The pro-choice struggle for reproductive justice is a noble one. For decades, in Canada and around the world, feminist activists have taken to the streets and the courts to decriminalize abortion and to make it safe and legal. By doing so, we have saved countless women’s lives and helped families grow in health and prosperity.

But what of the future of the pro-choice movement? While around the world the fight continues for decriminalization of abortion and even for access to basic birth control, in Canada our focus is shifting toward ensuring access to abortion services across a large and thinly populated country, where access can be fraught for those living in remote and northern communities.

We also continue to oppose the anti-choice movement. It remains an active threat even though, at present, roughly six out of ten Canadians apparently have no interest in recriminalizing abortion. Anti-choice advocates continue to lobby Parliament for legal restrictions and to engage in street-level activism, many of them protesting...
outside abortion clinics and high schools. Pro- and anti-choice activists often counter-demonstrate at each other’s events, which all too often leads to ugly and juvenile confrontations in the streets. Will this fight with the anti-choice movement continue in this mode forever? Or can two adversaries—both of whom have genuine concerns about profound issues such as the meaning of life, the nature of personhood, and the ethics of personal autonomy—move toward a more mature, respectful dialogue? Such a shift will be a challenge for both sides, but I believe the benefits to women and to society at large make this a legitimate goal.

No doubt you’re thinking, *Dialogue with the anti-choice? Why would I talk to people trying to take my rights away?* I can hardly blame you. The anti-choice movement’s attacks on women’s autonomy, the shocking dishonesty manifested by so-called crisis pregnancy centres, and, of course, occasional acts of violence against abortion clinic staff would seemingly mark those involved as dangerous cranks, fanatics not unlike the extremists of ISIS, rather than serious participants in modern civil society.

But the truth is that those who are anti-choice are far from monolithic. As a professional journalist, pro-choice activist, and clinic escort, I have had ongoing face-to-face dealings with them for decades, and I have found them to be as varied as the patients who come to our clinic. Certainly, some are angry, intolerant fanatics. But many, and I would argue most, of those who call themselves “pro-life” have far more nuanced beliefs than we generally give them credit for.

First, we have to understand what motivates them. No doubt the Randall Terrys of this world are primarily motivated by misogyny and personal ambition. But for most of the rank-and-file, church-going couples and families in a conservative milieu, going to a “pro-life prayer vigil” is seen as a way of doing good in the world, surely a powerful motivator.

We must also acknowledge that there *are* ethical issues around human reproduction and abortion. I don’t need anti-choice activists to tell me this; it is clear to me that abortion is ethically complex just from the range of opinion that I’ve heard from patients at the clinic where I work as a patient escort. While some arrive and leave feeling fairly light-hearted, many struggle with their decision. At the least, it is a sad day for them. At worst, they experience abortion as a terrible loss, a cause for weeping and sorrow. As staff, we can only be supportive and comfort patients who are obviously unhappy. Evidence shows that most of them will come to terms with their
decision to terminate a pregnancy, but a small minority will probably always suffer from various degrees of guilt and self-recrimination.2

I don’t think anyone in the pro-choice movement would in any way condemn a woman receiving an abortion for feeling this way. We would commiserate and respect the personal ethics of a woman who feels that abortion is wrong. Indeed, it is hardly unusual for people to reach that conclusion; virtually all religious and philosophical traditions have taboos against the taking of life. We don’t begrudge Hindus or Buddhists their beliefs, so we can hardly turn around and tell Christians that their concerns about the value of human life are crazy. These are legitimate and widespread beliefs, and those who are anti-choice have every right to feel the way they do about abortion.

I’m making a point of defending the right of anti-choicers to an ethical framework different from my own because I’ve noticed that progressive people have, in recent years, tended to become quite apoplectic about the beliefs of our opponents, often claiming that opposing beliefs are offensive and, more worryingly, shouldn’t be aired in public. To counter that view, I could easily raise some familiar arguments illustrating how calls for censorship of others’ views can backfire on us all. But I’d rather respond with some ideas about the relative importance of beliefs versus actions.

A couple of years ago, I discovered that a Roman Catholic order of nuns, the Sisters of Life (founded in New York in 1991), had established its Toronto mission in a closed up church five minutes from my home. I’d seen their pamphlets being circulated in front of our clinic and had noted that the literature contained no alarmist or nonsense medical misinformation, or shocking pictures. Rather, it conveyed the simple message that the nuns were there for any woman who needed help raising an unplanned child. The text was straightforward and nonjudgmental. When I met the sisters, I discovered that they were as well.

The Sisters of Life, being Catholic nuns, are hardly pro-choice. In fact, as a religious order, they represent a fairly conservative outlook in the Roman Catholic Church. I’m sure I could spend a lifetime disagreeing with the sisters about the ethics of abortion. But unlike many in the anti-choice movement, their outward expression of their internal ethics has not been to shame or condemn anyone. They strongly disapprove of aggressive behaviour against clinic patients and, of course, of violence directed at abortion providers. Instead, and this is key, what they do is support women regardless of their choices.
What does “support” mean in this case? It means giving new mothers material goods such as diapers, strollers, food, and furniture. It means providing shelter if the woman is fleeing an abusive relationship. It means advocating for women at immigration hearings. It means getting pro bono legal and medical help. Above all, it means offering genuine love, kindness, and emotional support. All of this is unconditional and independent of religious belief; the sisters’ Toronto mission is in a heavily Muslim area, and their clientele reflects that.

For many pro-choice advocates, this probably doesn’t sound like enough. After all, how is a woman supposed to get by raising an unplanned child with a few free diapers? But having been so poor that I didn't know where my next meal was coming from, I can tell you that a few free items can make a very big difference in one's life. Moreover, it is not up to us to judge what a young mother considers enough support. Poor women are as entitled to raise children as anyone else and are capable of making decisions regarding what is “enough” for their child. The nuns merely facilitate those decisions.

This point is worth elaborating. As pro-choice advocates, we often talk about women whose economic circumstances are so dire that they have been left with “no choice” but to terminate their pregnancy. For most women in this situation, choosing an abortion is the right decision. They know it and act accordingly. They are making choices and taking control of their lives. But what about those who believe that abortion is wrong or who really do want a child at this time? Faced with poverty, these women have no choice, and compelling a woman into having an abortion she doesn’t want is at the very least an outrage. We usually imagine that the agent behind such an event is a controlling boyfriend or parent. But far more often the culprit is neoliberal economics. Either way, the end result is the same: a woman undergoing a procedure to which she hasn’t really consented. And she has to live the rest of her life with this fact. Women such as these can turn to the nuns, who provide them with the means to make a different choice. And the undeniable reality is that these anti-choice nuns are helping women to make choices freely.

Few people have ever heard about the Sisters of Life. Since 1991, they have established a number of missions across North America, providing long-term support to women who need it. It’s not glamorous or controversial—it’s hard work and a heavy responsibility. The anti-choice proponents we usually hear about are the angry misogynists, the cruel lunatics who
scream at patients entering clinics, the doctor-stalkers, and the elected officials who keep suggesting that the state should investigate every uterus in the land. These zealots demand that women “take responsibility,” but, unlike the nuns, they won’t lift a finger to help young families. Unfortunately, such extremists drive the agenda simply by being so out there. They grab all the media attention and force pro-choice advocates to react constantly to their mean-spirited nonsense.

But this is just not good enough. Decent people who have ethical concerns about abortion should not be led by absolutist fanatics. And pro-choicers should not have to be constantly fighting against intrusive legislation and abusive, threatening behaviour in the streets. Both sides claim to be concerned about women and their families. Perhaps it’s time we all stopped focusing on how bad the other side is and started looking at how we can all support women and their children by putting actions before rhetoric.

Trying to talk about this to those who are anti-choice will be quite a challenge for our side. Their rhetoric is often provocative and difficult to ignore, and most anti-choice leaders will do everything in their power to thwart a constructive dialogue. Over the years, we’ve tended to reduce the opposition to angry caricatures, and their leaders’ words often reinforce our cartoonish view of them. But I think opening the door to anti-choicers who are willing to talk can only be rewarding. I have already found it so.

By far the greater challenge lies squarely on the anti-choice side, whose characterization of pro-choicers as minions of Satan has aroused fear of pro-choice proponents. Considerable resources have been spent on promoting a view of the world in which the abortion issue is a biblical struggle between heaven and hell, with the universe hanging in the balance. But it doesn’t. The lives of actual women and their children, real human beings whose personhood is beyond all doubt, are what matters, and both atheists and people of faith can see this simple truth.

It will be difficult for anti-choice proponents, but I think that many of them are up to the challenge. Now seems like an opportune time to pursue this approach, since Pope Francis has made it clear that while he may be against abortion, he has no time for judgmental rhetoric. The Sisters of Life are the Church’s own example of how those who are anti-choice can conduct themselves in the future. If Francis is prepared to embrace this example, the Church can rise to the challenge by officially denouncing anti-choice harassment at clinics and devoting its considerable resources to genuinely
helping the women who want its support. This is the only principled way to be against abortion, and one can only hope that Pope Francis has the vision to make it happen. If he is hesitant to make such a radical change and challenge the more conservative powers within the Church, he need only ask himself what a certain humble Galilean would have done.

Notes

