

All human life deserves respect

In some dioceses, the person responsible for some of the duties I perform is called the human life director. In other dioceses, activities that promote peace and justice are the exclusive domain of social-ministry staff, with little, if any, interaction occurring between them and the "respect life" staff. It is my good fortune to work at the Diocese of Rochester where justice, peace and life are addressed comprehensively.

Through my office, which operates under Catholic Charities, I promote the consistent ethic of life. My job is to help people understand that every human life is sacred and deserves respect, because all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The consistent ethic of life recognizes that life begins at conception, that the dignity of the human person is a birthright bestowed by God, that human beings are entitled to justice. The issues brought forth by the consistent ethic of life include the protection of the unborn and those who are frail or near death. It calls for life-giving solutions to problems of criminal behavior or international crisis; they are not "solved" by inflicting death or destruction. Accepting the consistent ethic of life requires all to recognize that every person needs certain essentials, such as food, water, shelter and basic medical care, and that it is our obligation to care for the poor.

While I believe that in specific arenas precise legislation on a single issue may be the most effective method to address that issue, studying the issues through a "consistent" prism has a great deal of merit. This helps us to think about the complexity of problems and the connectedness of solutions. It helps us to join with others to build a culture of life.

Beginning- and end-of-life issues exemplify the complexity of issues and the necessity of seeking connected solutions. Let's first take a

look at abortion.

The right to life of a person from the moment of conception is a doctrine that has been clearly taught by the Catholic Church for centuries. Abortion on demand has been legal in the United States since 1973, resulting in more than 45 million fetal deaths. The positive news is that in recent years the rates of abortion and absolute numbers of abortions have slowly declined. That is, for all demographic cohorts except for women living at 200 percent of the poverty level and below. For these women, abortion may seem the only "solution" for a baby that will be born in a world of poverty and struggle.

The twilight of life brings ethical issues as well. A person reaching the golden years of life looks forward to enjoying the fruits of his or her labor. Those of modest means often rely on pension and retirement benefits. Most people also expect some help from the Social Security program to which they contributed. Now, more and more pensioners face the loss of health-care benefits in retirement, and an increasing number of corporations are defaulting on their retirement plans. With age, everyone can expect at least a few significant health problems. Will adequate health care be affordable and available? Or will a sick senior come under increasing pressure to go "quietly into that good night" prematurely, so as to preserve whatever assets (s)he and his or her family have accumulated? The government and those who control the wealth in this country must be held responsible for fulfillment of social contracts that were negotiated in good faith in years past and that make the difference between an impoverished old age and decent retirement years.

Looking at the current state of affairs in international politics and economics through the consistent-life-ethic prism also illustrates the

The Forum

For this month's viewpoints section, the *Courier* invited two life-issues experts to share their views on the consistent life ethic. Their essays appear on this and the following page.

connectedness of issues. We are told that globalization of manufacturing jobs is necessary, so that companies may remain "competitive." Competitive often means creating wealth for shareholders without regard for the displaced workers in the domestic economy or the plight of workers in foreign countries. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of working and middle-class jobs have been exported to countries where wages are low. Some of the countries, such as China, have policies that include forced abortion for birth control, repression of religious belief and capital punishment. Domestically, the real wages of everyone except the top 20 percent have stagnated or decreased in the past decade. Frustration and despair contribute to structural problems in forming stable, healthy families that are life-giving, sustaining and nurturing.

The terrible violence in Iraq is antithetical to a culture of life. Despite Pope John Paul II's repeated pleas for the United States not to attack Iraq, facts and truth were somehow muddled, and an unprecedented shift in U.S. foreign policy occurred. The United States became a military aggressor, justifying its actions with a first strike, "pre-emptive" military policy. Many analysts seem to think that guaranteeing access to Iraq's oil fields was a major motivating factor in the decision to go to war in Iraq. Oil is important for many reasons, but it is particularly useful as fuel to ship goods from places of manufac-



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ture to faraway markets. The labor force displaced by globalization of jobs is more willing to accept dangerous positions with companies doing business in war zones or pursue careers in the military. Young men and women with few opportunities to advance their lives are willing to fight a war. Years of marketing and advertising that not so subtly exploit the most basic, vulgar instincts of individuals desensitize people who can then participate in the abhorrent activities that occurred in U.S. detention facilities in Iraq. And as it is always in war, the youngest, the oldest and the most frail are the first casualties in collateral damage.

The consistent ethic of life calls each of us to listen to Jesus and to follow the great commandments of loving God and loving neighbor as self. The dimensions of the consistent ethic of life challenge each of us to work toward a culture of life in our own special way. We are blessed when we advocate for a specific issue within the context of the consistent life ethic because we benefit from the mutual respect of all those working on each of the issues and the synergism of all committed to life.

Jann Armantrout is life-issues coordinator for the Diocese of Rochester.

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