

respect
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life

PERSEVERANCE

After 15 Years of Toil, the Respect Life Program Has Reached Maturity

The annual Respect Life Program, which begins on Sunday, Oct. 4, celebrates its 15th anniversary this year. It began in 1972 in an effort to reaffirm the sanctity of human life in all stages and to reverse the breakdown of moral, social and civil structures supporting human life in America. Just three months after the first Respect Life Sunday was celebrated in October 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down all existing state abortion laws. Clearly the Respect Life Program was needed.

The program began as a week- or month-long celebration of human life, but has since expanded to the current year-round effort. It has become the primary educational vehicle for the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities, a plan approved by the Catholic bishops of the United States in 1975 and reaffirmed by them in 1985.

The plan calls for a three-pronged effort on behalf of life — education, care and advocacy. Its goal is to "generate a greater respect for the life of all persons" by "focusing on the sanctity of human life."

In reaffirming the Pastoral Plan, the bishops made this point: "A consistent ethic, far from diminishing concern for abortion or equating all issues touching on the dignity of human life, recognizes the distinctive character of each issue while giving each its proper role within a coherent moral vision ... Precisely because all issues involving human life are interdependent, a society which destroys human life by abortion under the mantle of law unavoidably undermines respect for life in all other contexts. Likewise, protection in law and practice of unborn human life will benefit all life, not only the lives of the unborn."

Since its beginning, the Respect Life Program has promoted this comprehensive vision by focusing on a wide range of human life concerns — abortion, suicide, euthanasia, rights of the aging and dying, rights of disabled persons, immigration policy, war, capital punishment. That range is again reflected in this year's program manual. A similar manual (plus posters, flyers and other items) is published each year by the Catholic bishops' pro-life office in Washington, D.C. to assist parishes and others to implement the

program.

In this supplement, which is based on the Respect Life manual, the impact of new technologies on the issue of abortion is explored by Kenneth Van Derhoef from both a medical and legal standpoint. He notes that since the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973, viability — which the court placed at about 28 weeks — has dropped to 24 weeks, and in some cases to 21 or 22 weeks. At the same time technology is making possible the creation and sustained existence of new life outside the womb. He argues that viability, never a plausible standard for beginning to protect life, is even less plausible today.

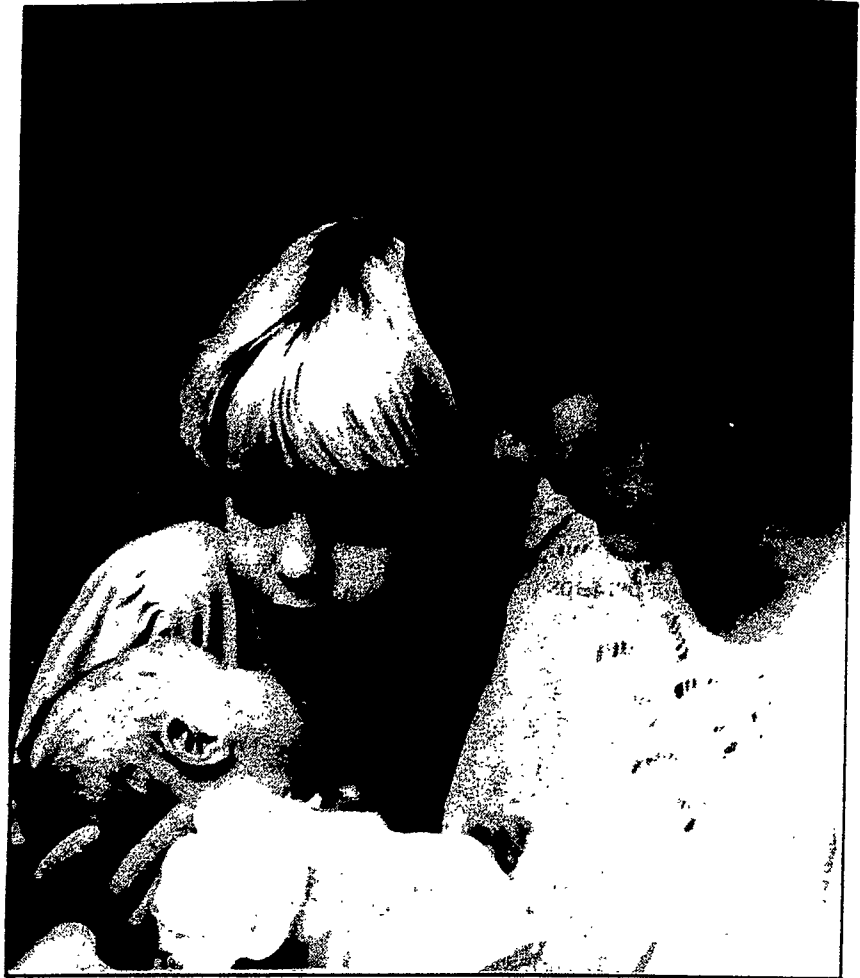
In his essay on euthanasia, Thomas Marzen shows that the campaign to legalize euthanasia is gaining momentum, and that it builds on some of the same ideas and social forces used to legalize abortion — especially the idea that society should protect only "meaningful" lives.

Other essays explore in detail the subjects of teenage pregnancy, adoption and natural family planning. Finally, Richard Doerflinger's essay on family policy discusses the gap between the laws of our country and the Church's ideals as stated in its "Charter on the Rights of the Family."

Pope John Paul II has spoken out often and forcibly on behalf of human life and dignity. Life as "God's unique and unrepeatable gift," the human person, human dignity, the child, are themes we hear him speak of again and again. As the theme for his recent visit to the United States, Pope John Paul took a passage from St. Paul that celebrates a variety of gifts in the Church "so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12).

In communion with the Holy Father and through their episcopal conference, the American Catholic bishops continue to speak with one voice in defense of life, born and unborn. On Oct. 4, the Catholic community in the United States will begin anew the Respect Life Program — to reaffirm and strengthen the Church's unity in service to the dignity of human life.

This supplement was prepared as a service to the Catholic press in the United States and Canada by The Catholic Standard and Times, the official newspaper of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, in cooperation with the American bishops' Office for Pro-Life Activities. The content of the supplement has been reprinted with permission from the 1987 Respect Life manual; the editing, design, layout and distribution are by The Catholic Standard and Times.



(Photo by M.C. Valada)

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A History of the Program

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

The American Catholic bishops strongly encouraged and supported these efforts to protect and care for life.

In the 1960s and early '70s abortion 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 national prominence. Abortion referenda in Michigan and North Dakota that same year also contributed to national awareness.

As the abortion issue continued to escalate in the public life of the nation, the bishops saw the need to bring Church teaching on the value and dignity of human life to the attention of the Catholic community. They also saw the need to link the abortion issue with other human concerns.

Thus the Respect Life Program was launched on the first Sunday

of October in 1972.

Three months later, on Jan. 22, 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down all existing state abortion laws. The need for the Respect Life Program became even more urgent.

The Respect Life Program has expanded and today many parishes have Respect Life Committees that focus on life issues at the parish level. The Respect Life Program has become the primary educational vehicle for the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities.

The Respect Life Program is conducted primarily through Catholic parishes across the country, as well as by many Catholic schools, health care facilities and organizations. To assist local implementation, the NCCB Office for Pro-Life Activities makes available new program materials each year — program manual, posters, flyers, etc. The materials are sent to every Catholic parish in the United States.

For additional information and a list of available Respect Life Program materials, write: Respect Life Program, 1312 Massachusetts ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005; or call (202) 638-0673.