another group, which was more thoroughly conservative—and thus representative of mainstream pro-life—was more popular. However, despite very different outcomes, both groups perceived themselves as marginalized by greater forces in their culture. The CEL group felt that the mainstream pro-life movement was “unwilling” to accept the CEL stance (Wedam 1993: 66, 76, 192). The mainstream pro-lifers felt the media and greater culture of their time encouraged a “flippant” attitude toward life and thus acceptance of abortion (1993: 199, 260). Also worth noting is the diversity within the American pro-life movement, even with regard to their moral ideologies surrounding abortion. Wedam refers to this phenomenon as the emergence of “alternative moral cultures” (1993: 1). Consequently, she further reports that the groups, though similar in some of their goals, approach questions on how to exist in a violent world quite differently; Wedam specifically cites Tolstoy’s question via Weber, “What shall we do and how shall we live?” (Wedam 1993: 1-2).

What is the sociological effect on pro-life Christians themselves of this besieged worldview? Rhys H. Williams and Jeffrey Blackburn (1996) find an emboldened sense of purpose in pro-life activists’ work. After interviewing mostly Protestant activists from the pro-life organization Operation Rescue, Williams and Blackburn claim that

[activists] take heart from the show of solidarity with fellow activists, and the confrontations and arrests supply a persecution complex that is an effective tool in reinforcing the common notion that they are besieged by a secular society. (183)

The authors argue that their respondents' worldviews in which they are persecuted are products of their internal processes and immediate surroundings, just as Maxwell found the pro-life sense of persecution to be "ideologically derived." Not only are the cards stacked against the activists in their minds, but they take it upon themselves to "[save] America's soul" because they believe that "man is evil...[and] fallen" (Williams and Blackburn 168, 175). Abortion is thus not merely a legal problem for these activists, but also a fundamental flaw of the people that they are "chosen" to save—hence the title of the authors' chapter: "Many Are Called but Few Obey." The activists do not feel that their work ends with mere policy change, but with a radical change in American values (178).

Parish Culture and Congregants' Feelings of Disenfranchisement

Sociologists of religion analyze parish culture with respect to parishioners' feelings of being welcomed or alienated based on their churches' political stance. Katherine DiSalvo's (2008) ethnography analyzes a Catholic church that has a high community engagement level among parishioners. Before introducing the parish she studied, she discusses why Catholic churches often do not have particularly active congregations compared to those of other denominations. In this discussion, she includes the "[hypothesis] that denominational culture and standard forms of liturgy and parish governance may discourage individuals' parish and civic participation" (438). Compared to other Christian denominations, the Catholic Church in many ways has a more rigid and exclusive hierarchy. Lay Catholics are then discouraged to an extent from participating in causes that are believed to have scriptural bases; technically, clergy are believed to have the highest authority in interpreting the Bible.

Standing in contrast to DiSalvo's respondents are some American Catholics who are more politically active. These Catholics value a parish that refrains from discussing politics. David C. Leege (1988) describes the distaste among American Catholics toward clergy speaking out on political issues of social justice as opposed to spiritual issues. Instead, these parishioners prefer to follow a personal sense of morality in their voting and other political habits. A priest who is vocal on specific political issues could alienate parishioners who disagree with his stance. As Leege suggests, "[Perhaps] it betrays their long period as an underdog, when others regarded Catholic clergy as 'un-American' if they made pronouncements on social issues or encouraged support for a candidate" (728). "Today," Leege continues, "American Catholics are in the cultural mainstream of the nation," but they are still left wary of a lingering sense of the persecution they have seen in the past (710). American Catholic culture thus continues to maintain at least a faint sense of embattlement.

Ziad W. Munson (2008) alternatively found from his respondents that pro-life Christians, though mostly Protestants, want a political message from the pulpit. His respondents claimed that preachers' silence on political matters made them feel unwelcome, much like hearing a position they would disagree with. Taking Leege's and Munson's accounts together, Catholics in this country appear to feel most comfortable in a parish with a culture that aligns with their own political values. The double-edged sword of political stances in church is thus being too "politically correct" (commonly invoked by right-leaning Americans as a slur) in avoiding discussion of politics, or in losing congregants by taking the stance congregants believe to be wrong.

The process of constructing a parish's political culture is a relatively new discourse to the sociology of religion. Lucas S. Sharma's (2012) thesis contributes to this discussion the ways in which "parishioners...together [shape] the cultural collective narrative of the parish, [and] the parish staff actively and regularly reinforce the narrative" (32). He compares a conservative Catholic parish, St. Pius, to a liberal parish, St. Mary Magdalene. At Mary Magdalene, the parishioners and staff have respectively created and reproduced a culture that emphasizes the "all are welcome" credo with a nuance from contemporary liberal politics in America. He writes, "It is interesting to note here that despite being an 'all are welcome' parish, some projects such as abortion, which do not fit into the narrative, have actually been 'unwelcome' at the parish" (31). Rather than "welcoming" pro-life advocacy at the parish openly, which would offend many of the predominately liberal parishioners, pro-life is selectively unrepresented in the "all are welcome" ethic at this parish. For the parish to take a pro-choice stance in this situation would be exceedingly difficult: besides the possibility of alienating some parishioners since most American Catholics are pro-life (see *Public Opinion on Abortion* below), the structure of the Catholic Church prohibits such a stance. Rather than facing excommunication, St. Mary Magdalene chooses to de-prioritize their Respect Life Committee as much as possible, which reproduces their liberal culture. As a result, their pastor refers to St. Mary Magdalene as a "last stop parish," for "fragile" Catholics who are disillusioned with the Catholic Church's conservatism and ready to leave the Church altogether (32).

Sharma also explores the common liturgical preferences among the pro-life Catholics with whom he spoke. St. Pius, the more conservative parish in his study, had a very active Respect Life Committee. The Committee's goals extended beyond "praying for the end to

abortion” to “trying to reframe the *moral discourse* of the parish into one that embraces the orthodoxy of Catholicism” (38-39, emphasis original). For these parishioners, pro-life was not just a matter of ethics, but furthermore one of Catholic identity. Opposing abortion, much like the parish’s “Latin songs, adoration of the Eucharist, and reciting the Rosary,” defines these Catholics’ relationships to their faith (38). This stands in stark contrast to St. Mary Magdalene, whose leadership intentionally appealed to the less traditional, more liberal tendencies of their parishioners who treated the parish as a last stop in being Catholic.

Public Opinion on Abortion

While some respondents in the studies mentioned above believe their pro-life work is acting against a predominately pro-choice U.S., the reality of whether this country is more pro-choice or pro-life is more complex and nuanced. Though impossible to thoroughly appraise citizens’ collective stance on abortion at any point in history, it is worthwhile to examine what most people have thought and think now about the issue in the wake of what the people in this study expressed.

In her book’s discussion of the history of the West’s public discourse on abortion, Kristin Luker (1984) reports on abortion law in the U.S. and England centuries before *Roe*. In this era, abortion was legal before the phase of pregnancy known as “quickening.” Faye Ginsburg (1989) says that in the U.S. as early as the early 19th century it was primarily “physicians [who wanted] to criminalize the practice of abortion...during a period when it had widespread popular acceptance” (23). Ginsburg describes a society that was fairly tolerant of abortion, long before *Roe* and the pro-choice versus pro-life divide had entered public discussion. Whether the physicians leading the early anti-abortion movement felt persecuted or weakened by having to

change the greater social values—values of relative disinterest in but some acceptance of abortion—is unclear. However, Ginsburg demonstrates that the pre-*Roe* anti-abortion movement was largely a professional, not religious or even particularly ethics-based, movement. The early anti-abortion movement thus did not identify as being a religious or ethical minority, as it was less a movement of personal values than of professional politics.

Doctors eventually lost their role as ultimate authorities on abortion and the issue moved into public discussions of ethics and women's rights. Wedam (1993) points out, "There is no adequate historical precedent for legalized abortion in Western societies; there is no historical precedent for equal treatment for women either. Abortion is a confrontation with modernity" (v). When pro-lifers cite the common argument that their movement is a return to the ethical past, they may implicitly or explicitly reject modern feminism. The liberals' reaction is commonly to see pro-lifers as incapable of embracing social justice and progressivism. Wedam does not claim pro-life to be inherently sexist, but she shows that the common argument for more conservative pro-lifers for the idyllic past paints with too broad a brush. Furthermore, although pro-lifers feel more and more stigmatized over time, pro-choice women claim the same thing. The ongoing debate over which group has more power thus has many conflicting discourses. Wedam characterizes this debate as both sides labeling those who "[act] with conviction and certainty on the 'right' side of issues" as "leaders," while those who are "wrong" are "fanatics" (104).

Public opinion on abortion since the 1973 *Roe* mandate remains in-between pro-life and pro-choice. In contemporary political discourse, "pro-choice" connotes the stance of supporting legal abortions for women based on their own discretion (at least until a certain point in the pregnancy), and "pro-life" is the stance of supporting the criminalization of abortion (sometimes

with exceptions for rape and incest, and saving the life of the mother). Between 1977 and 2016, the General Social Survey (GSS) asked “whether or not [respondents] think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if...the woman wants it for any reason.” Every year this question is asked, “no” or “don’t know” responses represent on average 21% more than “yes” responses (NORC 2017). Considering the definitions of “pro-choice” and “pro-life,” these surveys suggest that most respondents are not pro-choice. Despite the seemingly polarized discourse on abortion (dominated by the strong correlation among politicians of Democrats to pro-choice and Republicans to pro-life), these two categories do not capture the majority of American opinions on abortion. In a 2017 Quinnipiac University poll, only 39% of respondents aligned themselves with either the pro-choice or pro-life stance (Malloy and Smith 2017). From 1995-2009, Gallup polls found that most Americans self-identified as pro-choice when given just the two polar options. From 2009-2015, the votes split, with pro-choice or pro-life eking out a majority alternatively almost year-to-year (Saad 2015). While the Gallup polls can be misleading in their simplicity, they accurately demonstrate that there is no clear public opinion on abortion in the U.S. The GSS and Quinnipiac surveys support this claim, showing that American values around abortion are not expressly opposed to it, yet do not support unrestricted access based on women’s choices alone.

In 2012, Quinnipiac University found that American Catholics’ opinions deviate significantly from Church doctrine, including on abortion. Maurice Carroll, the director of the University Polling Institute stated, “On the two issues that have prompted some pulpit thundering, same-sex marriage and abortion, Catholics are right in line...[with] their non-Catholic neighbors.” Despite the old stereotype of voting in line with the pope, Carroll supports

Leege's conclusion mentioned above that American Catholics frequently vote against the Church's teachings. Nonetheless, Carroll noted that American Catholics "overwhelmingly...had a favorable opinion of Pope Francis," the figurehead of Catholic progressivism today who, for some, represents a betrayal of true Catholic ethics.

PURPOSE

The sociological study of religion documents how pro-life Christians feel their cause to be unpopular and that they are often persecuted (Weaver 1995; Weaver and Appleby 1995; Ashley 1995; Maxwell 2002; Williams and Blackburn 1996). We also see the ways in which politicizing parish culture can serve to mobilize, alienate, or drive away parishioners (DiSalvo 2008; Leege 1988; Munson 2008). Sharma (2012) furthermore explored how parish culture is shaped by parishioners based on the politics to which they predominately adhere. This research builds on these findings to address the question, "How does a liberal Catholic parish's culture impact pro-life parishioners?" The parish examined here is St. Gianna, and the pro-life parishioners who serve as respondents are some of the parish's Pro-Life Ministry participants, in which I include a parish administrator who partially oversees their activity. I will first explain how this parish is defined as liberal as respondents told me and as I observed. I will then demonstrate how this culture impacts respondents in terms of its effects on their ministry. I will finally report how they resist their parish's tendencies to suppress pro-life or use their parish culture to serve pro-life. This study furthermore develops how choose to act in their ministry in response to their parish's political culture.

METHODS

Data Collection

In seeking to understand perceptions about St. Gianna's liberal parish culture within the context of its Pro-Life Ministry, this study was based mostly on individual semi-structured interviews. I also observed one event sponsored by the ministry and conducted several informal interviews at the event. I observed parish Masses and conducted content analyses of the parish's promotional literature as well in order to understand the character of the parish as a whole. In my analysis, to try to answer how ministry participants saw the culture at St. Gianna as it related to their pro-life ethics.

While this project was a case study of a single parish and one of its ministries, Mary Ellen Konieczny's (2013) comparison between liberal and conservative churches shaped the approach in conducting ethnography in a parish and analyzing its culture. Her book "seeks to understand social processes underlying the relation between religion and family and their role in moral polarization" with focuses on comparing ideology and values between her sites (9). She approaches the task of researching such fluid objects of study that are difficult to define by employing individual semi-structured interviews as her main data source. She supplements interview data with observations of Masses and other parish events (as well as observing in parishioners' home, though I did not do this). Given the similarity in our studies' aims to examine parishioners' relationships to their parishes over issues of values and politics, I employed similar methods at St. Gianna.

I recruited respondents through convenience and snowball sampling. I chose to study St. Gianna for its liberal reputation, but also for its location near my home. Upon receiving

permission from the pastor to observe at the parish, I was referred to the Pro-Life Ministry leader, Claire, who became my first interviewee. She recruited other ministry participants to be interviewed on my behalf and I reached out to them as well. Interviewees recruited others in turn.

Semi-structured interviews were based around questions designed to get subjects to comment on their perceptions of the pro-life ethic and movement and how socially accepted they are with special regard to St. Gianna parish culture. In the interviews, each respondent completed a short demographic questionnaire before I began asking questions. Of the ten formal interviews completed, four were conducted via phone. The other six were held in person in respondents' homes or in a private room at St. Gianna. Each interview lasted about one hour. I jotted notes by hand in interviews and then typed more thorough fieldnotes of interviews per the methods outlined by Robert M. Emerson, et al in their book (2011). I tried to type fieldnotes as soon as possible, usually beginning them the day of the interview and finishing by the next day. One respondent (not included in the ten interviews) allowed me to use our email exchange as data, though he declined to be formally interviewed. At the film event, I conducted three informal interviews, asking respondents about their thoughts on the film and how to address pro-life effectively in the parish. Informal interviews lasted around five or ten minutes.

I observed ten Masses at the parish, listened to three recordings of homilies posted on St. Gianna's website, and read a transcript of one homily Claire gave on Pro-Life Sunday¹ in 2012. All the Masses I attended or listened to occurred between January 15 and May 21, 2017. At

¹ Pro-Life Sunday is a day of pro-life awareness that some Christians recognize. It falls on the Sunday nearest January 23—the anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that deemed abortion to be legal at the federal level. St. Gianna recognizes the day by decorating the parish with pro-life imagery (albeit subtle and with no direct mention of abortion), as well as inviting a pro-life speaker, though not necessarily a priest, to give the homily.

Masses, I again hand-wrote jottings based on Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (2011) methodology. I kept these jottings in a pocket-sized notebook so I would be less conspicuous and reduce possibly influencing anyone's behavior. I typed more detailed fieldnotes based on jottings within a few hours of each Mass. Considering the common impression that clergy often avoid discussing political issues from the pulpit in favor of spiritual ones (Munson 2008), I paid special attention to how priests chose to discuss the Christian's or Catholic's relationship with society, as well as what political issues they chose to discuss if indeed they discussed any. I noted when priests decided not to mention potentially controversial social or political issues in favor of commenting on interpersonal relationships or cultivating a spiritual relationship with God. Munson's respondents felt frustration in such instances. Beyond homilies, I recorded the topics mentioned in intercessional prayers, announcements, or any other parts of the Mass.

No standard Pro-Life Ministry meetings occurred during the data collection period. These meetings are supposed to occur once a quarter aside from summer, but the meeting set for April was cancelled by the ministry leader due to a family emergency. I observed the only Pro-Life Ministry event that occurred during the data collection period, which was a film screening and discussion of a pro-life film called *Voicelless*. Before the film, the ministry leader briefly introduced me as a researcher before I gave a more detailed introduction of my project and then offered to recruit anyone willing to be interviewed. Since I was "out" as a researcher at this event, I jotted notes in a large notebook, again following Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's ethnographic research methods. I typed fieldnotes of the event over the course of a week or so, as it was a long event from which I gathered some of my richest data.

I furthermore conducted a content analysis of information distributed by St. Gianna at the parish and online. St. Gianna displays its literature in a rack near the entrance of the church. Their website had information on its ministries, recordings and transcripts of past homilies, as well as more general information on the Roman Catholic Church. This content served to outline the parish culture at St. Gianna, alternately confirming and refuting the opinions demonstrated by respondents. Further analysis was conducted of content distributed by three organizations that St. Gianna's Pro-Life Ministry supports financially: a crisis pregnancy center and two pro-life advocacy organizations. Individual respondents worked or volunteered at these organizations as well as supported them in parish programming.

Analysis

While jotting in the field, I wrote short reflections of analytical ideas. I elaborated on and wrote more reflections while typing fieldnotes. I primarily analyzed respondents' expressions about St. Gianna's cultural influence on pro-life activity within the parish. I also tracked how respondents described St. Gianna's culture as liberal, explicitly or implicitly. While the parish was often careful to avoid a clear political bend in its actions and statements, I also tracked moments that I viewed as implicitly left-leaning, as well as more explicit statements in support of liberal causes. Analytical notes in jottings and fieldnotes summarized any potential findings, as well as compared different data points. Analytical notes typed within my fieldnotes served as the initial round of coding. I then re-read all the data and wrote more substantial analytic reflections still within field notes, but also by roughly populating bulleted outlines of arguments that eventually became those discussed below. These outlines served to sketch larger analytical thoughts that connected multiple data sources. I then wrote two brief analytic memos based on

these outlines. The first memo detailed the ways in which respondents expressed how the pro-life ethic was suppressed at St. Gianna; the second was on the various intellectual and programming responses respondents brought to the Pro-Life Ministry. After receiving feedback on the memos with my thesis chair, Rhys Williams, Ph.D., and co-reader, Elfriede Wedam, Ph.D., I wrote four longer outlines and analytic memos on the same arguments, including how respondents and I concluded that St. Gianna's culture was indeed liberal. These final memos served as the basis for the findings section of this thesis. The discussion section was outlined and then written as I wrote the findings section.

FINDINGS

Interviewees

Per the demographic questionnaires, formal interviewees ranged in age from 47 to 71 years with a median age of 66. Eight interviewees were women, three were men. All were white. The highest level of education was more than a bachelor's for six interviewees, a bachelor's for four, and a high school diploma or equivalent for one. Seven interviewees were retired. One of the retired interviewees worked part-time as a director of a pro-life charity. Another interviewee was an administrator at St. Gianna who oversaw outreach and social justice ministries, which included the Pro-Life Ministry. Three interviewees earned an annual household income of more than \$200,000, one earned \$100,001-150,000, one earned \$75,001-100,000, one earned \$50,001-75,000, two earned \$25,001-50,000, one responded, "Social Security and pension," and two did not to respond to this question.

I observed the approximately thirty-five film discussion participants who did not participate in interviews. They looked to have an average age slightly younger than interviewees,

perhaps around 55 years. There was a nearly even number of women and men present. All were white.

St. Gianna as a Liberal Catholic Parish

All interviewees and several film discussion participants defined St. Gianna as a liberal parish, though not necessarily saying so explicitly. For instance, after Nina agreed with my labeling her description of the parish as left-leaning, she then decided that I should call it a “Vatican II parish” to avoid divisive language that may alienate conservative parishioners. As discussed above, scholars of Catholicism have demonstrated extensively that to many conservative Catholics, Vatican II represents a turn toward liberalism for the Church. Some further define Vatican II as a shift away from the core values that have traditionally defined Catholicism (Weaver and Appleby, 1995). Liberals, conversely, may see Vatican II as a point of modernization, perhaps sufficiently or perhaps barely necessary to survive until today. (Several respondents to this study identified liberal Church reforms like female ordination or allowing priests to marry as necessary for the Church’s survival in the future.) Similar to Nina, Katherine said, “I don’t wanna call [St. Gianna] liberal. I’d say it’s more of a progressive place.” She then describes the parish culture per other respondents’ definitions of liberalism, but without explicitly calling it “liberal.” Importantly, the terms “progressive” and “liberal” are mostly interchangeable in meaning in today’s political discourse. Katherine said throughout our discussion that she was uncomfortable discussing politics in church and that such discussions are usually not productive, let alone effective in recruiting support for pro-life. In reflecting on her interview and comparing it to Nina’s and Katherine’s, I conclude that she refrained from directly calling St. Gianna liberal to avoid language that promotes the divisiveness that she finds distasteful. Molly and Val did not

explicitly refer to St. Gianna as liberal, but they noted that most or many, respectively, of their parishioners are pro-choice. To these two respondents, St. Gianna is clearly liberal, at least when it comes to abortion. All other interviewees explicitly called St. Gianna liberal. I did not jot any instances during the film discussion in which participants directly called the parish “liberal,” but they referred several times to its largely pro-choice congregation.

My own observations confirmed that St. Gianna is a liberal parish. In the Masses I attended, priests favored discussing personal spirituality and interpersonal relationships over specific social and political issues. They often made vague references to social issues and took stances that are reasonably characterized as being liberal. For example, one priest (to whom Jack and Patrick referred to as a liberal multiple times) spoke of a sense of “turmoil” and “darkness” that he saw in society soon after the 2016 presidential election; while he did not explicitly make this connection, his language reflected much of the American liberal sentiment at that time.

St. Gianna also often advocated a liberal stance on various controversial social issues. During the prayers of intentions at Masses, prayers were recited for immigrants and refugees. The church hosted an “anti-racist” performance of the Stations of the Cross during Lent. They collaborated with other local religious institutions in organizing visits to an open house event at a nearby mosque. Religious and racial harassment intervention training (given the timing, presumably targeting the widespread Islamophobic hate crimes that began after Donald Trump’s election) was advertised at the parish, as well as offers for transportation to the Chicago People’s Climate March.

The inclusivity that was often defined by respondents as liberal is shown in St. Gianna’s congregation. Lori and Patrick specifically pointed to racial and ethnic inclusivity as defining of

St. Gianna's liberalism (and that that was an admirable quality of the parish). Considering the demographics of the area and how segregated churches tend to be in the United States, St. Gianna is relatively racially and ethnically diverse, though technically does not meet the threshold to be considered "multiracial" by Korie Edwards, et al (2013). I routinely scanned the sanctuary to examine racial and ethnic demographics at each Mass I attended. Most attendees were white; I estimated that about 10-15% of each group were people of color, less than the 20% mark as Edwards, Christerson, and Emerson defined. Besides the majority white parishioners, other ethnic groups that congregants appeared to represent were black, Latino, and Middle Eastern. Compared to other Christian churches of various denominations near St. Gianna that I've attended, St. Gianna is a relatively racially and ethnically diverse parish. Sue, an interviewee, at one point said that she sees St. Gianna as an aging parish. I estimated over the course of data collection that most parishioners were either young families (parents in their late 30s or early 40s, children around ten years old) or couples in their 50s and 60s.

Other general cultural habits practiced at St. Gianna signal its overall liberal culture. One of the parish priests who respondents called a liberal reflected on the necessity of doubt in belief in one of his sermons. This could be taken to signify a liberal theology in the tradition of progressive Protestant thinkers such as Paul Tillich. The same priest also gave a challenging homily that stated Jesus was resurrected with a different body than that which he had in life—also possibly a liberal theological idea that challenges more traditional readings of the Gospel. During a homily, another priest chuckled at the pre-Vatican II theology his generation once believed, then advocated Church reform in a general sense—at least as far as those implemented at Vatican II. Liturgically, St. Gianna often included contemporary worship songs written by

popular evangelical Protestant Christian rock artists like Hillsong United who are not commonly heard in Catholic Masses. In the weekly bulletin, there were advertisements for a Catholic hip hop online radio station. I listened to two songs they played and although the lyrics are socially conservative (the song I remember condemned the immoral androgyny of pop stars like Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber), the use of hip hop in Catholic spiritual music, socially and/or liturgically, seems to be liberal.

St. Gianna's Liberal Culture as Suppressing Pro-Life

Overall, respondents tended to discuss the ways in which St. Gianna's culture was suppressive of the pro-life ethic, movement, and ministry. Though all interviewees and some film discussion participants reported at least some ways in which the culture is helpful (including Nina and Julia, who had almost nothing negative to say of the parish culture as it relates to pro-life), most respondents discussed how the parish culture discourages pro-life at least in some ways. I gleaned two major modes of how respondents appraised St. Gianna's pro-life resistance. First, the "bottom-up" theory, which maintains that the parishioners themselves produce a culture at St. Gianna that discourages pro-life. Second is the "top-down" theory, which shows the ways in which parish leadership (pastors, clergy, and administration) creates or enforces an anti-pro-life culture.

Many of respondents' complaints about St. Gianna were about its "politically correct" (PC) culture, which many of these respondents view as excessive. Jack is the only respondent who explicitly referred to "political correctness." He outlined his beliefs about this, saying,

We live in a PC world, politically correct. We're always concerned about, rather than speaking with truth and honesty and forthrightness, we speak with undue

sensitivity. In a world of constant fear of it, we might hurt somebody, we might inconvenience somebody by speaking either (A) truth, or (B) our own views.

Jack's definition of political correctness appeared implicitly in other respondents' accounts of some of their parish's problems around pro-life. Conforming to the terminology of some on the right with concerns about public sensitivity, as well as for the sake of convenience, the phrase "PC" will be used here when reporting respondents' references to their parish's sensitivity in a negative way. Thus, PC, invoked directly or indirectly, is used as a slur. Several respondents see St. Gianna's touting of their unofficial motto, "all are welcome," as a positive spin on what is truly a PC culture. The critique of St. Gianna's culture as PC appears in both the bottom-up and top-down analyses.

Bottom-up analyses

One critique of the culture at St. Gianna that emerges from the data is that there is not an adequate level of participation in the Pro-Life Ministry. However, some of these critiques do not frustrate respondents much and are furthermore not directly related to the parish's liberal culture. Some of these respondents reported that they saw the sensitivity of abortion as the cause of its unpopularity. Participating in the ministry may give parishioners feelings of anxiety or guilt, especially if they are personally affected by abortion. Claire, in our discussion and in a Pro-Life Sunday homily she gave a few years before (and was posted on the parish website), acknowledged the difficulty of the topic for anyone, let alone those with abortion-related

trauma.² In our interview, Claire also explained that she disagrees with the view common in pro-life that abortion is “the number one issue” facing society today. I think it is likely that other respondents would be shocked to hear a fellow pro-lifer say this, but as Claire explained, it is not a matter of ranking injustices like abortion versus hunger versus homelessness. She sees them all as evils that she wants to end, though she most actively resists abortion. Julia explained how people are reticent to discuss abortion during Masses, as many of the families at St. Gianna have small children who would be upset by hearing of abortion. Another respondent had had an abortion herself years before and noted that while she is a vocal advocate for the pro-life movement and is normally willing to discuss her personal experiences, she struggles with guilt and chooses to distance herself from certain pro-life activities that can be triggering, like protesting at Planned Parenthood. She did not say whether this trauma may be common among other parishioners, but she reported that that is what holds her back from some activities.

Val discussed the possibility that pro-life simply is not the cause to which many parishioners choose to devote their time. Although she believes that abortion is the greatest moral problem that society faces, she accepts that parishioners are drawn elsewhere. Furthermore, she is critical of Pope Francis, saying she wished he would discuss pro-life more. However, she is not angry or especially frustrated with the Pope on an individual level and added that “everybody’s different.” She accepts that he likely just sees different issues to prioritize for his

² Though a large body of journalism and scholarly research argues that there are widespread cases of “post-abortion trauma syndrome (PATS),” the subject is highly politicized. According to competing research, PATS may be highly prevalent or very rare. Some research also argues that diagnoses of and research on PATS is misleading. I do not know if there is any tendency toward consensus among reputable researchers on either side of the debate. Most respondents discuss varying degrees of trauma they have heard of or experienced firsthand because of abortion. None refer to it as a defined diagnosis, nor do they use any clinical terminology like “PATS.” Therefore, I report generally on “abortion-related trauma,” rather than use more controversial and questionable terminology.

own reasons—a realistic but nonetheless disappointing realization. Addressing how she accepts parishioners' and the pope's lack of commitment to pro-life, I asked Val if she gets frustrated with them. She responded with a sigh and a pause, "I don't know. I guess it's frustrating that people have abortions." Val did condemn people's lack of commitment to pro-life as personal failures. The lack of commitment still creates assent to society's greatest evil. While Patrick believes that most parishioners are relatively apathetic on abortion (at least "not spending kinetic energy" for pro-life, as he put it), their apathy works as consent to a small group of very influential liberal parishioners.

Though not directly relayed by these respondents, seeing a lack of pro-life activity at St. Gianna can be a critique of the parish's culture. Low participation in pro-life at St. Gianna is difficult to address when parishioners experience trauma around the subject. For parishioners who prioritize other causes above pro-life, however, despite some insistence that this is not a personal moral failure, low pro-life participation can still be a cultural critique of the parish. Val indirectly criticized the culture at St. Gianna but was clear that her concerns are not the fault of any specific person or even of the parish as a specific institution. Val has no specific frustration with any people at church, or even in the greater Catholic Church. In our interview, I asked, "You don't sound like you're terribly angry at anyone. Is that right?" She responded with some incredulity, "Angry at people? No!" Although she thinks Pope Francis is genuine in "[worrying more] now about the poor people...[it] doesn't mean he's not pro-life." She still reported, though, that the Pope "could do more."

However, Val also expressed frustration with ineffective or corrupt politicians and the very pro-choice media. Val did not name any specific people or institutions who bear

responsibility for abortion (it is worth noting that Val strongly admires the effort Claire puts into the Pro-Life Ministry, and that any lack of pro-life activity at church is despite Claire's hard work and strong morals). Instead, she resists a more general, unvocalized cultural system of assent to abortion that she sees existing at St. Gianna. Despite people's best intentions and personal commitment to pro-life values, Val sees the fact that abortion still happens shows how these intentions are not sufficient in resisting abortion effectively. The fact that she named poverty as what distracts Pope Francis from being stronger on pro-life demonstrates a criticism of a culture that values working for liberal social justice causes, which does not align with pro-life. Her disappointment shows up at church as well; though she did not bemoan the social justice emphasis at St. Gianna, other respondents clearly see these issues as getting much of the attention pro-life deserves. Later in our interview, Val also said she is disturbed with how liberal the U.S. is becoming ("I think we're heading towards socialism, which is not what our country is founded on."). Though a self-identified moderate, Val believes that liberal causes have more sway, both in American government and in St. Gianna's culture.

Respondents also reported that many parishioners at St. Gianna are pro-choice and discourage Pro-Life Ministry activity themselves. Patrick cited an incident after one of the Pro-Life Sunday Masses at which he volunteered:

So, there I am at the back of the church narthex, and as people are leaving Mass I'm handing out pro-life material. I actually had several women, older women, forty, fifty years old, as they passed by, I gave them [the material], they walked about ten feet, they're looking [at the material], and they felt so compelled to make a statement that they turn around and came back, rather than just pitch the stuff in the garbage, turned around and came back, got back in line and got to me and handed me the material back with a verve and said, "[speaking and gesturing forcefully] I don't believe in this," and then headed out. So, they had to make their statement to me: "I don't believe in this."

Claire roughly estimated that perhaps 30% of the parish is pro-choice, while Molly believed over half are. Several interviewees recalled people walking out of Pro-Life Sunday Masses, which they interpret to have been acts of protest. Jack, Lori, and Patrick also noted that while there are many liberal parishioners, there are very strong pro-life advocates at the parish that work hard to offset the liberal slant. As referenced above, Patrick described the parishioners to be in a power struggle:

PATRICK: It's probably a dumbbell, you know? You've got the big cluster of liberals, then you got the big cluster or conservatives, and most people in the middle are apathetic.

JONATHAN: So, the people in the middle, were they to choose a side...

PATRICK: My theory about that is that the very definition is, "I'm not gonna expend any kinetic energy to do anything." So, they say, "Eh, do whatcha want. I'm not gonna go out there and protest. The law of the land, Roe v. Wade, I'm not gonna work to overturn it."

He believes that if some liberal parishioners exercise great influence, a large part of the parish body passively accepts the liberals' stance on abortion. He later discussed how the pro-life parishioners have started to make strides as well without complaint from the apathetic majority. While Patrick sees the parishioners as largely apathetic, this appears as liberalism in their apparent assent to the liberal agenda.

Respondents furthermore see a problematic PC culture coming from parishioners. The mere presence of pro-choice parishioners, or even self-identified "apolitical" people who dislike discussing abortion in the parish, discourages pro-life advocacy out of a fear of offending someone. Val stated simply, "Our parish doesn't wanna offend anybody," and other respondents confirmed this. Claire described an upsetting instance in which a fellow parishioner who was leading a "Donut Sunday" event after Mass forced Claire to leave while she was showing a pro-

life public service announcement in the same room. She was screening a pro-life public service announcement off to the side of the parish “Donut Sunday” social event following Mass. The PSA showed teenagers explaining alternatives to abortion, and “there was no blood or guts or anything like that.” She recalled,

So, we’re showing these commercials, asking for money, but we had the TV in where we serve donuts because it was a Donut Sunday and people could watch it. And the guy in charge of donuts had a fit that we were showing abortion commercials during Donut Sunday [laughs]. But they weren’t graphic, they weren’t terrible, and he literally...threw me out.

After she told me of this incident, I asked why she thinks the parishioner responded this way. She answered, “I don’t think he thought of it as political...[He thought,] ‘This is inappropriate. This is for families, this is donuts, you can’t show that in here.’” Claire told this story in response to my questions about how St. Gianna demonstrates an objection toward pro-life. While she specified, “I don’t think [the Donut Sunday incident was] indicative of St. Gianna’s behavior,” at least in terms of open hostility, she acknowledged it as a moment indicating the culture’s occasional suppression of pro-life activities, and it specifically connotes a bottom-up analysis.

Jack, Lori, and Patrick also believe many parishioners at St. Gianna to be unwilling to allow pro-life discussion. Jack recalled an incident his wife reported from a choir rehearsal:

One of the choir members has a grandchild. At choir practice, he announces that he’s just had a grandchild. And he announces that he—I can’t explain exactly how it was [since I was not there], but essentially, he said, “Thank God this child wasn’t aborted.” A strong pro-life guy, and he said, “Thank God this was a beautiful child.” And members of the choir shouted out, “Nothing political here! Stop the politics! Stop the politics!”...If [St. Gianna is] to be a family, we have to have an understanding of the basic moral fiber and understanding with which we live.

Lori and Patrick, a married couple, have considered changing parishes because of St. Gianna’s weak pro-life culture. Lori said of St. Gianna, “There’s that *feeling* of being in a community

church. That's a good feeling, but it's also you don't wanna step on anybody's toes...So you can't really be yourself there." Hostile responses to pro-life discussion at St. Gianna makes way for the fear of offending someone. Some respondents explicitly or implicitly labeled this as PC culture, and still others connected this tension to greater public discussions about sensitivity on the left. The effect of PC culture is thus not feeling welcomed in the space parishioners seek acceptance, as well as what Jack called "undue sensitivity...rather than speaking with truth and honesty and forthrightness."

For Lori and Patrick, this Pro-Life Sunday means that parishioners "don't want *the* Catholic doctrine and dogma" (in Patrick's words). Patrick echoed Lori's frustration that PC culture is so rampant at St. Gianna that it prevents the parish from fulfilling basic Catholic tenets. In fact, both Lori and Patrick recalled someone previously in a parish leadership position saying that St. Gianna is "so liberal, it is the last stop that Catholics make before they leave the Church." Lori described St. Gianna as "almost like being a Protestant church," and that she wished they were "more homogenous in terms of pro-life." When I ask Patrick if he himself believes St. Gianna is indeed "last stop" church, he responded, "I don't see these people as ready to leave the Church. I see these people as wanting their own religion!" Both Lori and Patrick are devout Catholics and find it offensive that their parish equivocates on abortion. Lori and Patrick brought up these concerns about the weak parish leadership, specifically around Pro-Life Sunday, that fails to discourage what they see as un-Catholic belief and behavior.

Several respondents also see the rejection of pro-life at St. Gianna as indicative of a moral lapse of recent years in the United States. This attributed moral lapse is not unique to St. Gianna, but its culture embodies it microcosmically. I asked Molly if she saw a trend in opinions

on abortion in the U.S. She responded, “I think it’s changed. I think the people are getting cold, the hearts are getting cold. They couldn’t care less if they saw an aborted fetus disfigured.”

Responding to a similar question, Katherine attributed abortion to “living in this world right now of anything goes, do whatever you want, who cares about the consequences,” noting specifically that she sees this tendency in younger parishioners of St. Gianna. She elaborated,

I just think our life has become such a disposable, quick-fix, do what feels right and solve the problem right now sort of attitude. And people don’t wanna look within and think deeper and feel deeper...I think it’s in the world we live in, there’s a lot coming at us that goes against what [Catholics] believe and our values. A lot of chatter out there that gets to be a lot louder than we are...I just think it’s this culture—this social media world we live in...I think spirituality in this day and age is not a priority for a lot of people.

Val believes the main cause of abortion is an increasing “lack of morality.” Her critique was similar to Katherine’s, but Val’s dated back further to the origins of moral loss:

I think people don’t have the same values that they used to. When people were closer together and closer to families and they had more of a support system, I think they saw the values and everything. But you get out, you can be far away from your family, you don't have as much support, and so you think, “Oh, I can do whatever I want!” They don’t worry about the consequences of their actions.

Where Katherine focused on observations of the young people around her, Val pointed to history.

Val furthermore believes that *Roe* did not necessarily catalyze this ongoing shift, but was passed because of it. Val’s interview centered on abortion, but she noted that contemporary society’s economic turmoil has similar roots in the rampant disregard for consequences that both she and Katherine mentioned.

Top-down analyses

Respondents frequently attributed the ways in which St. Gianna’s parish culture is unsupportive and suppressive of pro-life as matters of church leadership, or a “top-down” effect.

The film shown in the pro-life event I attended, *Voicelless*, describes church leadership as often being pulled to “fill the pews,” but also to “speak the truth.” Several respondents invoked this language as well, which is why I feel the expression is a fitting title of this study. Respondents tend to feel that congregational leaders are meant to guide the church to moral truth, but often lose their way in order to engage more people. Respondents’ critiques of the parish leadership only occasionally commented on the possible motives of “filling the pews,” which they view mostly as a matter of securing or bringing in more funds for the church. However, they did not claim to have any surety over claims of motive and tended to focus on the observable rather than the speculative. Still other respondents recognize the ways in which parish leadership is pulled in multiple directions, but express sympathy with that difficulty.

Respondents claimed that parish leadership encourages a PC culture and suppresses the Pro-Life Ministry to appease other parishioners who disagree with the Ministry (and thus “fill the pews”). Claire recalled that two previous pastors were very concerned to alleviate any tension at the parish. She told of one of the pastors censoring a speaker on Pro-Life Sunday who the pastor felt was being too divisive. Claire remembered, “[The pastor] actually grabbed one of our pro-life speakers by the ear and said, ‘Don’t you dare talk like that from our pulpit again!’ He just shut him down.” Although the other pastor allowed the Pro-Life Ministry to operate freely most of the time, he restricted them on Pro-Life Sunday, possibly because the Mass is attended by more than just pro-life parishioners. At the film discussion, participants referenced a previous pastor making some sort of a controversial apology. Some participants asked one of the facilitators why he apologized, and the facilitator (an employee of the parish) said he could not speak to the pastor’s motivation. In my interview with Claire, I asked her what they were

discussing. She told me of the 2017 Pro-Life Sunday speaker, who Claire thought was “dynamic [and] wonderful.” She explained,

To make a long story short, one of the things she talked about was birth control. She said it during the homily, she’s just like, “The Catholic Church needs to kinda [accept] birth control [as a moral option to prevent pregnancies and abortions].” And there was like two or three people that went up to [the pastor] afterwards and said, “Shame on you for letting that be said from our parish. That’s not in the Catholic doctrine and you know that.” So, he actually got up the next week and apologized for her. So that was a little bit like, “Oh, come on!” ’Cause I had seven or eight people say she was the best pro-life speaker we've had yet, she was awesome. And *I* thought she was awesome.

I responded asking if she thought those seven or eight parishioners represented St. Gianna’s majority and the two or three who complained to the pastor were in the minority. She said that was “absolutely” the case. It is interesting to note that for Claire, as well as Sue and Julia, contraception is integral to pro-life. Claire specified that while celibacy until marriage is the most moral path, contraception is a much lesser evil than abortion. She even said that opposing contraception is inconsistent with her view of pro-life: “If people are gonna have sex, they’re gonna have sex.” Claire thinks that, overall, “[Catholics] are getting smarter” and becoming more accepting of contraception (at least in the U.S.), which is a significant break from the Catholic Church’s official approach to the pro-life ethic. She was furthermore disappointed in the pastor’s apology for the Pro-Life Sunday speaker’s advocacy of contraception. It is thus reasonable to conclude that she thinks most of her fellow parishioners feel similarly. Whether or not she thinks this, though, she saw these two pastors as “pretty strict with what they’ll say and the feeling they wanna get in the church.” Claire overall deeply admires the welcoming culture at St. Gianna. However, she thinks this welcoming can show up as unnecessary sensitivity, even to the point of censorship. As shown by the Donut Sunday incident, PC can show up to shut down

discussion of abortion; as shown by the Pro-Life Sunday apology, it can also serve to condemn the Ministry's specific approach to pro-life as breaking Church doctrine.

Respondents who disapprove of Pro-Life Sunday homilies for being too weak, however, place this responsibility partially on parish leadership as well. The Pro-Life Ministry selects and vets the Pro-Life Sunday speakers each year. It is unclear if pastors have always played a role in selecting and vetting. Several respondents, however, recalled a speaker from a few years before whose homily was seen by many as offensive. Claire first told me of the incident,

CLAIRE: Somehow through poor vetting, [we] had a speaker here for Pro-Life Sunday that was just awful. They got political and they got ugly and it was just like, "Shiiit!"

JONATHAN: [Laughs] Too confrontational?

CLAIRE: Yes, exactly, yeah. And that's not the message we wanted, you know? And it was actually a priest believe it or not.

JONATHAN: But not from St. Gianna?

CLAIRE: No. It was someone that we brought in based on a recommendation, but he was awful. And the [St. Gianna] priest after the 8am Mass just cut it off, "You can't come back. We'll find something else to do at the next two Masses." So that was kind of embarrassing and bad.

As a result, the Pro-Life Ministry and pastor are more careful in their vetting process. This includes their monitoring of what the speakers plan to discuss as Val explained to me, "Somebody got graphic one time and people were upset, and so from then on they have everybody send their speech they're gonna give and they have to give them permission for the speakers, before they let them speak."

As the Pro-Life Ministry coordinator, Claire's attitude to the screening process is one of acceptance: "We [the ministry] could literally get shut down [if someone is too offensive], like

that one Pro-Life Sunday after 8 o'clock. We didn't have anybody [speak on pro-life for the rest of the day]. It's important that we play by the rules at St. Gianna and do what we can." Other respondents see the screening process as suppressive to pro-life—not that screening the homilies at all is inherently suppressive, but that it is too quick to censor, which results in a weak message. As Val described the process above, her tone was not obviously frustrated. Overall, she is accepting of the culture at St. Gianna. However, before she discussed "somebody [getting] graphic" on Pro-Life Sunday, she said, "Our parish doesn't wanna offend anybody." Again, her tone here was measured, and besides some angry words about Donald Trump, the frustration that came out in the interview was reserved for abortion as a systemic phenomenon more than one of individual agency. But the phrasing of this statement on offending people suggests a veiled criticism of how sensitive parishioners tend to be at St. Gianna, or how careful, perhaps weak, their leadership is around abortion. Jack, alternatively, spoke of the screening process for Pro-Life Sunday with clear annoyance. He recalled a previous year when he gave the Pro-Life Sunday homily, stating, "I was so monitored about what I could say and couldn't say under [a previous pastor], and I don't think it'd be much different under [the succeeding pastor]." He wished one of the future speakers would say something he views as stronger and not equivocating on Church teaching:

Imagine if a bishop came and said, "Folks, I'm a [inaudible] of Christ and I'm here to tell you about Christ's teachings. And I'm here to soften your hearts and I'm here to engage your minds and I'm here to engage your spirits," and began the message of leadership.

Lori, alternatively, sees the shift from strong Pro-Life Sunday speakers not in response to the outside priest's angry homily, but in trying to discourage strong homilies on abortion from happening at all. She told me,

Like [a previous pastor's] first homily, which was wonderful...He just went, "When a child is conceived, this is part of your spiritual—you're vested with life in that moment. And at the moment of conception they're a separate human being." And that's how I've always thought, with their own purpose in life. And that's how he kind of directed it. God put them here for their own purpose. And you don't have to be like some of these nuts that say, "Oh, you're gonna go to Hell," and "fire and brimstone," anything like that, because that's between you and God. *Obviously*, that's between you and God. But the Church supports that belief system that this is what God wants. And this is what the Church believes. Don't try to make it something different because it doesn't fit into whatever you want it to fit, you know?

This homily was basically everything Lori wanted from a Pro-Life Sunday speaker: it was not condemning or angry, but it was clearly opposed to abortion. This pastor

also sponsored a person who came, she did not speak at the different Masses, but she spoke in a separate room, she spoke about her experience of having three abortions and being pushed into it by her then husband and how it left her bereft.

Lori acknowledged this talk would be inappropriate at Mass for its difficult content but still thought it important for St. Gianna to host. Since it was this pastor's first year with the parish, though, Lori sees the Pro-Life Sunday homilies as getting "weaker and weaker." Given the arc that she has observed at St. Gianna over the years, she believes the parish staff is "just very ambiguous about their feelings about [pro-life]." Her invocation of the parish staff, however, departs from others' accounts of the (volunteer) Pro-Life Ministry being partly responsible for screening Pro-Life Sunday talks; perhaps her view is that, behind closed doors, other leaders at the church are discouraging the pastor from speaking truthfully on abortion. Claire sees the pastor as "a straight-line thinker about pro-life," even stating that she wants him to be the one to screen Pro-Life Sunday homilies. Ultimately, though, she thinks that other parish leadership that suppresses pro-life won out over the pro-life pastor.

Lori's views of St. Gianna's political correctness are of these staff, and perhaps pastors submitting to staff's demands, shirking their basic moral responsibilities. What seems to be the best example of such moral disregard is Pro-Life Sunday. She sees a recent tendency in the parish where the yearly speakers discuss the other CEL issues besides abortion, which she views as a cowardly move done in the name of PC culture. Lori was very kind the day of our interview; she welcomed me warmly into her home and expressed enthusiasm for my project. As she told me the following, though, her tone shifted from measuredly frustrated to openly angry:

On Pro-Life Sunday it's about babies. It's about saving the unborn. And we [at St. Gianna] try not to talk about it! We try not to talk about it because we've got people who don't believe in it! And so, when churches start to do that, they start losing me. That's almost right up there with the priests and all the hierarchy disregarding the sex crisis with the children. They turn their backs on it. Now it's like, "Because you want the money, you're gonna let people do that? You're afraid of losing your congregation?" That disturbs me.

While St. Gianna's PC culture exists ostensibly to service the "all are welcome" credo, she expresses more than any other respondent a suspicion that it is a front to attract more parishioners and thus more money; upon reviewing St. Gianna's public annual financial report, Sunday collections are by far their most significant revenue source. Although Lori is most likely aware that it may be more complicated than pure greed, this supports her suspicion that the parish encourages inclusivity for the purpose of increasing Mass attendance in order to raise more revenue. Regardless of motive, however, by ignoring what she sees as the most pressing moral issue of her time, Lori accuses St. Gianna of committing a sin akin to that of the widespread masking of sexual abuse.

Patrick takes similar issue with St. Gianna's leadership encouraging its PC culture. Referring to the same Pro-Life Sunday speaker Lori discussed above, Patrick recalled her

“dancing around the subject” of abortion. Lori remembered her advocating strongly for the CEL besides abortion, but Patrick remembered, “[Her] message was basically, ‘We have to love everyone...that everything is ok and we love everyone’ ...So there was no...‘What can we do to prevent abortion?’ (Neither Lori nor Patrick mentioned the controversy others discuss on the speaker’s advocacy of birth control.) Patrick, like Lori, believes that St. Gianna failed on this Pro-Life Sunday to adequately address abortion and thus failed to represent Catholic values.

St. Gianna’s Liberal Culture as Helpful to Pro-Life

Respondents expressed how the parish’s culture, despite its liberal qualities, helps pro-life. These instances also fit into bottom-up and top-down frameworks.

Bottom-up analyses

Most of St. Gianna’s pro-life activity comes from the respondents’ own Pro-Life Ministry. The ministry toes a line between representing parishioners (which would fit into the bottom-up analysis) and parish leadership (top-down). It is led and attended by lay parishioners, and the pastor present during data collection gave them nearly free reign over their activities. They also work with the pastor in choosing Pro-Life Sunday speakers and events. In this section, I will examine how respondents view the Pro-Life Ministry as the efforts of parishioners without the authority of parish leaders.

The only Pro-Life Ministry event that occurred during the period of data collection was a screening of a Christian pro-life film, *Voiceless*. The film’s protagonist is Jesse, a PTSD-suffering war veteran who just moved to West Philadelphia for an outreach ministry coordinator position at a poor urban church. After realizing the clinic across the street performs abortions, he devotes his ministry to protesting the clinic in hopes of its closing. Along the way, he meets resistance

from the parish leadership, the parishioners, the police, the clinic, some of the clinic patients, and some of their partners. The film was a Pro-Life Ministry event that was almost universally well-received. Jack, a respondent who was among the most outspoken against the state of St. Gianna's culture, thought the film was very powerful. During his interview, he recalled specific scenes from the film and how his experiences, particularly at his parish, confirm the film's accuracy in depicting the difficulty pro-life faces. After the film ended and the discussion began, the audience similarly pointed to specifics in the film that they see happening at and outside of their parish. During the film and the discussion, I overheard a lot of emotional affirmations of the film, namely disgust at the characters who resisted the pro-life message. The only complaint regarding the film event came, interestingly, from its organizer, Claire. While she liked the film and found the discussion important, she told me that she detected no evidence of an increase in pro-life interest at St. Gianna. (However, she also acknowledged that she scheduled no other pro-life events during this time due to unexpected personal commitments.)

Nina is unique in her almost entirely positive view of St. Gianna's general culture and as it relates to pro-life. As a paid administrator in the outreach and social justice office for the parish, her bias may be not to sound too critical of the parish; however, her position could alternatively give her a wide view of most of the parish's activity. She mentioned in our interview that she must frequently remind herself to be careful as an employee and representative of the Catholic Church when she discusses certain Vatican policies with which she disagrees. In our conversation, though, she was animated and clearly passionate; if she gave me a safe interview with public relations or maintaining political correctness, she had me totally convinced of her sincerity. When we began our interview, Nina told me of her upbringing in a very

conservative part of Illinois by two parents who were devoted to progressive approaches to theology and politics. She leaned left on all the issues we discussed in our interview other than the conservative aspects of the CEL, which she follows. When we began discussing St. Gianna, she proudly told me that she is a founding member of the parish (but qualifies her pride by stating she does not feel entitled to greater influence over the parish's cultural direction). It may then be expected by conservative parishioners that she is pleased by the fact that their parish's culture is dominated by liberalism. But Nina says one of the main reasons she is proud to be part of the parish is because

there are people in this parish that I sometimes am surprised they still come to church here because their views on things seem so different than what a lot of the parish thinks. But I'm like, "Yay, rah!" that there's something here that they're drawn to! You know, there's something that brings them to St. Gianna. I mean, I think it's very clear kinda where the parish bent is in general. But I think there is something here that causes them to stay. And I think that's wonderful. I mean, we have so many Catholic parishes in town. People have a choice. But they still come here and I think that says a lot for who we are as a parish. We really try to be welcoming to everybody. Really welcoming, not just lip service. Really try to be welcoming to *anybody* who comes through our doors.

While the more conservative respondents would likely say that this inclusivity is misapplied or even that it actually *is* lip service (PC culture), Nina reports St. Gianna's welcoming message as one of its best attributes. While there is nothing inherently political, let alone liberal, about a welcoming church community, it is the part of St. Gianna's culture that causes the most tension and disagreement among respondents as it relates to politics. As discussed above, some respondents think outreach and social justice are overemphasized at St. Gianna, or at least do not include enough on pro-life. Nina explained the difference between the outreach and social justice ministries, which I did not know before speaking with her. The former refers to activity that provides needy people with resources, while the latter is activity that seeks more systemic

changes for justice. Nina sees St. Gianna's outreach work as outstanding and thinks their social justice work is good and getting stronger. St. Gianna's liberalism works well according to Nina, and although it is facilitated by leadership from her and others in the parish administration, it works because of its widespread support among lay parishioners.

Nina also departs from the general consensus of other respondents when she talks about how strong the Pro-Life Ministry is. She described an event in which the ministry teamed up with St. Gianna's Pax Christi group (an international Catholic movement for social justice) as "a beautiful marriage." The Pro-Life Ministry, in Nina's opinion, does a good job of representing all the issues addressed by the CEL, while all other respondents besides Julia who discussed the CEL do not follow it. Nina furthermore called Pope Francis a "rockstar," citing his redirection of pro-life focus from condemning abortion. She dismisses the condemning approach as redundant and ineffective: "[He doesn't] need to be the one continually reminding people...[of] what the Church teaches!" Instead, Nina sees Francis's pro-life strength (besides the related CEL stances, which she and other Catholics believe he represents [Gehring 2017]) in speaking on "grayer" issues of which Catholic opinion is less definable. She discussed Francis's statements on Charlie Gard, a terminally ill baby in the United Kingdom whose parents were fighting the hospital to devote more efforts to saving him. The hospital was concerned that the resources to do this would be too costly and ultimately ineffective. At the time of our conversation, Gard's parents were in the news frequently, fighting the hospital where their son was and the courts in the U.K. for refusing him treatment. Nina told me,

Let's look at a current example, the baby in England, ok? Well, the pope has come out and talked about that. I think there's gray areas within the topic of abortion because there's a lot that goes into it in terms of the financial situation of the mother, the health of the mother, is the father—you know, things like that. But I

think what the Church teaches is you respect life in all forms, so that's pretty black and white. There's no gray in there. This young baby, it's a tough one. We know what the Church teaches about life...But I think for [Pope Francis] saying [that he supports Gard's parents], I think pro-life advocates and ministries should look at his response to that and put that in his plus column!

After Nina explained to me her admiration of Pope Francis, I asked what she makes of the internal Catholic resistance to his progressive stance, and whether she sees this resistance at St. Gianna. She said, "I don't think I've seen it here. I've seen it nationally..." then turned her focus to other American Catholics' concerns about the Pope. This surprised me, given how my respondents seem to split evenly between supporting and opposing the Pope. I asked her to clarify if she thinks there is near agreement over how to approach pro-life at St. Gianna. She responded,

The biggest thing that I've seen is...It's more like [parishioners complaining], "You [church administrators] need to do more [for pro-life]." But if a parishioner comes to us with an idea under any of our ministries, we'll always talk...So, I think that's where sometimes they'd like us to do maybe a few more movies, but it's not just that topic. There'd be other topics. [Addressing complaining parishioners,] "Find something! Come and talk to us! We're willing to talk to you!"

I followed this up with a question on whether the disagreement has a noticeable negative effect on parish culture. She says it does not since there are only a few dissenting parishioners, and they are open to discussing their concerns with staff, and these discussions do not escalate. This was a very different account from Molly, Jack, Lori, and Patrick, who believe St. Gianna faces a cultural crisis, particularly over abortion. For Nina, however, she sees pro-life at her parish as strong and widely supported, at least as much as reasonably expected in a large congregation.

Although Claire expresses some disappointment with the lack of pro-life activity at St. Gianna, her worldview—somewhat unique to pro-life—allows her to accept this reality more

easily than others. As discussed above, this viewpoint contrasts Val's disappointed acceptance that people are drawn away from working with the Pro-Life Ministry. Val takes special offense at the injustice of abortion and society's insufficient resistance, with particular attention to how this appears at St. Gianna. Claire sees pro-life and culture generally, as well as at St. Gianna, differently. Where some other respondents (Jack, Julia, likely others as well) believe abortion to be the greatest threat to humanity, Claire intentionally avoids engaging any such claims. She sees abortion, "euthanasia...poverty...homelessness...and a ton of issues in the world that are tough" as not necessarily equal in their evil, but they are all evil and they all demand attention. However, she does not pass the same judgment on the lack of pro-life activity at her church as Val does. Again, Val's judgment is systemic, not personal. Claire is passionately pro-life as well, and while she also likely feels discouraged by the lack of pro-life activity at church, she does maintain the belief that diversifying ministry work is not counter-productive to pro-life. Val conversely did say that the pope and Pro-Life Ministry "could do more" to resist pro-life, especially when compared to their concentrated efforts on other social justice issues.

Top-down analyses

For some respondents, the local diocese is seen as supportive of pro-life and helps St. Gianna's ministry resist their PC culture. As a representative of the Knights of Columbus, Patrick facilitates many events at the parish, from liturgical ceremonies to decorating the parish for Pro-Life Sunday. He told me of an instance that he sees as epitomizing St. Gianna's overly-sensitive culture. The parish's Knights of Columbus performed a ceremonial procession involving prop swords, which sparked a complaint by a couple attending the Mass who found the use of weaponry offensive. The pastor at the time reacted by prohibiting future ceremonies from

involving swords. While Patrick did acknowledge that the diocese is a “mixed bag” in terms of the strength of its advocacy against PC culture—a significant roadblock to St. Gianna’s pro-life activity—one bishop who told the Knights privately that he would have supported them were he the pastor. Several film discussion respondents furthermore claimed that individual bishops and diocese as a whole are more supportive of pro-life than St. Gianna’s priests. Other discussion participants, however, express disagreement, stating either that St. Gianna’s priests are strongly pro-life, or that the bishops kowtow to pro-choicers within the diocese. A film discussion participant furthermore argued that the bishops are “more pro-life” than their parish priests.

Claire sees the diocese’s pro-life advocacy in its laissez-faire approach to their parish’s ministry. When the bishops do receive complaints from St. Gianna parishioners about the Pro-Life Ministry, Claire receives communiques from parish administrators, who say,

“We got an email that said, ‘Hey, we’re forwarding this complaint onto you.’” And that’s where it stops. “There ya go, *you* do something about it. We’re not gonna tell you what to do.” If somebody emails the bishop with a complaint about [the Pro-Life Ministry], he forwards it back to us and says, “Here ya go. Here’s some feedback for you.” He doesn’t tell us, “You can’t do that anymore,” or, “You have to do that.” Just, “Here’s your problem to deal with however you decide to.”

Claire sees the bishops’ hands-off style as empowering to the ministry. This way, the ministry, especially Claire, can work with the parish leadership per their own discretion on appropriate activities. When a film discussion participant claimed that bishops are more pro-life than priests, others painted the diocese as reproducing the PC culture at St. Gianna. Participants debated the role local bishops tend to play regarding pro-life. Another participant stood with the bishops and priests, claiming that parishioners “need to support [their] priests [and bishops].” Rather than discouraging dissent, however, he said parishioners can best support clergy by being more vocally pro-life so the diocesan leaders, whom he sees as mostly populists, can respond with

support. While this discussion participant's appraisal did not necessarily paint the bishops as being strongly pro-life, he sees their potential for influence to pro-life's benefit.

The Vatican and pope also shape the sense of parish culture at St. Gianna. Although Pope Francis's decrees may not observably impact their church, some respondents report that his approach to pro-life supports the work they are doing in their ministry, which aids other parishioners to buy in to the cause. Claire believes that Pope Francis is a "breath of fresh air" for many Catholics. His contribution that she most appreciates is the Year of Mercy from 2015-2016. Officially known as the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Claire explained to me it represented "any kind of mercy, any kind of forgiveness." Claire was especially moved by the Pope's intentional inclusion of abortion in the Jubilee, musing on "how liberating that would be for women [who have had abortions]." In reflecting on the compassion Francis shows for women who have had abortions, Claire remarks after a brief pause, "He's just so normal, you know?" In the context of negatively criticizing some pro-lifers as being "wacky," her word meaning "condemning" and "lack[ing] compassion," I infer Claire's use of the word "normal" to mean accepting and compassionate. She further supports this inference in commenting on how out of touch Catholic leaders can be, promoting strict adherence to tradition over practical solutions. Contraception and female ordination are two of the issues on which she sees the Church maintaining a wacky position. Although she acknowledges the Pope's wacky tendencies ("He still has a ways to go on the whole [acknowledging women priests] thing."), she sees his compassion around abortion as representing a sensible and progressive stance for the Church to take. Given the satisfaction with Francis that she perceives among other parishioners, she believes this "normal" approach to pro-life is popular and bolstering to her ministry.

Sue's appreciation of Pope Francis and his validation of St. Gianna's culture interestingly directly contradicts the beliefs of some of the more conservative respondents. When I initially asked Sue about her thoughts on Francis and his impact on the Catholic Church, she responded, "I love him. I *love* Pope Francis! He rocks! I'm gonna tell you something, he wants to change things. He wants things to be more liberal, more open." She goes on:

SUE: He doesn't like to live in the Vatican! He's a schmo like you and I! I love him because—you know, I call it non-denominational Pope. That's how I call it... Because he speaks from his heart, not with people coaching him...

JONATHAN: So, when you say "non-denominational," you mean not the proper Catholic way of doing things...?

SUE: Right! That's how I portray him! I portray him as, yes, he's Catholic. But he's a non-denominational Catholic. Pretty much he's open to things. Open to see more things. Does he forgive people that have had abortions? Absolutely. You think he's gonna throw people out in the street? No! But does he wanna see more cutbacks [on abortions]? Absolutely.

Sue admires Francis's departure from what she sees as papal traditions, namely a lavish lifestyle and reinforcing a condemning approach to pro-life. Although the more conservative respondents would agree with Sue regarding the pope's modest lifestyle and outreach to women who have had abortions, they likely would be less enthusiastic about her general approval of his "non-denominational" habits. Val also praised the pope for being a liberal, but sees in him "hope...for change," and not that he necessarily represents reform now.

Other respondents also expressed praise for the pope and how his ethic is present at St. Gianna. While Sue sees Pope Francis as breaking from Catholic tradition in significant, yet positive, ways, Katherine made a point to mention that Francis is "traditional" and "stick[s] to the catechism." Although she does not see Francis as the reformer that Sue views him to be, Katherine thinks he has positively impacted the Church with his "all are welcome" approach to

the faith. This is the quality Katherine most admires in both Pope Francis and her home parish. Nina, an employee of St. Gianna, did not speak to how Francis adheres to or departs from Catholic tradition, but mentioned his positive attributes other respondents discuss: openness, forgiveness, and generosity to the poor. She also says that he lives the consistent ethic of life much like St. Gianna's Pro-Life Ministry.

Political labeling as problematic

Within a politically divided parish, some respondents made a point to express their distaste for placing people along the liberal-conservative spectrum. Claire said that over half of her friends are pro-choice and that she refuses to choose friends based on their opinion of abortion. Based on her discussion of her approach to pro-choice people with God's love and even close friendship, I infer that while she hopes to see pro-life spread in its influence, she focuses her attention more on reducing the number of abortions. She admits throughout our discussion that she is "not a very good evangelist" in response to her lack of motivation, both personally and as the head of the Pro-Life Ministry, to proselytize for pro-life. She finds the politicization of abortion, though necessary, to be distracting at times from providing basic care for mothers and trying to help vulnerable women seek resources to raise their children. For this reason, she finds political conflict at church, a place where she finds a great deal of meaning in community, to be distasteful. Katherine echoes Claire's sentiments and praises Claire specifically for her depoliticized leadership of the ministry. After our interview (in which she characterized St. Gianna as liberal), Nina suggested that I refer to St. Gianna as a "Vatican II parish." Although Vatican II represents a distinct moment of liberalization of Roman Catholic values, she told me that calling the parish by this doctrinally sanctioned phrase will appear less divisive to

conservative readers. Although Julia identifies herself and others in political terms, she says that such labels can be used offensively and create division among people. She furthermore says that the polarized, liberal-conservative way of naming individual political leanings is “not a fair thing” because many people, including herself, have beliefs that do not neatly align on the left or right.

Worth noting is that all three respondents who expressed a dislike for political labeling tend to favor the parish culture at St. Gianna and reportedly embraced at least some aspects of their parish’s liberalism. While it is reasonable to predict that conservative respondents would express similar sentiments regarding the harm in political labels, they also explicitly stated on numerous occasions their desires for greater political consensus within the parish, namely on abortion.

Ministry Responses to St. Gianna’s Liberalism

The Pro-Life Ministry participants at St. Gianna react to their liberal parish culture in diverse ways based on their attitudes towards St. Gianna’s specific brand of liberalism. The dominant liberal trait at St. Gianna is, as explored above, defined in the positive as openness, acceptance, or touting the “all are welcome” style of worship; when expressing negative opinions of their parish culture, respondents describe its liberalism in terms of “political correctness.” For respondents who embrace their parish culture and appreciate or even identify as liberals themselves, ministry and other pro-life activities are designed less to push a political agenda and more to offer support to mothers and families who may be likely to consider abortion. I call this approach “acceptance,” referring to the acceptance of pro-choicers in their parish. For respondents criticizing their parish culture, pro-life is defined as further politicizing the matter

and seeking to encourage greater consensus on the immorality of abortion or possibly to educate others to become pro-life. I call this the “confrontation” approach, referring to a more vocal pro-life presence and willingness to lose pro-choice parishioners over the issue’s seriousness. While I found all respondents to lean toward one approach or the other, this is not to say that those who practice acceptance morally equivocate on their pro-life stance, nor that the confrontational respondents do not find value in compassionate outreach work for struggling parents. Acceptance and confrontation are furthermore not mutually exclusive categories. All respondent would likely find value in tactics that may fall closer toward one approach or the other. However, in speaking with respondents, it seemed clear whether they felt St. Gianna was adequately accepting or toxically PC.

Acceptance: promoting liberalism

As the on and off leader over the course of her twenty-five years of involvement, Claire chooses to embody the acceptance approach much more than the confrontational approach. She acknowledges some ambivalence in this approach, stating that she “see[s] that side” to pro-life that claims “if you’re doing God’s work, you don’t just let people do things that are wrong.” Claire ultimately remains convinced, however, that God calls pro-lifers to show compassion, which she is willing to express at the expense of using divisive rhetoric. She thinks abortion is abhorrent, but when I ask about what her faith says about the true beginning of human life, she responds,

I don’t know...I know that there are different faiths that believe different things like when life begins. And you know what? I’m not God. I don’t know the right answer to that at all. I’m just gonna go with the very second it started [laughs] to be on the safe side!

Her personal theology opposes human hubris, but she is the only respondent who discussed doubt in their conviction of when life begins. She goes on to say, “I don’t think confrontation can be used effectively. I think people get very defensive.” However, she simultaneously expresses ambivalence about whether a more confrontational approach would necessarily be immoral or ineffective: “I don’t know if [pro-choicers would] change their view on abortion [if pro-life was more confrontational]...I don’t know if we need to be a little more direct.” (Apparently, Claire’s definition of “confrontational” is not aligned exactly with the definition I outlined above in this thesis.) In synthesizing these competing discourses, she chooses to prioritize an acceptance-based approach to pro-life that fits in well with St. Gianna’s culture.

Regardless of God’s determination of when life begins, Claire is deeply offended by abortion and sees her “job [as] to just love,” especially struggling women considering abortion. She does not feel God’s support of more political-level pro-life work as strongly as she feels God’s support of outreach work to young parents. Her view is that the Pro-Life Ministry’s primary activity is donating resources to a local crisis pregnancy center (CPC), which provides pre- and post-natal services to struggling parents who considered or had an abortion. While Claire did organize the pro-life film screening that made a political argument for opposing abortion, most of the ministry activity she coordinates is to the benefit of this CPC. As she stated in our interview, “You can see I’m not an activist. I’m just in this little Pro-Life Ministry [laughs].” She uses this position to promote ground-level support to discourage abortion rather than direct political or cultural condemnation of the act.

Respondents who tend to favor their parish culture reject the pro-life movement’s overly-confrontational approaches. Claire disparagingly refers to these approaches as “wacky.” She

defines wackiness as “kind of [problematically] confrontational and just a lack of compassion.”

She sees many wacky pro-life activists condemning women who choose to abort “and say that they’re sinners and they’re murdering and they’re going to Hell.” Alternatively, Claire’s impression of pro-life indicates her more general existential beliefs: “Our job on Earth is to just love. Just love and, you know, we’re not supposed to condemn or judge. That’s God’s job.”

Katherine builds upon Claire’s definition of “wacky” pro-life supporters in her definition of “crazies” as “ultra-conservative.” According to Katherine, were St. Gianna to engage in a crazier or wackier pro-life approach, it would compromise their functional parish culture. Both Katherine and Claire furthermore express that this style of pro-life cannot serve to convert people to the cause, which is a central goal of pro-life and the ministry. The method of conversion within the parish setting that Katherine thus sees as most realistic is by “chang[ing] one heart at a time,” which would bring the movement “just one step closer” to becoming a universal public value. Although Lori has negative opinions of St. Gianna’s culture overall, she nonetheless spoke of “these nuts that say, ‘Oh, you’re gonna go to Hell,’ and, ‘Fire and brimstone.’” She defined pro-life nuts as activists, often from mainstream advocacy groups, who she believes lie about the negative health effects of abortion and Planned Parenthood’s illegal business dealings.

Nonetheless, Lori and Sue expressed skepticism that extremism is truly widespread in pro-life.

Lori questions reports of pro-life nuts as “fake news” propagated by liberals. Sue does not necessarily agree or disagree with Lori but says that the pro-life activity she sees at St. Gianna and a local CPC is compassionate and effective, not “going out there, picketing, being protestors, get in people’s faces and everything.”

Many also reported outreach work being an important facet of the acceptance approach to pro-life. Most outreach work respondents discussed falls closer to acceptance than confrontation as they seek to provide options besides abortion rather than systemically end abortion. Although leaning closer to confrontation than acceptance, Patrick summed up the goal of pro-life outreach when he said, "Let's kill abortion by giving women a better alternative rather than burning down the abortion clinic." Claire expresses her favorable attitude toward outreach by organizing regular benefits that send money and resources to a CPC. Sue not only supports the CPC financially but has referred women and girls that she knows to them, while Katherine was a former volunteer. A respondent who had an abortion herself believes this CPC to be a moral alternative to Planned Parenthood not only because they do not perform abortions, but because they do not function to make a profit and thus harm women in the way she believes Planned Parenthood does. Julia spends her retirement running a pro-life charity that engages in outreach work for her local community.

Some forms of education programs also serve to define the acceptance approach. Whereas the confrontation approach educates people on the evils of abortion and thus hopes to change their moral and political opinions on it, the acceptance approach provides education as outreach for expectant or new parents to support them through difficult circumstances. Katherine volunteered extensively at the CPC to which St. Gianna provides resources. She worked as a mentor for struggling mothers to demystify some of the difficult aspects of parenting. Katherine said this CPC was founded in response to a Planned Parenthood being built nearby. Her role as a volunteer was meant primarily to provide opportunities for women who may have felt abortion was the only option; while this act becomes inherently political considering the political nature

of CPCs and Planned Parenthood, Katherine's work was not primarily engaging in political discourse on behalf of pro-life. Although she stopped volunteering, Katherine still actively supports the CPC by participating in programs through St. Gianna's Pro-Life Ministry, noting that its focus is turning toward "educat[ion], provid[ing] classes to help [clients] better themselves in areas that they aren't as strong [as needed to be a parent]."

Claire and Sue are both active in the parish's religious education program for teenagers. Claire regularly speaks at confirmation classes on alternatives to abortion. She explained to me why she focuses on educating young people more than trying to inform their politics on abortion:

I feel like as the years go on there's less people willing to fight for this cause, feels like kind of a lost cause. I honestly don't think we'll ever get *Roe v. Wade* overturned, but what I'd like to see is education for women on alternatives to abortions.

Claire acknowledges that overturning *Roe* is a goal, but it is not the best way to save unborn children from abortion. She does not believe that political discourse will save lives, or at least not as efficiently as educating women on alternatives to abortion. Sue leads a religious education class and regularly counsels students through issues relating to sex and pregnancy. During our discussion, she focused her attention on the benefits of the education and support she provides while expressing desires and some loose plans to encourage her ministry to engage in more of this as well. However, she agrees with Claire in seeing education as the best safeguard against abortion. Sue does not reject political action to make abortion illegal but expressed that the political work she sees as more effective would be to "pass a bill that they should have a class in school about sex education" and the harm of abortion. Sue and Katherine told me that buy-in from young people is crucial for advancing pro-life. Sue think that teenagers shy away from the pro-life message out of cultural disillusionment with the Church. She said in an impression of a

sarcastic teenaged confirmation candidate, “Psh, oh my God! Really? Sex education at Catholic church? Wow!” Katherine, on the other hand, sees less disillusionment and a more cultural apathy in which life is “disposable” because young people do not “wanna look within and think deeper and feel deeper.”

Use of contraceptives plays a part in both Claire and Sue’s educational approaches to pro-life. Claire believes that sex ought to be saved for marriage, but ultimately sex with birth control is far preferable to abortion and more realistic than expecting abstinence; “if people are gonna have sex, they’re gonna have sex,” as she said to me. In an informal interview after the screening of *Voicelless*, Sue expressed frustration with the Catholic Church’s stance on contraception, which she sees as archaic. She rhetorically asked me why she cannot encourage use of contraception to the confirmation students in her classes. Claire and Sue both believe the Church’s doctrine on contraception being immoral contradicts the Church’s pro-life message.

Some respondents qualified their acceptance-based Pro-Life Ministry by stating that if confrontation is the way to pro-life success, that ought to be saved for outside of their parish to preserve St. Gianna’s welcoming atmosphere. Both respondents see pro-life as tied closely to their conceptions of their faith but see the potential loss of church membership and community as negating the value of a stronger pro-life message when this message could be better communicated by pro-life advocacy groups unrelated to church. Claire brings up that preaching divisive political messages in this case would compromise the security and community parishioners ought to experience at church. She stated,

And people don’t come to church to be always [pause]—they come to church to build a relationship with God and the community itself and to get a message into their hearts. So, I don’t think they wanna be hearing about abortion every third [inaudible]. That’d be like a punch in the stomach.

Given the nature of Claire’s personal calling to outreach work, she does not find it necessary to preach a message that would divide the parish. Although Claire believes pro-life ought to prioritize compassion for those traumatized by abortion, she thinks regular discussion of abortion would be exhausting to anyone, let alone those personally affected by it. Katherine builds upon Claire’s beliefs, stating that a more vocal pro-life message would ultimately fall on deaf ears.

When I asked Katherine how she thinks such a message would go over in a Mass, she responded,

Negatively. And people would probably walk out [laughs]. People would probably, like, be emailing the pastor as they’re walking out the door [laughs]. Because I’m sure we have people who are fiercely pro-life, but I have a feeling we have plenty of people who are fiercely pro-choice in our parish as well. So, I think a condemning, heavy-handed, political [message] would not go well.

Katherine goes on to explain that pro-life “need[s] the people in the cause to be doing the bigger stuff, to be doing the legal stuff, to be putting up that big fight,” but that it does not belong in church. Citing a personal experience in which a confrontational political message (not on abortion) left her and her family feeling alienated at church, Katherine empathizes with people who see the pro-life message as offensive, and she does not find value in inevitably dividing her faith community over the issue.

Respondents who follow the acceptance approach do acknowledge that more confrontational approaches to pro-life are necessary. Claire said she sides with the acceptance approach more often, but she thinks critically about how effective St. Gianna is from the pulpit in reaching people over pro-life. She told me that in recent years, someone will announce Pro-Life Sunday is approaching at the masses on the previous Sunday. She said that a former pastor decided to include this announcement as a “warning” so as not to have upset liberals at the pro-life masses. She weighs this PC approach against arguments for increased confrontation:

But he's also very by the book and doesn't wanna ruffle any feathers and avoids confrontation. The parish has adopted that. They are very careful not to hurt anyone's feelings. And I'm not saying that's necessarily a bad thing, 'cause the Catholic Church is having a hard time with membership anyway, so you certainly don't wanna alienate anyone when they finally *do* come. But there's the fine line of speaking the truth [pause], making people hear the tough message, or just keeping everything all sweet and happy. So, I don't know what the right answer is, I really don't [laughs exasperatedly].

Katherine expressed similar ambivalence, but ultimately does not approve of confrontation specifically within her parish. Katherine stated, "I mean, we need the people in the cause to be doing the bigger stuff, to be doing the legal stuff, to be putting up that big fight." However, for her, "it's not a comfortable place...to be." A non-confrontational approach, for Katherine, is not the only way of doing pro-life, but it is necessary in a parish, especially one as politically diverse as St. Gianna. She said of the sense of community at St. Gianna,

Our "all are welcome" sort of motto, it's not an official motto but it's something you see a lot here at our parish. And it's been said on the altar, "Whether you are gay or you're straight or single or married or you're divorced or you're this or you're that, you are welcome here." I mean they make it very clear. All are welcome. So, I do think that St. Gianna is doing a good job.

A confrontationally pro-life parish would sacrifice its community for stronger advocacy when such advocacy can occur outside of church, assumedly producing more beneficial results in Katherine's view.

Confrontation: resisting liberalism

Based on how respondents outline their confrontational efforts of pro-life advocacy at St. Gianna, I interpret these strategies to reflect their sense of immediacy around abortion. The immediacy is amplified due to society's unwillingness to confront the evil of abortion. Confrontational discourses as reported by respondents furthermore reflect that they believe the

community and leadership at St. Gianna to be guilty of reproducing this insufficient response to abortion. As a result, this approach tends to reflect a more negative view of St. Gianna's culture.

One confrontational strategy employed at St. Gianna is claiming space for pro-life at church. This strategy is reflected in the pro-life film, *Voicelless*, that Claire chose to show at an event for the ministry. In the film, Jesse arrives at his new church faced with silence on abortion out of fear of discomfort and disillusionment. In the end, pro-life at Jesse's church is no longer voiceless, and the clinic across the street where abortions are performed is closed. The film closes with the actor who played Jesse (Rusty Joiner) addressing the audience directly in a short epilogue. He states that 94% of Evangelical churches do not have pro-life ministries (Necerato 2015). The discussion that followed the film lasted longer than anticipated since participants in the discussion found the film so relatable and challenging. The idea of voice was discussed extensively: one participant elaborated on the film's title as it relates to the pro-life movement as the "voice for the voiceless," making advocacy even more important for the defenseless unborn. Another participant suggested that "authority responds to our voices," meaning that what it would take to strengthen church, diocesan, and possibly legal advocacy against abortion was to be more vocally pro-life. Participants even illustrated the voice metaphor literally with their comments. A man stood up to comment on his frustration with the lack of pro-life activity coming from St. Gianna parishioners due to feeling unsupported by their clergy, which he referred to as "a crock of shit." As he spoke, he became increasingly animated and his voice became louder. Then, as I wrote in my field notes, "Amidst some commotion, a woman responded quietly, 'I disagree,' to which [the man speaking] said, 'Well, good for you,' in a very dismissive, angry tone before continuing on without allowing the woman to elaborate." These

two participants' literal voices demonstrate the sense of embattlement in the pro-life experience, as well as using voice to resist this oppression and promote their senses of truth. (In the interest of transparency regarding my bias, I took this tense, awkward exchange as a brief illustration of a gendered power dynamic I think common in pro-life: masculine voices invalidating feminine perspectives.)

Some respondents act on these desires for fellow parishioners to hear their voices. Molly told me that she used to pass out pro-life literature with the rest of the ministry after Masses at St. Gianna. When she noticed that many people would simply throw away the literature, she started attaching pro-life messages to holy cards³ and rosaries because, as she said with a laugh, "People don't throw away holy cards so easily. It works really well." This act was not sanctioned by the Pro-Life Ministry, but she told me she had permission to do this from a parish staff member. Molly furthermore prefers her personal pro-life messages to those distributed by the ministry due to the former's direct tone condemning abortion. Besides the ministry's occasional event like a "speaker or [collecting] swaddling clothes," they also "give like Tootsie Pops to mothers on Mother's Day and a stick of gum to the guys on Father's Day." Molly takes offense to these practices because "there is no pro-life agenda *for the unborn*," (my emphasis) instead focusing on those birthing and raising born children. Given Molly's preference for direct actions outside of "abortion mills," the act of passing out more confrontational pro-life material attached to materials Catholics are wary to discard demonstrates her desire to facilitate society's—be they people considering abortions or fellow parishioners—confrontation with the evils of abortion.

³ Holy cards are small paper cards distributed by Christians (most commonly Roman Catholics) depicting an image of a saint on one side and a prayer on the reverse.

She knows even the most liberal of St. Gianna's parishioners will have a difficult time ignoring a pro-life message when attached to an object they find valuable.

As a vocal advocate for more confrontational methods of Pro-Life Ministry, Molly goes as far to say that St. Gianna's outreach and social justice work is counterproductive to pro-life. She did call outreach to vulnerable expectant mothers "a good thing." At St. Gianna, however, she thinks "the social justice [focus] is...anti-pro-life" since it is followed to a degree that leaves no opportunity to try to stop abortions from happening in the first place. Molly also thinks it is wrong that St. Gianna does not offer "healing service to post-abortive women at the parish." Beyond more effective outreach work, however, Molly says that the social justice work at St. Gianna ought to be directed more towards praying for the unborn, citing multiple instances she observed of women changing their minds and not getting abortions at clinics after seeing and hearing demonstrators like Molly praying outside.

Although she is perhaps the most explicit in opposing confrontational strategies in church, Katherine's approach to Pro-Life Ministry does require elements of confrontation. Overall, she prefers St. Gianna's "low key" and "loving" ministry, defined by its acceptance-based approach. However, Katherine sees that the candy the ministry distributes on Mother's and Father's Days as moments of veiled confrontation. She explained,

We hand out something on Father's Day and Mother's Day...a little piece of candy on it and a little note or something positive, but it'll always say, "From the Pro-Life Ministry at St. Gianna"...It's finding that fine line where you don't want people walking out in the middle of it [laughs], you know? But I think it's a little nudge. A little increased awareness [small laugh]. And I think we've had those and those have gone well...You just never know what could change a heart in another direction.

The “nudge” of passing out candy with a small mention of pro-life is subtle but nonetheless confrontational because it advocates pro-life and seeks to garner its support. While Katherine did not indicate any expectation that handing out candy will convert someone from pro-choice to pro-life, her goal in the Pro-Life Ministry is to “soften” hearts by inspiring compassion and respect for life, including those of the unborn. Considering Katherine’s strong beliefs *against* confrontation in most instances, her advocacy for small moments of confrontation (though she likely may not consider it as such) demonstrate that respondents tend to view their ministry on a spectrum between confrontation and acceptance, rather than two exclusive approaches.

Though not specific to St. Gianna’s ministry, nor something in their control, respondents also expressed desires for the Catholic Church, specifically Pope Francis, to promote pro-life more effectively. Some respondents see Francis as very strongly pro-life, but others focus their criticism on his agenda’s “trickle-down” effect, which serves to weaken St. Gianna’s pro-life representation. During the film discussion, I wrote in my field notes, “A man asks what Pope Francis thinks of abortion. Someone says he’s pro-life. Man responds, “Really?” He goes on to say the pope speaks extensively on climate change but not abortion.” Julia admires Francis but also expresses a lack of confidence in his strength on abortion:

JONATHAN: ...you don’t seem terribly frustrated with [Pope Francis] in particular. It’s just more of a general frustration with the amount of abortions, but it’s not like Pope Francis is to blame. It’s not like parishioners at St. Gianna are to blame.

JULIA: No, no! Well I think he could do more, actually. But he is more worried right now about the poor people. That is his focus. It doesn’t mean he’s not pro-life—he is. He said that, but he’s just got a different agenda that he’s more worried about right now. Everybody’s different, you know?

...

JONATHAN: Is that a problem? Or is it just like, well, people happen to be called to other causes and you're doing what you can? Or is it frustrating at times?

JULIA: [Sighs] I don't know. I guess it's frustrating that people have abortions.

Julia agrees with the film discussant quoted above that Francis's concerns do not draw sufficient attention to pro-life. Given the film discussant's tone of annoyance when talking about Francis, I infer that they placed some blame on him in being too weak on abortion, perhaps to avoid controversy and thus preserve the liberal Catholic population or attract more liberals to the Church. Julia, on the other hand, places less energy in blaming the Pope specifically while still bemoaning the number of lives lost to abortion.

Some of the more conservative respondents I interviewed side closer to the film discussant in their beliefs of Pope Francis's ineffectiveness as it relates to ending abortion. Molly expressed measured admiration of Francis as she traveled to Philadelphia to see him during his 2015 visit to the U.S. As for his presence on abortion, she told me, he is lacking:

I read some discouraging words about him that he's cancelled the pro-life group with his cabinet.⁴ I just keep praying for them 'cause I want the truth to come out and I think this is a very sad situation. He causes confusion and doubt with some of his messages, and I don't know who changes the words [in translation] or if those are really his words...[but] I don't think there is a language barrier there. So, I don't think he's a real help.

Jack expressed similar beliefs:

I don't think [pro-life] is well-represented at St. Gianna and I don't think it's well-represented largely in the Catholic Church...I think we start with this Pope who presents strong pleas, almost emotional, with respect to issues like climate change. But yet the genocide of babies throughout the world and particularly in the United States is not condemned and damned at the same level.

⁴ In February of 2017, Francis suspended activities for the Pontifical Academy for Life, a pro-life advisory body to the pope founded in 2012.

Jack echoes Julia's concern that the Pope is more attentive to social issues besides abortion. Where Julia sees this as a personality difference between pro-life advocates and the Pope, however, Jack told me that this is a symptom of the Church being "simply interested in filling pews."

Patrick believes Pope Francis represents a movement within contemporary Catholicism that he refers to as the "Kumbaya Church." Like the song "Kumbaya," which is colloquially referenced to represent peace and harmony between people, Patrick thinks there are strong currents within the Catholic Church that enforce "fewer rules, more self-interpretation, more universal rather than Catholic...let's make all the rules very, very loose and rubbery." Rather than preserving strong traditions and facing difficult truths (like those around abortion), Patrick believes there are Kumbaya Catholics who ignore these in favor of celebrating community and personal spiritual relationships with God. Patrick believes Francis is not a good leader for the Church because of the Pope's weak stance on abortion as well as what Patrick sees as "his comments on capitalism being bad." Patrick's disapproval is also rooted in Francis's failure to be a "great reformer" who would "kick ass" and "clean house" regarding financial corruption in the Vatican and sexual abuse committed by priests around the world. Interestingly, Patrick also takes issue with Francis's conservatism regarding his refusal to ordain women priests, which Patrick views as crucial to ensure the Church's survival.

Whereas the acceptance approach may utilize education in the ways outlined above, more confrontational respondents employ education to demonstrate the horrors of abortion to their parish. I define this method of education as confrontational as it is intended to convince parishioners of a political position and is thus a more systemic approach to ending abortion.

Wedam (1993) observed pro-life respondents to her dissertation invoking language thought to be common among pro-choicers. They exemplified the ignorance of the pro-choice position by referring to unborn children as “masses” or “blobs of tissue.” Her respondents invoked this language when discussing educational efforts in their activism, designed to show that fetuses are human lives rather than just tissue. The respondents to this study made similar arguments. Jack, Katherine, and Julia all invoked this language when discussing educational efforts.

Though the CPC’s work is largely outreach and thus in line with the acceptance approach as I have outlined it, Katherine sees some of its efforts as communicating the truth about the evils of abortion. She told me,

What I’ve come to learn is a lot of women, I hate to say it, are kinda clueless. They go in, they don’t even realize what’s going on in their bodies. They’re just not aware, they think this is a blob of tissue. They don’t realize what is forming. A heartbeat is there. So, I think these ultrasounds that [the CPC] does, free ultrasounds, really does help the cause. Women get to see with their own eyes, “Ok, *this* is what is in my body. There is something here, that is beating. It is alive.” So, on a broader level, could that happen, requiring [ultrasounds] to happen before women decide on an abortion? And more education up front? You know, statistically, what are the consequences, how they [will] suffer emotionally, how men suffer emotionally after abortions are done?

Julia agrees that mandating ultrasounds before abortions would decrease the number of abortions, but then suggests that doctors instead “offer” ultrasounds rather than forcing women to receive them. Rather than using ultrasounds to educationally convince women of a fetus’s personhood, Jack discusses showing graphic images of post-abortive fetuses (though not necessarily outside of clinics):

I think what I was saying is I don’t fully object to [showing graphic images], but it wouldn’t be my priority. So, I’m not saying that those people that feel it’s absolutely necessary to be as confrontational, that I would dismiss them. [Abortion] is a horrendous thing. I’m old enough to remember and you’re not, but during the Cold War it was not uncommon for people...to show the carnage that

occurs as a result of nuclear [attacks]. So, you would see signs, and you would actually see advertisements by groups on television showing bombs going off, people being blown apart, burned, all that stuff, scenes from Hiroshima and that kind of thing. So I think it's important that sometimes we give a very strong message about the evil of abortion and about getting the message to people that it is not just a blob of tissue.

Jack's advocacy of displaying graphic pictures of dismembered babies is tempered, but his intention is the same as Katherine's and Julia's (along with Molly, Patrick, and Jack in another point in his interview) advocacy for showing ultrasounds: to convince the public that abortions are violent attacks on human lives.

Of respondents who I identify as more confrontational than accepting, one identified a skepticism about educational programming in a Pro-Life Ministry. In our email interaction, Wayne wrote that he thought the ministry's educational efforts were "small goals" that have all but exhausted their effectiveness on St. Gianna's congregation. Nina supported Wayne's claim that education does not have a substantial impact in pro-life's favor, but as a ministry participant more from the acceptance tradition, she was pleased by St. Gianna's outreach work as an alternative.

Three respondents who found St. Gianna to be weak on pro-life have reacted with disillusionment with their parish and the Catholic Church in general. Jack told me that while he values the interpersonal relationships he has with other St. Gianna parishioners and some of their leadership (namely a few deacons), he would transfer to a different parish were there one close by who had a stronger pro-life presence. He does not despair, however, over what he called a "crisis of culture" at St. Gianna in his acceptance of the shortcomings of organized religion regarding abortion. Patrick expressed similar thoughts to those of Jack, but Lori told me she occasionally considers leaving St. Gianna. Lori expressed her ambivalence toward St. Gianna:

“There’s that *feeling* of being in a community church. That’s a good feeling, but also you don’t wanna step on anybody’s toes... You can’t really be yourself there.” She continues to attend for her and her husband’s friendships with some of the other parishioners, but often finds herself wondering if she would be more at home at a church that is “more homogenous in terms of pro-life.”

DISCUSSION

Top-Down and Bottom-Up Theories of Culture

According to respondents, the reasons why St. Gianna’s culture became so liberal fall into two main categories: top-down and bottom-up. As explored above, top-down theories demonstrate how church leadership defines parish culture, while bottom-up shows how it comes from lay parishioners. Respondents like Jack, Lori, and Patrick but also others see St. Gianna’s leadership, namely clergy, as too weak to engender a more effective culture, around pro-life as well as in general, at church. They cited the steady decline in quality of Pro-Life Sunday speakers and the PC-like need to apologize for any hint of controversy.

Similarly, respondents who were more accepting or valued liberalism more also recognized how leadership defines the culture there. While Claire was critical of one of St. Gianna’s pastor’s habit of apologizing too much, she saw the Pro-Life Ministry’s ability to function so freely because of this and other pastors’ trust in their work. Until hitting a certain point like publicly endorsing contraception, pastors tended to allow for an independent, empowered ministry to advocate as it saw fit. Claire and Sue both view the frontlines of pro-life’s future at St. Gianna in youth ministry, and they are thankful for parish administration’s support in letting them speak frankly with the high school religious education students.

Others identified how liberal parishioners shaped parish culture. Val thought that weakness in opposing abortion, at St. Gianna and American culture generally, is a symptom of a society with a weak moral foundation due to family instability. Katherine also told me that she believes children today to have a stronger need for instant gratification, which leads to impulsive disregard of making ethical decisions. Molly furthermore made a passing comment disapproving of divorce. These respondents who believe abortion to be a social problem aggravated by social progress demonstrate David L. Newman's (2017) analysis that conservative social movements often place blame for social problems on social progress. As exemplified by respondents to this study, people believe abortion rates increase as alternative family structures—leaving the home at an early age, having children out of wedlock, and divorce—flourish. Newman's response to such claims common among the general conservative American population is that these supposed trends of family structure have existed in similar frequencies throughout modern history, and there are as many benefits to the supposed “alternatives” as there are problems with more “traditional” nuclear families.

Lori and Patrick both identified liberal parishioners as at least partially responsible for engendering a weak pro-life presence at St. Gianna. They both invoked language of related to how these parishioners compromise core Catholic values, leaving their parish closer to a Protestant church in appearance. R. Scott Appleby (1995) came to similar conclusions that conservative Catholics in the U.S. often believe that when the Catholic Church equivocates on its principles, it resembles Protestant or secular culture: without strong moral foundation. Lori and Patrick echo this sentiment very closely, but in the context of St. Gianna as a microcosm of the Catholic Church Jack would likely agree with Lori, Patrick, and Appleby's respondents. While

the confrontational respondents to this study likely still value individual liberty and critical thinking within the parish, he believes that without unity on key moral issues like the beginning of human life, a social institution is slowly “dying,” in his words. Although Jack has grown to be automatically skeptical of the faults of organized religion, he likely experiences the deep pain and sense of betrayal both Weaver and Appleby’s respondents expressed to them over twenty years earlier.

While some respondents consciously pointed to leading figures at St. Gianna as responsible for its culture, they also revealed how lay people shape the culture, which in turn determined how leadership responds. Several respondents said a former pastor was strongly pro-life, but lost his voice on the matter, so to speak, after seeing the controversy it stirred within his congregation. Katherine explained that many parishioners have an aversion to hearing any mention of abortion and pro-life, so parish leadership and the Ministry respond with “low-key” pro-life advocacy. This thesis, as made evident by my invocation of the “all are welcome” analysis of parish culture, further confirms Lucas S. Sharma’s (2012) findings of an inclusive parish culture that limits which discussions are welcome.

The top-down and bottom-up views of culture construction interact with one another. Jack pointed out that parishioners at his wife’s choir rehearsal were quick to stifle any mention of life beginning at conception. Rather than telling this story as an example of how liberal the parishioners are, though, he told it to me to illustrate that there is an absence of a strong leader who could unequivocally denounce abortion and allow discussions on the “true” beginning of life to happen at St. Gianna. Jack’s example demonstrate how parish culture is the result of synthesizing the influences of leadership and parishioners; both sides act and react with one

another. Where St. Gianna's dominant culture falls because of these two forces is far to the left, enforcing a PC or possibly accepting approach to the Pro-Life Ministry. For respondents who desired a dramatic shift in St. Gianna's culture to be more confrontationally pro-life would then require more confrontational voices from the pulpit or the pews, though the results would likely be difficult, including lower church attendance.

From both top-down and bottom-up theories of parish culture, respondents expressed ways that they felt the liberal agenda was more powerful than pro-life. At church and in American politics generally, some respondents found little hope that people would systemically change and reject abortion. Molly said that the liberals at St. Gianna are unwilling to listen to the pro-life position; Katherine echoed similar sentiments with slightly less surety at their stubbornness. Claire and Val told me they did not anticipate *Roe v. Wade* to be overturned, at least not anytime soon given the rate of progress they see within the pro-life movement. Most respondents to Caroline J.C. Maxwell's (2002) study on Operation Rescue, a pro-life advocacy group, also saw stronger systemic social power siding with pro-choice than pro-life, much like some respondents to my study. However, Operation Rescue was a far more politically-aligned organization than St. Gianna's Pro-Life Ministry. Julia, for example, was more optimistic, going as far as saying she thought *Roe* could possibly be overturned within a generation. She furthermore expressed that she believes over half of the American pro-life movement to follow the consistent ethic of life; Nina believed this proportion to be represented at least among St. Gianna's parishioners. Julia also expressed belief that the media, an important power player in shaping public opinion on abortion, heavily favors the pro-choice position. While her political outlook was optimistic in the near future, she still believed there to be strong power imbalances

in society that work against pro-life.⁵ However, if the pro-life movement employs the proper educational tactics, Julia, along with Claire and Sue, believe that abortions can significantly decrease in frequency. While the respondents here see systemic power working against pro-life's interests, I would not characterize them as uniformly pessimistic on the state of public morality as Maxwell found them to be.

Respondents to Rhys H. Williams's and Jeffrey Blackburn's (1996) study, also from Operation Rescue, exuded to the authors a "persecution complex," expressing that whether or not society fell in line with the pro-life agenda, these activists were indeed doing God's work by trying to draw attention to the evil of abortion (183). Some respondents to my study expressed similar sentiments; most vocal on interpretation or surety in observation of divine providence was Molly. Others, however, mostly from the acceptance side of Ministry, preferred to work to decrease the numbers of abortion through providing outreach services in their community. Claire's lack of conviction that human life even truly begins at conception—a trait common among Wedam's (1993) respondents who practiced the CEL—demonstrates the accepters' less righteous and thus less confrontational approach to pro-life—what Katherine calls "low-key." Claire and accepters prefer outreach to activism and work primarily to decrease abortions out of people feeling they have no other option. Confronters see the best way at saving unborn lives is to convince people that abortion is wrong, in turn decreasing abortions politically due to political demand.

⁵ Wedam's (1993) respondents who followed the "mainstream" pro-life movement tended to be more critical of the media as a whole, while the CEL-followers felt more ambivalence—an interesting break from CEL-following Julia's general distrust of media.

As stated above, the two respondents who told me they follow the CEL interestingly disagreed with the beliefs Wedam's (1993) respondents expressed (albeit keeping in mind that Wedam's study had significantly larger and thus more valid numbers of respondents who she identified as following the CEL). Nina and Julia both expressed that they believe and practice the CEL, yet they expressed that their parish and greater pro-life movement, respectively, did as well. Wedam found that while all her activist respondents felt marginalized being pro-life in the U.S., those who followed the CEL felt marginalized even within the pro-life movement. Julia did express frustration beyond the pro-life movement with politicians, however. Agreeing with Wedam's CEL-following respondents, she found great difficulty in having to decide between mostly pro-life Republican candidates, who reject much of her social justice values, and mostly pro-choice Democrats, who assent to mass killings of the unborn.

Acceptance and Confrontation

Interviewees and other respondents I observed largely aligned closer to one of two narratives that emerge from participating in St. Gianna's Pro-Life Ministry: one of acceptance or one of confrontation. The acceptance approach to the ministry is founded on the principle that it is the ministry's job to embrace their left-leaning congregation, thereby employing the parish's unofficial "all are welcome" mission. These respondents reported to employ such strategies because they believe that in the context of a parish community, it is more effective to push a narrative of acceptance, though some also believe it to be more conducive to their parish culture which is not worth harming over a Pro-Life Ministry's work. The more confrontational respondents see the culture at St. Gianna to have an overall stifling effect on pro-life. They thus focus their energy not on pushing the "all are welcome" motto, which would result in

equivocating on their opposition to abortion, but by pushing a pro-life political agenda at the expense of alienating liberals in the congregation. These polarizing viewpoints align somewhat with both of Wedam's (1993) dissertation respondent groups of pro-life activists. One group publicly identified as conservative—a de facto identification as “mainstream” pro-life. The other group publicly identified as liberals beyond some of the issues within the consistent ethic of life. The former group sought primarily to prevent abortions from occurring—an “ethic of justice”—while the latter additionally emphasized a desire to provide care for vulnerable families to a greater extent than the mainstream group—thus following Wedam's “ethic of care” (7). Wedam's more mainstream respondents who tended to push an ethic of justice align to an extent with the confrontational respondents to my study, while the CEL- and ethic of care-followers were closer to the accepting respondents.⁶ The internal parish conflict further supports Sharma's (2012) findings as well, demonstrating how for more conservative parishioners, they are the exception to the “all are welcome” credo.

Importantly, respondents make it clear that Pro-Life Ministry must have elements of both acceptance and confrontation to function. Indeed, this is true for respondents of pro-life work outside of the parish context as well. As stated above, Katherine was, in some ways, the most pro-acceptance respondent of the group. She is attracted to St. Gianna's pro-life presence because she thinks it is “low key” and “loving,” which she defined as oriented away from politics and more towards providing outreach services that may indirectly discourage abortion—an act

⁶ To once again draw attention to the complexity between these two poles, Wedam's mainstream respondents bristled at being described as unforgiving of abortion or unwilling to provide care to families (271). Similarly, the confrontational respondents to my study expressed resentment to similar criticisms. Jack, for example, told me how in order to spread the pro-life belief in society, women who have had abortions must acknowledge their sin, but also be welcomed and forgiven by the pro-life movement.

that, in and of itself, liberals and conservatives alike can support. Katherine's belief that the ministry, for all its acceptance and refusal of politics, still "nudges" parishioners toward pro-life actions if not beliefs (though she thinks it unlikely) and thus does *not* entirely tolerate the pro-choice belief among them. Under Claire's leadership, the Pro-Life Ministry is predominately based in the acceptance narrative. Even she, however, has felt that pro-life has been betrayed at St. Gianna for the sake of preserving its PC culture, typified by the incident where a pro-life PSA was censored at the Donut Sunday event.

Confrontational respondents likewise embrace aspects of the acceptance narrative. Jack expressed to me that he feels the Pro-Life Ministry is distracted by its fetishized message of "all are welcome" because it serves to water down the pro-life message. However, he does not believe the parish ought to reject its pro-choice parishioners for the sake of having an ideologically similar parish to push the pro-life agenda stronger than pro-choicers push back. Rather, he spoke passionately of what he believes is Christ's desire of forgiveness and unity as "foundational principles" of Christianity. While they disagreed on how effective the local CPC is in promoting pro-life, Lori and Patrick both valued and participated in acceptance-based outreach efforts to prevent abortion (and interestingly adoption to an extent as Lori practices pro-life) without necessarily engaging in intentional, direct political action.

Considering the polarizing viewpoints on abortion represented in St. Gianna's Pro-Life Ministry, as well as the turmoil this causes respondents from both sides, I confirm Wedam's (1993) finding on the diversity of approaches within the pro-life movement. Kristin Luker (1985) received much criticism from pro-life groups for painting the movement with too broad a brush. Beyond the historical arguments she posed that contradict common pro-life narratives, some also

argued that her book implicitly contended that the pro-life movement is made up entirely of condemning, radical conservatives. One of Wedam's respondents expressed this exact concern, even mentioning Luker's book to Wedam before she began collecting data for her dissertation. In the end, Wedam found that there are multiple facets of the pro-life movement that seek to end abortion in diverse ways. My findings confirm Wedam's in that not only is there more than one way to approach the pro-life movement or related ministry work, but there is great struggle and contention on the matter.

CONCLUSION

This thesis offers an analysis that informs the sociological understanding of how people respond to liberalism in church when working to advance a conservative political viewpoint. While there are certainly more liberal churches nearby, nobody doubts that St. Gianna is a liberal parish. As shown in my analysis, liberalism in one's home parish is defined by emphasizing a social justice mission and creating a space that tolerates difference in opinion to encourage unity.

For some of the parish's most passionately pro-life representatives, these qualities enhance the parish's approach to pro-life, most actively demonstrated by their Pro-Life Ministry. For parishioners who view St. Gianna as a *welcoming* church, the Ministry does pro-life work right. The result may not be specific advances for the pro-life movement, but there is a palpable closeness these parishioners feel to one another interpersonally and culturally. St. Gianna's functional culture is a product of its lay parishioners' decency, but also its intentional leadership, as shown by what priests discuss from the pulpit, parish programming, and, of course, their ministries. The result is a parish that actively seeks common ground among people to advance the narrative of Christian love and end abortion—speaking truth.

For other parishioners, though, the parish's liberalism is a roadblock to communicating one of the most sacred truths of the Catholic Church that abortion is wrong. By assenting to the liberal dominance at St. Gianna, these parishioners believe the Pro-Life Ministry is doing more harm—in ignoring abortion—than good—in establishing a strong faith community. They do not see St. Gianna as a welcoming place, but a politically correct space disguised as being welcoming. The closeness parishioners feel is superficial because once someone openly advocates to end abortion, the parish silences or rejects them. Similar to the acceptance-following parishioners' beliefs, PC culture is a product of misguided, hypersensitive, liberal parishioners and a parish institution that exists to appease parishioners and thus preserve their culture, as well as make money—merely filling pews.

In the future, I hope to witness or possibly conduct research that answers questions on how the findings above compare to those found in different contexts. The respondents to this study represent the demographic traits common among the most active pro-lifers in the U.S.: they are white, from the upper-middle class, and mostly women of retirement age (Munson 2008). While less prominent than these identities, there are strong currents from other social groups within pro-life. Considering the high degree of racial and economic segregation in American churches, we cannot extrapolate my findings collected from wealthy, white suburbanites to poorer communities, different racial and ethnic groups, or from urban or rural settings. Younger respondents may yield different results from what I found. I was furthermore unable to find significant data on gender differences among respondents since most of my respondents were women. Considering Wedam's (1993) and Gilligan's (1977, 1988) different

conclusions on gender among pro-life activists, there is value in examining how gender influences perception of one's parish culture and its impact on pro-life.

It would be beneficial to study how people relate to their parish culture while controlling for the political leanings of the parish, as well as those of the ministry. The findings presented above revolve around what we generally acknowledge to be a conservative ministry within a parish we can reasonably define as liberal. What would participants in a liberal ministry have to say about their work in the context of a conservative parish? Such ministries would likely address social justice problems—for example, problems around immigration, race, or economic inequality. Though not a common sentiment, some respondents described above see liberalism as conducive to the supposedly conservative pro-life movement. How might respondents from social justice ministries associate with conservative culture?

Ministry activities then have strong effects on respondents and their feelings of comfort and direction in their parishes. As shown in this thesis, respondents directly stated the ways in which St. Gianna's pro-life presence inspired some to remain active members. However, the parish's specific brand of pro-life, or lack thereof, also drove people to feel discouraged enough to contemplate finding a new faith community. Parish culture is a strong predictor of who a church attracts, and parish culture is highly politicized. For pro-life Catholics in the U.S., finding a home church is quite literally a matter of life and death.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How did you become involved in your pro-life activism?
2. How does American culture embrace Christian values? How does it reject them?
3. Some say that American law should reflect Christian values. Do you agree? If so, which values and laws?
4. How do you feel about Pope Francis and the overall direction of the Catholic Church?
5. What are your opinions on the other so-called “life issues”: capital punishment, assisted suicide, euthanasia, war?
6. Do you feel that the (pro-life/other life issue) cause is well-represented at your parish? Why or why not?
7. Do you ever feel that your parish does not embody or emphasize certain Catholic values? Which ones and how?
8. What type of activism do you do? Why? Why not other forms?
9. Tell me about a time when you felt successful doing pro-life work.
10. What would it take to reduce the incidence of abortion in the U.S.?
11. What might be some obstacles to the pro-life movement gaining more support/recognition among the public?
12. Were you born Catholic or did you convert? If you converted, why and when?
13. Why do you attend your parish?

APPENDIX B
RESEARCHER BIAS

In the interest of transparency, it is necessary for me to summarize some possible sources of my own bias as a researcher.

I define my personal faith as non-denominational Christian in a Protestant tradition. I was raised Catholic but did not practice intentionally until college. I became a Catholic at the age of 20 before leaving the church a few years later during graduate school. My faith is founded in radical leftist politics, however, drawing a stark difference between respondents' and my individual opinions. I am furthermore pro-choice. Like many other progressives, I find many aspects of the pro-life movement disturbing, including what I perceive as resistance to basic social justice. However, I empathize with the logical and moral belief that life begins at conception. As a result, I deeply respect some pro-life efforts like emphasizing outreach to vulnerable families to afford them the right to raise children.

Based on my findings, I conclude that respondents would consider much of my personal political and moral beliefs problematic. My most obvious bias rests in my being pro-choice and thus opposing what they regard as moral truth. I furthermore support many cultural practices that they may consider to be PC censorship. Considering my stark moral opposition to respondents, I did what I could to keep my biases in check. In my analysis, I drew heavily from feminist standpoint theory, particularly Dorothy Smith's (1997) contributions early in the theory's development. Smith outlines that a researcher must consider their personal social standpoint. Though this study does not directly consider privilege, her theory nonetheless applies. In the analysis stage of the project, I intentionally recognized the ways in which my leftist opinions colored my impressions of the data. For example, I would tend to empathize with a more liberal

respondents' moral logic around pro-life activity than with a more conservative respondents'.⁷ I realized the complex ways in which my bias may lead me to make potentially dismissive analytical claims, as Smith found to be common among male researchers studying feminized labor. However, one can also apply Smith's theory to determine that as a liberal, it is possible that I maintained a more critical eye to any possible ideological inconsistencies in respondents' reports.

While still respecting Smith's arguments for maintaining one's subjective standpoint, I supplemented this theory by using the bracketing analytical technique as conceptualized by Edmund Husserl (1999) and explained by D. Soyini Madison (2005) to empathize with respondents. I accomplished this by mentally setting aside my personal politics, which are pro-choice, and hypothetically assumed a pro-life stance. This exercise was not difficult as I find myself empathetic to much of the pro-life position. By "bracketing" my personal beliefs, I was able to better understand the logic of a position with which I disagree. Considering standpoint theory according to Smith, however, I still did not assume that bracketing gave me any more of a "fair" view of respondents. I thus employed Madison's (2005) method of mentally balancing one's standpoint and the bracketing process to critically consider my findings as simultaneously valid and limited as will be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis.

⁷ Though this was not a hard and fast trend; I often found myself admiring the more confrontational respondents' views of their work compared to the self-described liberals, since the former's advocacy was stronger given my bracketed assumption (see below) that abortion is wrong.

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VITA

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