

The Pope and My Right to Life

By Warren M. Hern

THE NEW YORK TIMES **OP-ED** THURSDAY, AUGUST 12, 1993

BOULDER, Colo.

This week, I began wearing a bulletproof vest to work. I am not a policeman setting out to raid crack houses. I am a doctor who does abortions.

The reason I wear body armor is that Pope John Paul II is visiting Denver, attracting legions of anti-abortion activists, Roman Catholics as well as others hoping to capitalize on the publicity surrounding the visit. The demonstrators were encouraged in July by Randall Terry, the national leader of Operation Rescue. I last saw Mr. Terry in 1989, surrounded by followers, praying for my death in front of my clinic.

The Denver Catholic hierarchy, which has encouraged anti-abortion activism, is concerned that demonstrations by groups like Operation Rescue might get out of hand. Worried that they will detract from the Pope's visit and his role as the "most eloquent" and "supreme" opponent of abortion, Archbishop J. Francis Stafford has sought to quell demonstrations. That won't be easy. The Pope and his bishops have so harshly attacked abortion for so long, it has created a climate of permission for the most radical activists. Now the church does not wish to take responsibility for the unpredictable, violent consequences of its rhetoric.

Wearing body armor to the abortion clinic.

Today, when I drove to my office, there was a stranger wearing dark glasses and holding a dark object. I wondered, is he an assassin or the husband of a patient? Is the object a handgun or a case for sunglasses?

I saw on the news that the former home of a colleague in Denver was again the site of an anti-abortion demonstration. He no longer lives there because he is being divorced. Were the demonstrations and threats as tough on his marriage as they were on mine, which also ended in divorce?

The first attempt on my life was in 1978. There have been many violent demonstrations since then. In 1988, five shots were fired through my waiting-room windows; we now work behind four layers of bulletproof glass. And this is in Boulder, a community that is solidly and officially pro-choice.

Since the assassination of Dr. David Gunn in Florida by an anti-abortion fanatic in March, doctors who provide abortion services have been more concerned about security. It is not the demonstrations I fear. It is the lone fanatic who steps out of the shadows to deliver the ultimate message of hatred for what I do to help women.

A reporter asked the Pope how he hoped to stem rising violence among youths in Denver. He replied rightly, "It is necessary to ask clearly who is responsible for the degradation of young people." I hope that when Catholic officials next hear of a violent attack against a physician or a patient at an abortion clinic, they can bring themselves to ask a similar question and to realize their own culpability. □

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