

to Life

Doctor earns honor for pro-life activism

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

He has viewed the sanctity of life from sharply differing angles during his adult years: first as an abortionist, then as a staunch pro-life activist.

In recent months, Dr. Leo Holmsten has reflected on his own life while battling an incurable illness. The experience, he said, has only deepened his belief that no life should be ended prematurely.

"I'm a candidate for euthanasia. I could come up with ways to take my own life," Holmsten said in a recent interview at his Penfield home.

Instead, Holmsten has found a measure of serenity since being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer this past June. The illness has forced him to suspend his private medical practice, but he said he has used the period "to take more time with my family, and in prayer and worship of the Lord, seeking his direction. You get so busy sometimes, you don't make the Lord your number one priority."

"These past few months have been a tremendous blessing for me," Holmsten added.

Holmsten, 63, has been such a blessing and inspiration to those connected with the pro-life movement that an award has been established in his name. He received the first Leo Holmsten Human Life Award during a

Sept. 16 banquet at the Four Points Hotel in Rochester. The event was sponsored by 13 Rochester-area groups that advocate for life, including the Diocese of Rochester, Problem Pregnancy Help Center, Inc., Project Rachel, the Catholic Physician's Guild and the St. Thomas More Lawyer's Guild.

Although Holmsten said he was uneasy at being singled out, he agreed to lend his name to the award if it helped further the pro-life movement.

"I'm not looking for any glory for myself. I want everything to point to the Lord," he said.

Holmsten has been an obstetrician and gynecologist in Rochester for 34 years. Early in his career, Holmsten's actions stood in stark contrast to his current views on abortion.

Holmsten became affiliated with Planned Parenthood of Rochester in the late 1960s and eventually served as that chapter's medical director. It was during this period that he performed abortions routinely.

"I can't tell you how many. It was in the hundreds," Holmsten said.

However, he added, "I never felt comfortable with it. I did a lot of soul-searching on this and I didn't have the answers."

Holmsten's misgivings were also stirred by his religious beliefs. He had become a born-again Christian while serving as a captain in the U.S. Army at Fort



Greg Francis/Staff photographer
Dr. Leo Holmsten, a former Planned Parenthood medical director, relaxes at his Penfield home the day before he was honored Sept. 16 for his pro-life work. An award has been named for him.

Stewart Army Base, Ga.

"I was thrown in with a lot of Southern Baptists. They did some 'strange' things — they carried their Bible, they read their Bible and they knew their Bible. In 1967 I invited the Lord into my life," Holmsten recalled. He now attends Edgewood Free Methodist Church in Brighton.

Holmsten became decidedly opposed to abortion after New York state passed the most liberal abortion legislation in the country in 1970. He said this leniency prompted an alarming increase in abortion advocacy by Planned Parenthood, and in 1972 he resigned from the organization.

"I didn't like what I saw. Planned Parenthood was trying

to change the morality of our society," Holmsten said.

Since he left Planned Parenthood, Holmsten has taken part in numerous pro-life activities through radio and television appearances, writings, legislation campaigns and public debates.

He has served on many church and pro-life boards, including Faith Haven, where he is medical director; and Crisis Pregnancy Center of Rochester, where he served until recently as medical director. He is also president of the Rochester Area Right to Life Committee, Inc., Advisory Board.

Holmsten admitted he has often been a minority voice while standing up for his beliefs.

"Christianity isn't as popular

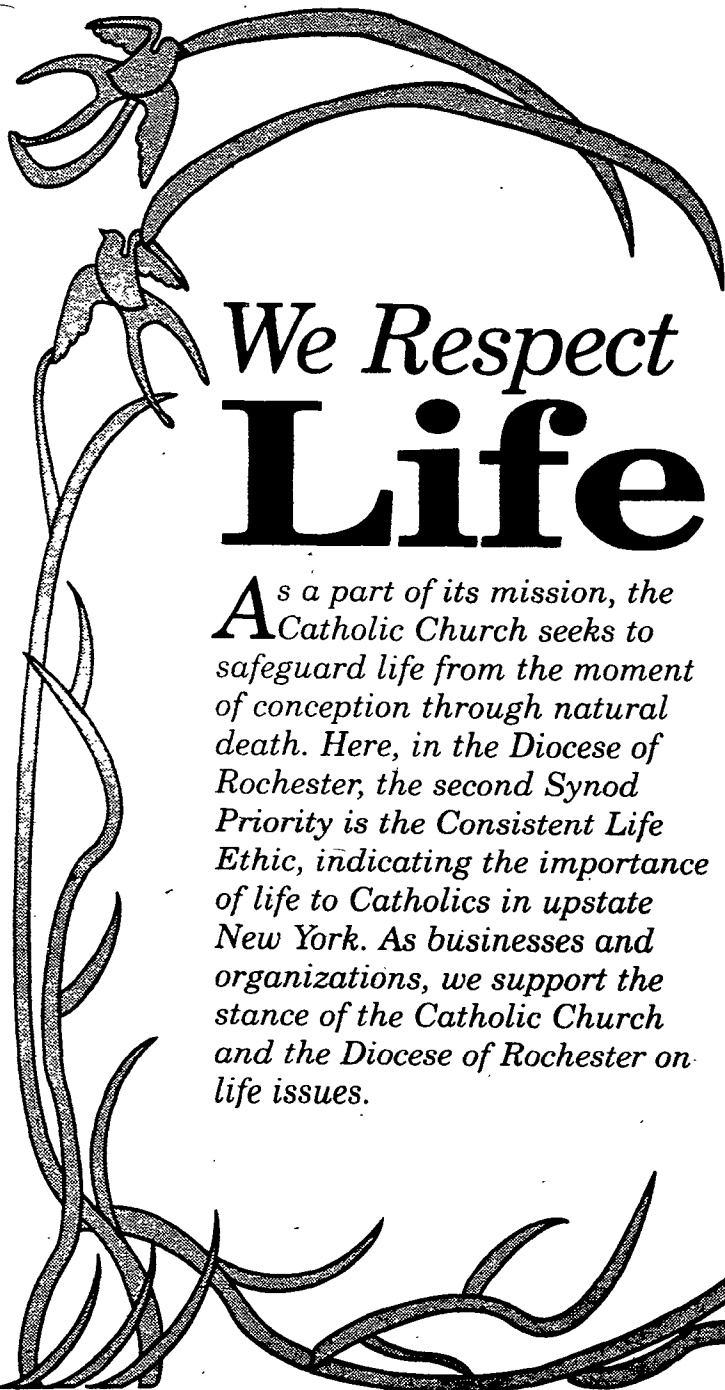
to defend as is abortion," Holmsten commented. "But I decided a long time ago that I'm not out to make friends. I just want to speak God's truth."

Holmsten said that the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision, which effectively legalized abortions in the United States, has served as ongoing motivation for his activism.

"Life has been devalued so much over the past 25 years," he said.

Regarding his own past history as an abortionist, he said he has reconciled his actions by seeking forgiveness.

"The only way you can really do it is through the Lord. I had to repent, but God is forgiving," he said.



We Respect Life

As a part of its mission, the Catholic Church seeks to safeguard life from the moment of conception through natural death. Here, in the Diocese of Rochester, the second Synod Priority is the Consistent Life Ethic, indicating the importance of life to Catholics in upstate New York. As businesses and organizations, we support the stance of the Catholic Church and the Diocese of Rochester on life issues.

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