



Joseph Sobran: God's Satirical Soldier

Like most conservatives, Joseph Sobran, enjoyed being a contrarian, flatly contradicting the conventional wisdom, which he liked to describe as “what everybody thinks everybody else thinks.” Joe Sobran wasn't “everybody” and he was only too happy to challenge, in his own special way, many of the things that “everybody knows.” Things like “You can't turn back the clock.”



“Who turned it ahead?” asked Sobran, who may have been the best since G.K. Chesterton at challenging the assumption that change is necessarily progress. *National Review*, his literary and ideological home for roughly two decades, had declared its mission in terms of high drama: “It stands athwart history yelling Stop....” Sobran simply quoted Hamlet: “The time is out of joint.”

It was typically Sobran. Even when he was passionately engaged, as he was on so many of the social and political issues of our time, he communicated a marvelous calm, analytical mien with words that so clearly and brilliantly punctured the myths, illusions and outright lies that permeate what has become an essentially pagan culture. He helped us appreciate the seriousness of contemporary threats to life, liberty and just plain decency in America, even as he made us laugh at the absurdity of them.

Sobran was flat out fun to read and he obviously found it fun to lampoon, for example, environmentalists hell-bent on protecting every species but the human. “Why is it always our planet Gore is trying to save?” he asked about the ecological crusades of the former Vice President. “Why doesn't he stay home and take care of his own?” When Seymour Hersh published a book about the Kennedy presidency called *The Dark Side of Camelot*, Sobran confessed, “I didn't know there was a bright side.” When the lurid stories of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib in Iraq made the news, Sobran put it in perspective: “There goes all the good will we built up through years of bombing Arab cities and starving Arab children.”

His passion and wit were wedded inseparably, most notably on the subject of legalized abortion. To my knowledge, no other widely circulated columnist took on what John Paul II labeled the “culture of death” as frequently and fervently as Sobran did. “Abortion,” he wrote in his book, *Single Issues*, “violates every decent human instinct — so much so that its indecency must be clothed in euphemism.” And Sobran ridiculed the euphemisms with a logic and wit George Orwell might have envied.

The deliberate, premeditated killing of an infant in the womb is, as “everyone knows,” Sobran wrote, now only a matter of “terminating a pregnancy.” Women are no longer “with child,” they are merely pregnant, “not ‘with’ anything particularly.” Words like “killing” or “baby” are out, of course. “But it's still acceptable to say ‘rape’ and ‘incest’ rather than ‘involuntary intercourse’ and ‘excessive family intimacy,’” Sobran observed. “True some women still say things like ‘The baby [sic] is kicking,’ but that



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merely shows that they are insufficiently open to new ideas. I even saw a book on the newsstand titled *Caring for Your Unborn Baby*, when the author obviously meant 'Caring for Your Fetal Matter.' But such gaffes are probably protected by the First Amendment."

By the end of his life he was calling himself a "reactionary utopian" and a "reluctant anarchist," but he was always much more a genuine conservative than many who wear that mantle, while giving limited lip service to conservative cultural values and devoting their full energies to the necessity of cutting marginal tax rates and rushing to war at the drop of a hat or the tilt of a turban. Strange, he noted, that the only people being accused of "single-issue politics" are those who have focused on the single issue that lies most directly at the heart of a decent society. "What," he asked, "could be more barbarous than the killing of an unborn child, by the choice of its mother, through the agency of a doctor and with the blessing of the state?"

The issue being buried by a neglect that is anything but benign is as old as the Garden of Eden, where mortals dared to know good and evil apart from the will of the Creator. "Do we dare assume the role of the enemies of creation?" Sobran asked. With the legal sanction for the killing of an estimated 4,000 babies a day, it seems America has dared to assume precisely that role.

Nearly 38 years after *Roe v. Wade*, even most pro-lifers may have a hard time fully appreciating just how radical is that decree from our judicial Caesars. Sobran, for all his wit and learning, was like the small boy in the Hans Christian Andersen story who saw right through the emperor's imaginary clothes.

"Under its pretended neutrality," he wrote, "the Court has given a positive answer to the religious question: it has defined us, operationally, as an atheistic people, a people for whom no moral considerations may obstruct the claims of convenience and hedonism assisted by the advanced techniques of killing."

Sobran's death last week at age 64, from complications arising from diabetes, silenced in our time a voice and a pen employed relentlessly against America's covenant with death. He will be, God willing, one more soldier in the company of the saints in Heaven. We will do well to continue his battle on earth, recalling always the exhortation of Saint Paul:

"Let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap if we faint not." (Galatians 6:9)



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