

Respect LIFE

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An Introduction to the Program

The kick-off for the Catholic community's annual Respect Life Program takes place each year on the first Sunday of October — this year Oct. 5. From its inception in 1972 the program has linked the abortion issue to a broad range of human life concerns.

Today the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities — first approved by the U. S. Catholic bishops in 1975 and reaffirmed in 1985 — provides parish, diocesan and state groups with general guidance for program activities in the areas of education, pastoral care and advocacy.

The pastoral plan is set in the context of a consistent ethic that links concern for the unborn with concern for all human life. The inviolability of innocent human life is a fundamental moral norm. Ultimately, the obligation to respect all human life is based on the belief that the human person is made in the image of God.

Since 1975, certain matters have become particularly urgent and these receive attention in the re-endorsed pastoral plan — euthanasia, proper care of infants born with disabilities, sexual mores of teenagers, the practice of natural family planning, reconciliation as part of pastoral care, ecumenical dialogue, and the role of prayer in pro-life endeavors.

The most effective pastoral action occurs at the diocesan and parish levels, especially when clergy, Religious, and laity work as a team. Experience shows that the success of the pastoral plan depends in a special way on

the support and encouragement given it by parish priests.

The overall goal of the Respect Life Program, which is a major educational vehicle for the pastoral plan, is to form Church members who respect human life from conception to death. The program evangelizes and catechizes. It touches the heart and instructs the mind.

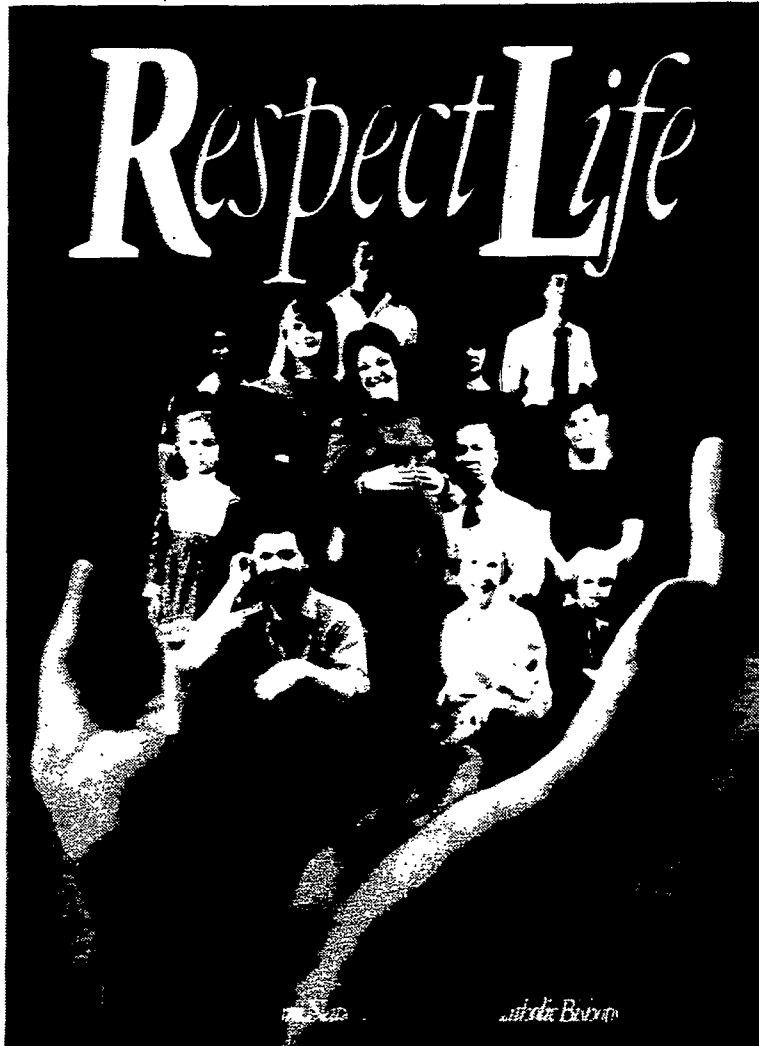
However, the more specific and immediate purpose of the program is to prepare Church members to be pro-life witnesses in the world — by the example of their lives, in word and deed.

Since its inception in 1972, the Respect Life Program has highlighted a wide range of issues, and this year's agenda continues that pattern. It focuses on the threats to human life from abortion, euthanasia, and substance abuse. It emphasizes respect for life as an integral part of sound economic life, reflects on the special dignity of immigrants and refugees and probes the ethical foundations of a consistent respect for life.

The articles contained in this supplement are excerpts from the Respect Life manual compiled and edited by the national Respect Life Program of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

A phone survey of several diocesan respect life and pro-life directors from around the country revealed a vibrant and creative program.

"The great need today is to



(NC photo by Bob Strawn)

evangelize our own people on the consistent ethic of life," said Rev. Roger Coughlin, director of the pro-life office for the Archdiocese of Chicago. "Our people need an agenda that is compassionate and caring, one that is grounded in the meaning of Church."

These sentiments were echoed by Rev. Larry Crawford, pro-life director for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. "We need good, solid education on the Church's view of the life issues," he said.

Formation of youth is receiving growing attention.

"Youth are very open — they want to be listened to, to be treated as individuals," said Miriam Barth, co-director with her husband, Ken, of the Respect Life office in the Diocese of Buffalo. "They need to learn that as followers of Christ it's OK to be different."

The Respect Life Program in the Diocese of Honolulu has embarked on a new approach to Respect Life formation.

The program has three phases:

1. A parish-based Christian community is formed;
2. The members of this

community make a retreat of the Holy Spirit;

3. These people go back to the parish to put the pastoral plan, in all its phases, into effect.

According to Deacon George Thorp, the Honolulu diocesan Respect Life director, this concept was first developed a little over a year ago. Currently 11 Christian communities exist — and the number is growing.

Seventy percent of Hawaiian parishes have either Respect Life coordinators or committees.

"The concept will continue to evolve," Deacon Thorp stated. "The spiritual foundation gives the people a common basis for loving each other. This is all we hope to achieve."

From its beginnings the pro-life movement has offered assistance to women and families with distressed pregnancies.

However, the reality of the practice of abortion means that post-abortion counseling and reconciliation is a great need. "One of the greatest challenges to the pro-life movement today is offering a compassionate response to women who have had abortions," noted Joyce Lively, a volunteer with the Camden, N.J., Respect Life Program.

Post-abortion reconciliation is the experience of the forgiving love of God in Christian community. "It is inner healing, above all, forgiving self," Miriam Barth said. "We should not characterize why people receive abortions. We should be open to all people."

Mary Gibson, director of the Respect Life Commission in the Archdiocese of Denver, notes that "there is a sense that the public is turning on the abortion issue. Basically, we need to continue and to increase the momentum."

The Evolution of the Pro-Life Movement

In the 1960s pro-abortion groups began to push first for the weakening and then for the elimination of all state abortion laws. To combat this trend, citizen-based right-to-life committees sprang up across the country. These groups worked hard to defend the unborn child's right to life through public education and through intervention in the courts and state legislatures. Early on the first Birthright organizations were established, offering a compassionate response to women experiencing a distressed pregnancy.

The term "pro-life" was coined to emphasize that the right-to-life movement was not just against abortion but was for life. However, the movement was composed of people who held diverse views on concerns

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other than abortion. As a matter of practical strategy, then, the movement's focus was generally limited to the abortion issue.

The U.S. Catholic bishops encouraged and supported these efforts to protect and care for life.

In the early years the abortion issue generally existed only on the edge of society's consciousness. It

was probably the 1972 presidential elections that for the first time brought the issue to full prominence at the national level. Abortion referenda in Michigan and North Dakota that same year also contributed to this national awareness.

As the abortion issue continued to escalate in the public life of the nation, the bishops saw the need to

teach the Catholic community more about the value of human life, to explicitly link the abortion issue to other human concerns, and to promote prayer, ecumenical dialogue and consciousness raising. Thus, the Respect Life Program was launched.

In January 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down all existing state abortion laws. This meant that the need for the Respect Life Program was only more urgent.

At first a week- or month-long celebration of the gift of human life, this program has expanded to a year-round effort — and has acquired a great deal of maturity. Today, the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities — first approved by the bishops in 1975 and reaffirmed in 1984 — serves as the guide to the Respect Life Program.