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Diverse views color consistent-life discussions

ROCHESTER – In 1983, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago first articulated the idea of the consistent ethic of life.

That ethic — sometimes called the "seamless garment" — posits the interdependence of the issues of abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, poverty and war. Adherents of the ethic maintain that all people should be treated with dignity and that all life is sacred.

"Precisely because life is sacred, the taking of even one human life is a momentous event," Cardinal Bernardin said in a Dec. 6, 1983, address at Fordham University. "Indeed, the sense that every human-life has transcendent value has led a whole stream of the Christian tradition to argue that life Monthly focus on catechetics may never be taken."

In September, 1993, the Diocese of Rochester adopted the "consistent ethic of life"
— often referred to as the consistent life ethic, or simply the CLE— as one of five goals approved at the diocese's Seventh Synod. In December, 1994, the consistent life ethic became one of the goals of the diocese's Pastoral Plan that grew out of the diocesan Synod.

Over the next five years the diocese will be guided by this goal in its public policy pronouncements and actions, opposing not only abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia and unjust war, but also looking out for the social welfare of the poor.

Thus, for example, Bishop Matthew H. Clark led a delegation to Washington, D.C. for a Sept. 13 visit with area congressional representatives. The trip's intention was to provide Catholic input into welfare reform in light of the poverty component of the consistent life ethic.

Meanwhile, diocesan parishes are also looking into ways to implement the ethic, but

the precise means to do so — and helping Catholics understand what the CLE is — will likely prove easier said than done.

Pittsford's St. Louis Parish, for example, has agreed to become a pilot parish charged with exploring ways to incorporate the consistent life ethic into all aspects of parish life, from youth ministry to liturgy.

But, as Deacon Thomas Driscoll, the parish's minister of Christian formation, noted, "We haven't gotten to the 'how' stage yet."

Father James Schwartz, the Pittsford parish's pastor, will preach about the consistent life ethic this Respect Life Sunday, Oct. 1, Deacon Driscoll said. In addition, the parish is in the process of creating a social ministry committee.

"It's important that we get the social ministry piece in place first," the parish deacon said. "After that, we don't know what we mean by putting the consistent life ethic into our programs."

Consequently, the parish will work with diocesan officials in developing specific steps to incorporate the CLE into various parts of parish life.

Part of that planning process will be undertaken with the knowledge that the ethic

is not accepted by all people.

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"There are a number of folks who disagree with some of the issues," Deacon Driscoll observed.

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Suzanne Schnittman, who has served as the diocese's consistent life ethic coordinator since July 1, is well aware that people are at different levels of understanding of the ethic and in their acceptance of it.

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