

Consistent life

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"When I sit down with 10 people asking them what they think of it, some want healing, some want to understand what the consistent life ethic is, some understand what it is and want to advocate in one area or another, some have been involved with Respect Life for years and are into dealing with the death-penalty issue," Schnittman said, referring to the annual ongoing Respect Life Month effort focusing on respect for life at all levels.

In the few months she has been on the job, Schnittman has been doing a lot of talking and listening with such groups and organizations as the Parish Pro Life Network, Pax Christi Rochester, the Problem Pregnancy Help Center, Inc., parish social ministry committees, the diocesan Department of Evangelization and Catechesis, and youth ministers.

Schnittman acknowledged that some individuals accept one part of the ethic, but not others. Indeed, some people disagree vehemently on some of the issues, with abortion and the death penalty most often being where disagreements occur. In such situations, Schnittman emphasizes respect for other people's views, but not necessarily agreement.

"One thing I stress with groups is that no one group has to work on all five issues, but that no group should put up obstructions to what another life group is doing," Schnittman said.

She added that she herself has experi-

enced personal growth on at least one of the issues.

"I was pro-choice until 1984," Schnittman acknowledged. But, she said, through a combination of spiritual reflection and reading of scientific research, "the realization came that I could not continue to deny that the fetus is a human being."

Thus, she said, her approach at this point is simply to get people talking, to get them to look at the ways in which they support the consistent life ethic, and to build upon that support.

In the process, Schnittman is trying to emphasize the ethic's positive aspects.

"We're still really seeing it as protests," Schnittman said. "I think there's a great need to broaden that and make it a positive affirmation of life, rather than make it a negative, 'We oppose that.' If you begin to talk about why you can affirm different aspects of life, you can begin asking questions."

Robert Dorscheid of Penfield has found his views on life issues shifting because of such questions.

A member of Penfield's St. Joseph's Parish, Dorscheid is a longtime pro-life activist. He now also opposes the death penalty — a reversal of his previous position — and has reservations about whether contemporary wars meet the church's just-war criteria.

"It was all because of my pro-life work and meeting with people and discussing the other issues," Dorscheid said. "Once you can get somebody to say they are pro-life, why they are against the death penal-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Suzanne Schnittman speaks to a reporter during a protest Aug. 31, one day before the death penalty's reinstatement in New York.

ty, why they are against war, then you can get them to look the other issues."

But a fellow, longtime pro-life advocate is not as certain that this will happen.

"There may be some charitable level where (the consistent life issues) all touch, but when you get to the political level and you talk about social charity, the right to protect the common good, they fall apart," observed former Monroe County legislator William Polito of Webster.

Although he believes there have to be substantial safeguards to make sure that the accused get a fair trial and that innocent people are not condemned to death, Polito does not oppose the death penalty.

In addition, the Holy Trinity parishioner believes there are situations where war is justified, such as the U.S. involvement in World War II.

The difference Polito sees between abortion and the death penalty is that, while abortion takes the life of an innocent person, the death penalty is applied to those who are guilty of serious crimes.

"If a person can lose his soul, why can't he lose his life?" Polito argued.

Meanwhile, Corpus Christi parishioner Clare Regan takes the opposite views on the death penalty and abortion.

A longtime opponent of the death penalty — she is Amnesty International's Western New York representative for the death penalty — Regan believes that abortion is permissible up to 20 weeks.

"I think we have to honor life, but I don't think we can say life begins at conception," Regan argued. "Nobody pretends that an acorn is a oak tree, so how can we pretend that a fertilized egg is a human?"

She acknowledged that the church now teaches that life does begin at conception, but she claims that the church did not always adhere to that teaching. At one time, she contended, the church's teaching was, "You cannot have the soul there until the body is ready to accept it."

Although she does not fit the diocesan definition in terms of abortion, Regan said she still sees herself as pro-life — and as an advocate of the consistent life ethic.

"I sort of resent it that people say to me that I'm not pro-life because I don't believe life begins at conception," Regan said.

Jan Bezila, on the other hand, does fit the definition of a consistent life advocate, although as a coordinator of Pax Christi

Rochester — the international Catholic peace group — her focus is on the ethic's stance on war.

"We are a consistent group," Bezila said. But not all peace activists are, she acknowledged.

"I think the difference happens because of the people (the peace movement) attracts, because they have a liberal agenda," Bezila said. "That is not a big problem in Catholic circles."

But she sees many people in the church unwilling to take positions against war.

"The church really can't succeed against abortion unless it preaches pro-life consistently," Bezila said.

The Catholic Church is moving in that direction on the death penalty and war — two issues where, to some advocates, it has been less consistent. In 1990, for example, Pope John Paul II and a number of bishops — including Bishop Clark — questioned whether the war against Iraq could be considered a just war.

And in his 1995 encyclical, "Evangelium Vitae" ("The Gospel of Life"), the pope addressed all of the consistent life issues, calling for a "culture of life" as opposed to the prevalent "culture of death," which he described as including modern methods of warfare and the death penalty. He called for limits on the death penalty, stating that it should only be used in situations where it is the only means to defend society.

"Today, however," the pope wrote, "as a result of steady improvement in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically nonexistent."

In light of Pope John Paul II's declaration, the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" is being revised to reflect this more limited understanding of when the death penalty is permitted.

The shift Cardinal Bernardin called for in 1983, toward advocacy of the consistent life ethic, is being seen throughout the church today.

"I am convinced that there is an open moment before us on the agenda of life issues," the cardinal said. "It is a significant opportunity for the church to demonstrate the strength of a sustained moral vision."

"I submit," the prelate concluded, "that a clear witness to the consistent ethic of life will allow us to grasp the opportunity of the open moment and serve both the sacredness of every human life and the God of life who is the origin and support of our common humanity."

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