

Respect Life: A Constant Ethic

Sunday, Oct. 6

Respect Life Program Begins

The annual Respect Life Program sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops will begin this year on Sunday, Oct. 6.

The message of the Respect Life Program remains unchanged since it began in 1972 — all human life, born and unborn, deserves respect and protection at every stage of its existence and in every circumstance of human living.

This year the program focuses on the story of abortion in the United States from 1973 to the present, and on the continuing need for society to be supportive of pregnant women and children. It highlights the value of children and the importance of family life, and focuses on human experimentation and society's efforts to deal with the escalating incidence of suicide as some promote the idea of "rational" suicide. It reviews, too, the unsatisfied needs of nations struggling to provide for their people.

The Respect Life Program addresses a diversity of issues that, seen together, dramatize the Church's commitment to a consistent ethic of life — an ethic linking the Church's teaching on issues concerning human life from conception until natural death.

In the Introduction to this year's Respect Life Program manual, the bishops on the Committee for Pro-Life Activities note that this approach has often been "misinterpreted or misrepre-

sented — both by its defenders and its critics" — some wishing the bishops to give less emphasis to the public debate on abortion; others afraid they might do so.

"Nothing could be further from our intention," state the Committee members headed by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago. "When the Church devotes resources to the abortion debate," note the bishops, "it is not diverting attention from its human rights agenda — but advancing an integral part of that agenda."

In addition to Cardinal Bernardin, members of the Bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities include: John Cardinal O'Connor (New York, N.Y.); Archbishops Thomas Donnellan (Atlanta, Ga.) and Edward O'Meara (Indianapolis, Ind.); Bishops Walter Curtis (Bridgeport, Conn.), Elden Curtiss (Helena, Mont.), Francis Dunn (Dubuque, Iowa), James Griffin (Columbus, Ohio), Edward Head (Buffalo, N.Y.), William Levada (Los Angeles, Calif.), Andrew McDonald (Little Rock, Ark.) and Edward O'Donnell (St. Louis, Mo.).

To help parishes and others develop and expand efforts on behalf of human life, the Bishops' Office for Pro-Life Activities has developed all new program materials: program manual, posters, motivational flyers, clip art. For information contact: Respect Life Program, 1312 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.



ILLUSTRATION BY CAROL SCHWARTZ

Suicide: The Next Pro-Life Frontier

By DENNIS J. HORAN
and EDWARD R. GRANT

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents, and the rate of suicide, particularly among teenagers, is increasing at an alarming rate. American attitudes towards suicide, however, remain ambivalent.

At the same time, there is increasing clamor for acceptance of suicide as a "rational" choice, particularly for terminally ill and handicapped persons. "Self-deliverance" societies have advocated this stance by publishing manuals with detailed "recipes" for lethal poisons. "Suicide pacts" have been publicized, and there are organizations striving to create social and moral acceptance for suicide and a legal right to assist at suicide.

All of these factors are converging to shape public policy and attitudes in the United States and to challenge the traditional attitude of opposition to suicide. That attitude is currently reflected in laws which make assisting at suicide a crime in most states in America as well as in most countries of the world.

Suicide has been decriminalized in most jurisdictions, not out of approval for the practice, but because it is recognized that victims of failed suicide attempts do not deserve punishment, but rather, need assistance. This means that the act of suicide is no longer considered the legal

equivalent of self-murder, which under early English common law could result in dire punishment when the attempt failed or loss of family wealth when it succeeded. However, prohibition against assisting suicide — either directly by statute, or by case law interpreting acts of assis-

the individual's right to privacy to protect other persons involved in the decision to terminate life-support systems.

Yet the law has always recognized the state's legitimate interest in preventing suicide. This interest has long been recognized and has been re-

of his or her civil rights. Such suits could result in the imposition of actual damages, possible punitive damages and, certainly, court costs and attorney's fees.

By creating a constitutional right to suicide, the help potential suicides need so badly — medical and other — would

own life.

Between 1969 and 1979, deaths from suicide in the United States increased approximately 22 percent. Most of the increase was attributable to a drastic rise in the suicide rate for those aged 15 to 24. Suicides in this age group increased 74 percent among males and 33 percent among females. In 1981 alone, 5,600 young men and women under age 25 took their own lives.

Much as the proponents of abortion did 20 years ago, proponents of suicide are attempting to lead the legal system away from a position of respect for the intrinsic value of all human life. In 1973 we were told by the Supreme Court that the life of the unborn was not "meaningful" because it could not exist without the mother's support. In the 1980s, we increasingly hear that the lives of the handicapped, the terminally ill, the victims of Alzheimer's disease and the chronically depressed are not meaningful because they are dependent on others for basic means of support.

This article is excerpted from "Suicide: The Next Pro-Life Frontier," by Dennis J. Horan and Edward R. Grant in *Respect Life*, Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1985. Dennis Horan is president of Americans United For Life Legal Defense Fund, Chicago. Edward Grant is Executive Director and General Counsel of Americans United for Life Legal Defense Fund.

"By creating a constitutional right to suicide, the help potential suicides need so badly — medical and other — would be effectively prevented."

tance as equivalent to homicide — still exist in most states. It is these laws which are likely to come under attack by advocates of "rational" suicide.

This could come about by direct challenge. For example, an individual wishing to commit suicide with the assistance of others could ask the court to strike down laws prohibiting that assistance, or a person charged with assisted suicide might raise the deceased victim's alleged constitutional "right to suicide" as a defense for his or her own actions. Such defense, they might argue, is supported in law by *Roe v. Wade* which found the constitutional right of privacy to be broad enough to encompass a woman's right to abortion, and by the case of *Karen Ann Quinlan* which expanded

examined and re-affirmed in the recent spate of termination of treatment cases. This state interest is strong enough to allow temporary restraint, and even incarceration, of potential suicides in order to protect them from themselves.

However, if a right to suicide or to assist at suicide were found by courts in the Constitution or created by legislatures, then interference by either the state or an individual would be wrongful — amounting to a breach of privacy and an assault and battery on the would-be suicide. Under these circumstances, individuals and groups would interfere with a potential suicide only at their own peril — having first reconciled themselves to a potential suit by the would-be suicide for a breach

be effectively prevented.

At issue in any case attempting to create a constitutional right to suicide will be the validity of society's traditional opposition to suicide, an opposition premised upon respect for the sanctity of all human life. Those who support the right to suicide and the right to assist at suicide generally emphasize two basic themes to counter this sanctity of life ethic.

First, they maintain that life itself is not an absolute good, but only one among a series of goods from which all human beings must make choices.

The second theme is the principle of personal autonomy. The argument is that society has no right to prohibit suicide because it is a matter which solely concerns the person choosing to take his or her