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Campaign aims to stand up for most vulnerable

By Nancy Wisdo
Guest contributor

One of the misguided criticisms of Catholics in the pro-life movement — and by extension, the U.S. bishops — is that they care about children only before they are born and not much afterward. Such criticism blatantly ignores the church's enormous contribution in providing education, shelter, health care, social services, and advocacy on behalf of children and families in this country and around the world.

In November, 1991, the U.S. Catholic Conference brought together the church's long-standing tradition of pastoral care and advocacy in a statement titled, *Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation and World*. The statement is a "call for conversion and action — a spiritual and social reawakening to the moral and human costs of neglecting our children and families."

This attempt to acknowledge the alarming facts about the economic, social and emotional poverty endured by many of our children and families proposes a "family-focused" legislative agenda that will challenge our nation's leadership, especially in this election year. "While others are campaigning for public office," said the bishops, "let us campaign for children. Let us insist that the needs of our children, all children, but especially unborn children and poor children, take first place in the dialogue over the values and vision that ought to guide our nation."

Two months earlier, the bishops published another statement, *On Political Responsibility: Revitalizing American Democracy*, a call for education and action on a broad range of issues. Three questions in this state-

ment helped to focus the bishops' advocacy agenda on family and children's issues:

First, how can our nation respond to the haunting needs of vulnerable children in our midst? The bishops' answer: opposition to abortion and federal funding of abortion and support for pregnant women and children; support for legislation to eradicate hunger; and support for stronger child support laws.

A word about each of these:

- Because of our nation's pro-choice policy of abortion on demand, threats to our children begin before they are born. Every year 1.6 million children are abortion victims. There are also risks to unborn children and their parents from AIDS, substance abuse, and inadequate health care. The bishops also call for "expanded national education and prevention, the provision of prenatal and other health care, treatment and rehabilitation of abusers of alcohol and other drugs."

- An estimated 5.5 million children under 12 years old are hungry. "New investments and improvements are needed in basic nutritional programs, such as food stamps ... and the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program, that still does not reach all in need."

- At a time when almost half of all marriages end in divorce, the bishops call for steps to ensure that absent parents provide for children's needs. These steps would include minimum child-support awards based on the number of children and the absent parent's income, and automatic wage withholding.

The second question, how can our society support families in their irreplaceable moral role and social duties, offering real choices and help in finding and affording decent education, housing and health care? The bishops' answer: support for refundable children's tax credit; support for family and medical leave; and support for parental choice in education.

- The bishops support changes in our nation's tax policies that will "bring fairness to the treatment of families, especially to those raising children on mod-

est incomes." A refundable children's tax credit is one proposal which would allow middle-income families with children to keep more of what they earn and would help lift low-income families out of poverty.

- Families that must juggle full and part-time jobs, child-care arrangements and time off for family crises, need "family-friendly" workplace policies. The bishops support a national family and medical leave policy that would allow parents to take unpaid time off to "welcome a new child, nurse a sick spouse, or comfort a dying parent," without having to worry about losing their jobs or their health-care benefits.

- If parents are to exercise their primary right and responsibility to provide for the education of their children, they must have real choices about how and where that education takes place. The bishops urge "education policies that respect parental choice such as vouchers and tax credits ... policies that will improve poor quality schools, increase parental and family involvement, and encourage teacher excellence in education."

Third question: how can we find fair ways to invest in human needs without mortgaging our country's economic future? The bishops' answer: increases in federal support for Head Start, Job Corps, housing and health care.

Many families need a "social safety net" to be able to meet basic physical and social needs so that their children can grow and develop. Those needs include early childhood development, safe and affordable housing, basic health care, and job training for young people. Mothers and children make up an increasingly large proportion of the homeless. Over one-half of mothers with children are in the work force.

The Catholic Campaign for Children is an opportunity to build on our tradition of defending the poor and vulnerable members of society — our children.

Wisdo is director of the United States Catholic Conference Office of Domestic Social Development in Washington, D.C.

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