

Respect
LIFE

Choosing Life:

A Complex Issue Grows More Difficult

By SISTER MARGARET CARNEY, O.S.F.

"Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live"
(Deuteronomy, 30:19).

Since the beginning of the pro-life movement in this country, these words have been a rallying cry and a source of reassurance. We find them on the lips of the aged Moses as he prepares the Israelites for the final stage of their journey to the Land of Promise. They summarize a beautiful series of sermons in which he expounds the law of the Lord and reminds the people of the blessings promised to them if they will prove faithful to the covenant they have made.

In the seventh century B.C., King Josiah led the Jewish people in a profound religious renewal. The Torah — with its injunction "choose life" — was rediscovered. In a dramatic ceremony the people rededicated themselves to the covenant with Yahweh. When they heard this "torah," they heard themselves described as people chosen for special service. They rendered that service among the nations. In rendering it they did not assume an air of superiority because they were chosen. It was because of the Lord's love and mercy that he chose them, not because of their unimpeachable morals or talents. When they heard this "law," they heard themselves called to concrete social responsibilities. The weak and oppressed were singled out for special protection.

How do we understand the meaning of this passage today?

Some 15 years have passed since the beginning of wholesale liberalization of abortion laws in this country. During these years our ability to articulate and communicate has grown. Public pressures from individuals and groups and internal discernment among non-sectarian as well as religiously motivated pro-life advocates have taught us much.

A key moment in answering this question came when Joseph Cardinal Bernardin delivered a series of speeches — three at major Catholic universities and a fourth at the National Right to Life Convention — between December 1983 and June 1984 on the development of a "consistent ethic of life." He invoked the scriptural image of Christ's seamless garment to convey the breadth of concern that Catholics should bring to their respect life mission.

The Cardinal urged all Catholics to expend the intellectual and moral ef-



(Photos by Jim Whitmer)

(Photo of unborn child courtesy of Dr. Landrum B. Spättes)

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fort needed to promote a comprehensive vision of the Church's teaching on the dignity of the human person. From such a vision, he argued, a more inclusive and cooperative approach to the various issues and strategies identified with the work of human rights and justice would result. Two years have passed since those presentations caught national attention and provoked lively discussions within the Church and beyond.

In 1975, the Catholic bishops of the United States adopted the first "Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities," which called for a three-pronged response to the promotion of abortion-on-demand: education, service to women with problem pregnancies and advocacy for legislative changes. Understandably, the decision met with criticism from many quarters of the American public and even from the membership of the Church. Critics wrongly assumed that the Church had no business applying moral criteria to political situations with such force. Critics rightly assumed that the endorsement of such a plan signaled the end of an era in which Catholics in America sought merely to win acceptance and admiration within the larger culture. American Catholics were declaring a readiness to dissent from judicial, legislative and executive decisions that ran counter to basic moral tenets.

The magnitude of the challenge

was not lost upon those listening, but it was not always easy to hear without deep emotional response. To be stretched, questioned, challenged to embrace a wider frame of reference, to rethink the connections among issues, to move beyond the inevitable tensions that develop among people passionately committed to different issues — these were "hard sayings." Much had been done to promote consensus and consistency already, but more was needed. The Holy Spirit's stirrings of justice, prudence, fortitude and temperance call us — the entire Church — to continuing conversion to the Gospel message. Are we coming to understand that to "choose life" demands a thorough alteration of consciousness and conduct?

As we foster the development of this consistent ethic of life, what factors will we weigh in refining our moral principles and in correctly analyzing the situation in which we must apply them?

We must begin by contending with the quantum leap in moral decision-making skill that the escalation of technology demands. Questions without precedent in human experience confront us: genetic manipulation, nuclear warfare, control of human reproduction.

Other questions that have always stalked the human conscience rise up with dramatic new contours: euthanasia, care of disabled

newborns, capital punishment. We also live in an era in which the religious consensus that shaped the traditions of the Western world for centuries is no longer exercising a philosophical and practical monopoly.

Finally, we live in a world of global consciousness. Decisions made in our nation regarding many human rights have dramatic effects upon peoples and economies far from our shores (aid to dependent nations, population policies, arms treaties, to name a few).

This multiplication of issues and their complexity create some of the most perplexing questions for individuals, agencies and governing bodies in the Church. Each of us is challenged to discover linkages among issues, while understanding the differences that exist among those issues; to work together in common witness, knowing that specific activities, lobbying structures, particular talents and time will necessarily differ on distinct but related efforts to promote human life; and to make the Church's moral vision and tradition available in a special way as part of the political process in our pluralistic society.

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