

COLUMNS COMMENTARY

Life ethic calls for committing resources

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

I used to be quite suspicious of the phrase, "the consistent ethic of life." For one thing, in all my years of being Catholic, I never encountered it until very recently. At first, I assumed it was some sort of modern religious fad and would soon go away. Upon investigation of its origins, I later learned that Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago was responsible for popularizing this saying and promoting the meaning behind it.

For Cardinal Bernardin, the "consistent ethic of life" offers a way of saying that the very core of Catholic moral teaching lies in the dignity of the person. All of the precepts, principles and codes related to Catholic moral teaching are rooted in our fundamental belief in the inherent dignity of people, created, redeemed, loved and sanctified by God. Because of this common foundation, the many issues that demean and threaten human life are actually related, and should be seen as connected through their attack on this most fundamental of all beliefs.

Cardinal Bernardin urged Catholics to see the link between all the ways in which life is threatened in contemporary society and to resist the forces of death and diminishment in all their manifestations. He used the image of the "seamless garment" to suggest a single, structured response based on the dignity of the human person and directed against the many threats to life itself.

But the consistent ethic of life finds support and takes its roots from an



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even more fundamental source than Cardinal Bernardin's words and images. In the Second Vatican Council's document *The Church in the Modern World*, a strong passage from the "Respect for the Human Person" also links ways in which we need to support life and resist death. The passage is from #27, and reads:

"The varieties of crime are numerous: all offenses against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and willful suicide; all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures; all offenses against human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions where people are treated as mere tools for profit rather than free and re-

sponsible persons: all these and the like are criminal: they poison civilization; and they debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honor of the creator."

Many people might not automatically connect the issues of abortion, subhuman living conditions and degrading working conditions. But this document, from the highest teaching authority of our church, clearly states that link for all to see. The link is made, and the foundation for it is clear: we resist these crimes because we confidently believe that every single human person is created in the image of God and, for that reason, merits our respect and deserves our protection.

But that list of crimes can seem overwhelming, and we might be tempted to ignore our own responsibility to resist the parts of modern culture that demean and threaten human life just because the task seems so big. Thus we need to simplify the task somewhat in order to claim some power for ourselves and take up action on behalf of life. I like the example suggested in a letter the bishop of Shrewsbury, England, wrote to his people:

"Abortion is now legal. That does not make it right. Life is a gift of God. We cannot create it. We can only transmit it. It is given to us to cherish and to use, not to stifle and to extinguish.

"We recognize that, for one reason or another, a pregnancy can cause a problem, distress, shame, despair to some mothers. Perhaps, in our concern to uphold the sanctity of life, we have failed to show sufficient practical concern for the mother-to-be who feels herself to be in an intolerable situation."

"The Diocese of Shrewsbury publicly declares its solemn guarantee. It is this: any mother to be, Catholic or non-Catholic, is guaranteed immediate and practical help, confidentially and at no expense to herself, if, faced with the dilemma of an unwanted pregnancy, she is prepared to allow the baby to be born and not aborted. This help includes, if she wishes, the care for her baby after birth. All the resources of the diocese are placed behind this pledge."

I don't mean to suggest that this bishop's response is the single response to the single issue threatening life today. But I like the passage because it presents an example of one thing we all have the ability to do on behalf of life: we can all take some of the resources we have at our disposal and put them at the service of life.

I also like the bishop's response because it is a practical and positive one. He doesn't inflame the debate; he doesn't attack those who think differently than he does; he doesn't become negative; he doesn't neglect women for whom pregnancy can be an enormous burden. He does not deny the compassion Jesus showed to every person he ever encountered. And he does not deny the compassion that ought always to accompany Catholic action on life's behalf.

All the bishop of Shrewsbury does is to put what resources he commands at the service of life. Whatever else the "consistent ethic of life" means, it means at least that: we are all called to put some of our own resources — of talent, time or money — in service of life and in opposition to the forces that endorse death in our society.

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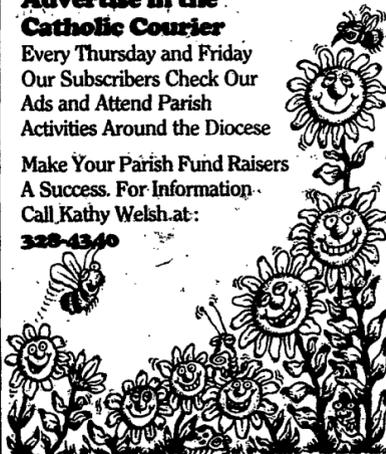


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