

Respect Life

Introduction

Why a 'Respect Life' Program?

Because each human person has been created and redeemed by God, the Church teaches that human life is sacred and should be respected. Yet we needn't look far to see instances where the sanctity of human life is openly violated or ignored.

Since 1973, when the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion throughout pregnancy, the lives of more than 21 million unborn children have been destroyed. Today there are more than 1.5 million abortions performed in the United States each year, and one out of every three unborn children is destroyed by abortion.

But while abortion has become commonplace, Americans remain uneasy with abortion on demand. A recent poll showed that a majority of registered voters support legal restrictions on abortion except in rare circumstances. Fathers are fighting for the right to prevent the aborting of their children. Parents are increasingly upset by a system of law that allows their minor children to undergo abortions without their knowledge or consent. And advances in technology that allow us to see the child in utero have helped people to understand that it is a human life that abortion destroys.

Physicians, once expected to heal and care, today are asked to give patients lethal drugs or to withdraw nourishment from non-dying patients in order to end their lives. The word "euthanasia," once a euphemism for crimes against humanity, is touted as a compassionate and merciful act. This year an initiative that would allow doctors to provide dying patients with lethal drugs almost qualified for the November ballot in California. The groups spearheading this effort — the Hemlock Society and its political arm, Americans Against Human Suffering — have vowed to try again, if not by ballot then through state legislatures.

There are more homeless families with children today than at any time since the Great Depression. Thirty-seven million people are denied access to basic health care because they cannot afford the cost of such care or insurance, but fail to qualify for Medicaid.

Men, women and children continue to suffer the ravages of AIDS. And we who are healthy often have not learned to divest ourselves of fear, ignorance and cultural prejudice in order to minister to those who need our help and friendship.

Never before has society been so assaulted by pornography on television, in the movies, and in books.

The lives of women and children, and even men, are demeaned, and virtue is ridiculed as an old-fashioned ideal.

Concern for the broad range of issues that touch upon the dignity of human life gives rise to what Joseph Cardinal Bernardin has called a "consistent ethic of life." Speaking on this in Florida earlier this year, Cardinal Bernardin said: "Although they are not all the same, and they may not all be equally urgent at any given moment, all life issues are linked. Because of that linkage, no one of them can be eliminated from our overall vision of life and our responsibility toward this great gift.

"But one in particular," he said, "requires special attention at this moment in our history as a nation. The anguished cry of Jesus continues in a poignant way in the silent screams of unborn children who are denied their right to live. The scriptures tell us that, when Jesus died, a darkness covered the earth. This darkness now envelops our world. No matter how much we try to lift this darkness, we will never succeed unless we first decide, as individuals and as a nation, that we will protect the life of the unborn, that we will not deprive the most vulnerable of God's creatures of the gift of life which he has given them."

Working to protect and nourish human life is difficult. Those of us who try can feel overwhelmed, frustrated, alone. Sometimes it is easy to look the other way and not see the problems before us. Sometimes we see but we decide there is nothing we can do, and we become complacent.

Yet there is so much to be done, and it will not happen by itself. We must challenge ourselves continually to see social problems in light of our faith convictions and to act on those convictions.

The annual Respect Life Program was begun in 1972 by the Catholic bishops of the United States to help the Catholic community to focus on the sanctity of human life and, at the same time, to consider some of the contemporary threats to human life and human dignity. The bishops called for the program to begin each year on the first Sunday of October — this year, Oct. 2. This day is called Respect Life Sunday.

Liturgical suggestions for use on Respect Life Sunday are included in the Respect Life manual published each year by the National Con-

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— Phil. 4:13



ference of Catholic Bishops, from which this supplement was edited, as are suggestions for liturgy on other appropriate occasions. The manual also includes a special "open letter to priests" by Bishop Patrick Ahern concerning homilies on the topic of abortion. Contact your diocesan or parish Respect Life coordinator for more information about this manual.

The 1988 issue of the Respect Life Program manual includes essays on abortion, euthanasia, pornography, AIDS, health care for the poor and *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical issued by Pope Paul VI 20 years ago. While this manual has many uses for individuals and different groups, it is designed primarily to be used by parishes to promote pro-life activities.

In order to implement the program most effectively, we renew our call for parish pro-life committees to be initiated or expanded to facilitate and coordinate program activities. Each diocese has a Respect Life Coordinator (or Pro-Life Director) who can help parishes to implement the program. The NCCB Office for Pro-Life Activities can also be of assistance.

We must, each in our own way, continue to work on behalf of human life with both patience and humility — but also with joy, courage, confidence and determination. We must learn, too, to work with one another on behalf of life. And we must make our own the words of St. Paul: "In him who is the source of my strength, I have strength for everything" (Phil. 4:13).

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