

# Respect Life: A Constant Ethic

## Seizing a Turning Point in History

By **SISTER PAULA VANDEGAER, S.S.S.**

Today we are living in a new "historic moment" — a transition time from one pattern of living and thinking to a new, undefined pattern.

Scientific and other advances affect not only our style of living but also our way of thinking about ourselves and others. Family life is under great stress; cultural and religious values are called into question; there is a new world order emerging; we are dependent economically from one country to another.

Communication has changed profoundly.

Today, in the space of one hour on television, we see famine, war, accidents and disasters all over the globe. We are in instant communication with major nations of the world. Surely, this brings us to a new world consciousness.

Politically, we are reorganizing on a more globally cooperative level. We know we possess the means to ravage the world. To turn away from this requires a high level of moral consciousness that many in our world seem not to possess. But never before has there been such an urgency for the conversion of the hearts of so many.

Our emerging economic order has resulted in families being moved from city to city, depending on job availability. Consequently, most families no longer live in close-knit neighborhoods or extended family groups. Divorce has become a common phenomenon, and many young people have experienced repeated broken relationships.

One of the effects of our rapidly changing world is that many young people have been seriously damaged in their ability to form a permanent marriage bond. Much healing and reconciliation must occur before they are able to sustain the self-sacrifice required of marriage and childrearing. Families already crippled by repeated broken relationships are further challenged by the lure of new advances in science.

There is a great temptation today to expect new scientific discoveries to make our lives free from suffering, with a hitherto unheard of element of perfection and ease. Through scientific and technical advances children can be chosen for their sex or perfection. Parents can decide whether the time is right for them to have a child. If a woman becomes pregnant she can legally abort the child. Such decisions can be made on the basis of expediency or convenience, or seemingly on no basis. We can discover a handicapped child in utero and abort him or her at will. What kind of ethical and moral considerations will govern these decisions?

In building our new society and our new way of living, the predominant force must be the dictates of the Gospel. What would Jesus do in this situation? We know that his concern was for the poor, the oppressed, the defenseless. We also have the clear and constant teaching of the Church that each and every human being is made in the image and likeness of God himself.

What of the woman with an "unwanted" pregnancy? She is pregnant with a baby she thinks she doesn't want or can't handle, and she lives in a society that tells her it is perfectly acceptable to get rid of it. Who will tell her otherwise? Who will stand for another value? The Christian community must offer that value, based on the teaching of Our Lord. Our care must be advanced through preaching and teaching, but most especially, it must be advanced through demonstrated action.

Today there are 1,500 pro-life service groups in the United States. These groups consist of hotlines and centers providing emergency pregnancy care. About 500 of them are part of the Catholic Charities system. Approximately 100 are sponsored by Protestant evangelical churches. The remainder are community groups sponsored by individuals gathered together to provide services for pregnant women.

I have always believed that God gives each of us a direct vocation to love and to express our love to someone. Usually God calls us to love our family and friends, and in that love to heal and reconcile those close to us. But today, perhaps because of the demands of our time, many people who once would have been called only to express their love within the close-knit circle of family and friends, are being called to express their love within a wider circle. Today people are called to care for and provide volunteer service for pregnant women and children.

There is so much to be done. In the first 15 years of the pro-life service movement emergency pregnancy service centers were established. In the past five years more attention has been given to surrounding services — housing, shelter, education and care of young women and their babies after delivery. All across the country new services are springing up under volunteer leadership.

God is calling His people to come forth and create a Christian community — a place where new ideas and discoveries will take place, not as overwhelming forces threatening Christian values, but as supplementary help in furthering the Christian message.

While all of society has a responsibility to care for women and children, the Christian community has a special role to play. Throughout history God has called His people to meet the needs of the time. Often we are called in strange ways. Like St. Paul, some of us are knocked off our horses. We are busy about many things and God finds a way to tell us He needs something different from us.

Some of us are like Jeremiah. We complain the whole time! Although we anguish and worry, we do respond to God's call, often not liking it, and sometimes suffering greatly because of it.

Others of us are like Isaiah. God speaks to us and says, "Whom shall I send?" and we say, "Here I am, send me," not really knowing what is involved. We have little more to offer



(Photo by Barbara Hadley)

**LOOKING AHEAD** — Modern society has the scientific means to carry out the Christian message in a new era of history. However, technology must first be guided away from destructive ends.

Him than a willingness to try and do His will.

It is estimated that more than 12 million women in the United States have had abortions. Suiciders Anonymous reports that in a two-year period, out of 4,000 women who had attempted suicide and contacted their hotline, 1,800 of them had had a previous abortion. This is only one indication of the pain that is present in American society.

Much of that pain is undetected and unknown. The woman who has had an abortion does not go around advertising the fact. Often she keeps her feelings very deep within herself. She has been told that she need not feel guilt or remorse about her abortion. When

our love for one another be reflected in our words and actions? Will we welcome into our communities those who are hurting? Will we go forward from our Christian communities to affect less loving segments of society? Will we create a society in which women will not choose abortion because it makes no sense to them — because they know there is a clear alternative, and that caring people stand willing and able to support that alternative? Will we influence society to offer loving support to women and children?

We can do these things. And I believe we will do them. God will lead each individual to his or her place of service. We need only to respond to his call.

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she does experience feelings of guilt or remorse, she may think there is something wrong with her, and submerge or hide such feelings. They may re-emerge later in attempts to be a "super mother," or in over-anxiousness for her children years later. These feelings may also emerge as unexplained bouts of depression, or in a fear of marriage or any kind of permanent commitment. Tender personal feelings about her baby who was aborted may be submerged to such an extent that she denies her feelings completely and dedicates herself to becoming a liberated woman, free of sexual and social restraints, and concerned with her personal well-being and satisfaction above all else.

Healing and reconciliation can only occur in a loving setting, and it is within the Christian community that that setting can be best provided. Will

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Such examples include many nurses, doctors, social workers, counselors, judges and others. They have been faced with personal involvement in abortion and have had to reject that involvement. Because of this many have lost jobs, money, prestige, opportunity and other things. But their courage has caused many of their colleagues to pause for thought.

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