

Pastoral Plan For Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign In Support Of Life

In our present social context, marked by a dramatic struggle between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death", there is need to *develop a deep critical sense*, capable of discerning true values and authentic needs.

What is urgently called for is a *general mobilization of consciences* and a *united ethical effort* to activate a *great campaign in support of life*. *All together, we must build a new culture of life*.

- Blessed John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, no. 95 (emphasis added)

Introduction

We issue this *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life* to put forth "a *precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability*, and at the same time a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person, in the name of God: *respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life*" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 5).

As pastors and teachers, we proclaim that human life is a precious gift from God; that each person who receives this gift has responsibilities toward God, self, and others; and that society, through its laws and social institutions, must protect and nurture human life at every stage of its existence. These beliefs flow from ordinary reason and from our faith's constant witness that "life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 51)—a teaching that has been a constant part of the Christian message since the apostolic age.

A Consistent Ethic of Life

A wide spectrum of issues touches on the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity. As Pope John Paul II has reminded us: "*Where life is involved, the service of charity must be profoundly consistent*. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, for human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 87).

Among important issues involving the dignity of human life with which the Church is concerned, abortion necessarily plays a central role. Abortion, the direct killing of an innocent human being, is *always* gravely immoral (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 57); its victims are the most vulnerable and defenseless members of the human family. It is imperative that those who are called to serve the least among us give urgent attention and priority to this issue of justice.

This focus and the Church's commitment to a consistent ethic of life complement one another. A consistent ethic of life, which explains the Church's teaching at the level of moral principle—far from diminishing concern for abortion and euthanasia or equating all issues touching on the dignity of human life—recognizes instead the distinctive character of each issue while giving each its proper place within a coherent moral vision. As bishops of the United States we have issued pastoral letters on war and peace, economic justice, and other social questions affecting the dignity of human life—and we have implemented programs for advancing the Church's witness in these areas through parishes, schools, and other Church institutions (e.g., *Communities of Salt and Light* [1994]; *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching* [1998]). Taken together, these diverse pastoral statements and practical programs constitute no mere assortment of unrelated initiatives but rather a consistent strategy in support of all human life in its various stages and circumstances.

To focus on the evil of deliberate killing in abortion and euthanasia is not to ignore the many other urgent conditions that demean human dignity and threaten human rights. Opposing abortion and euthanasia "does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing and health care" (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 23). We pray that Catholics will be advocates for the weak and the marginalized in all these areas. "*But being 'right' in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life*. Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its

most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the 'rightness' of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community" (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 23).

Pervasive Threats to Human Life

Where does one begin? Today, when human rights are proudly proclaimed and the value of life itself given public affirmation, the most basic of all human rights, "the very right to life," "is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the more significant moments of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 18). Sometimes very difficult or even tragic situations can be the basis for decisions made against life, circumstances that can diminish the personal culpability of those who make choices that in themselves are evil. But as Pope John Paul II points out, today the problem goes further: "It is a problem which exists at the cultural, social and political level, where it reveals its more sinister and disturbing aspect in the tendency, ever more widely shared, to interpret . . . crimes against life as *legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights*" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 18).

The question "Where does one begin?" is easy to answer: "*We must begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing, of any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled or desperate that life may seem*" (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 21).

Thus some behaviors are always wrong, always incompatible with our love of God and the dignity of the human person. Abortion, the direct taking of innocent human life prior to birth, is always morally wrong, as is the deliberate destruction of human embryos for any reason. Assisted suicide and euthanasia are not acts of mercy but acts that are never morally acceptable. Direct attacks on innocent civilians during war and terrorist acts targeting noncombatants must always be condemned.

Our concern is only intensified by the realization that a policy and practice that result in well over a million deaths from abortions each year cannot but *diminish respect for life in other areas*. In this pastoral plan, then, "we are guided by a key insight regarding the linkage between abortion and these other important issues: Precisely *because* all issues involving human life are interdependent, a society which destroys human life by abortion under the mantle of law unavoidably undermines respect for life in all other contexts. Likewise, protection in law and practice of unborn human life will benefit all life, not only the lives of the unborn" (*Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation* [1985], 5). This is why we focus here on the pervasive threat to human life arising from the widespread recourse to abortion, from public policies that allow, encourage, and even fund abortion, and from a growing effort to promote the taking of human life through euthanasia.

The Legacy of *Roe v. Wade*

In January 1973, the Supreme Court of the United States gave our nation *Roe v. Wade* and its companion decision *Doe v. Bolton*, and in so doing effectively removed every legal protection from human beings prior to birth. The legacy of *Roe* is virtually incalculable. In its wake it has left death and sorrow and turmoil:

- the deaths of millions whose lives were destroyed before birth and even during the very process of being born
- countless women traumatized so deeply by abortion that they spend years struggling to find peace, healing, and reconciliation
- men who grieve because they could not "choose" to protect a child they helped bring into existence
- a society increasingly coarsened by toleration and acceptance of acts that purposely destroy human life

These attacks on human life are carried out within the family and with the active involvement of those in the healing profession—institutions that traditionally have protected the weak and the vulnerable. Often they are carried out at the urging of fathers who, rather than protecting their child, believe their only responsibility is to help pay for an abortion. And today, those who support and provide abortion freely acknowledge that killing is involved, and choices once treated as criminal and rejected by the common moral sense have become socially acceptable.

In 1992, the Supreme Court reaffirmed *Roe v. Wade*—in large part, it said, because admitting error and reversing a prior decision would undermine the Court's authority. It said also that "people have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail" (*Planned Parenthood v. Casey*). In other words, Americans had come to rely on legalized abortion as a backup for contraceptive failure.

In 2000, in *Stenberg v. Carhart*, the Court expanded the abortion liberty beyond killing in utero; it now wrapped in the mantle of the U.S. Constitution the practice of killing during the process of birth. Abortion has come to be seen by many not only as a "right" to end a pregnancy prior to birth, but as a *guarantee* that a child aborted will not survive. This is clear in regard to partial-birth abortion, as well as in the growing reports of children who, having survived mid- and late-term abortions, are put aside and left to die because they were not supposed to live in the first place.

Today, some seek ways to alleviate human diseases through research that involves the deliberate destruction of human embryos. Such research, it is claimed, will enhance human life, when in actuality it "reduces human life to the level of simple 'biological material' to be freely disposed of" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 14). Often these embryos that are targeted for experimentation were created in laboratories by *in vitro* fertilization in attempts to assist couples struggling with infertility. Such efforts, however, embrace the manufacturing of human life without considering the consequences, including the many ethical dilemmas resulting from such misuse of scientific technology.

A Word About Violence

Our goal is to eliminate violence against unborn children, their mothers, and those who are dying. We unalterably oppose the use of violence in any form to achieve this objective, and we condemn the actions of those few who advocate otherwise. During the past decade, several persons involved in the practice of abortion have been killed, and others have been harmed, by tragically misguided individuals claiming to be pro-life. Such violence against human beings is indefensible. It is an offense against God's command: *you shall not kill*. It also unjustly stigmatizes the pro-life movement in the eyes of many Americans as being violent and intolerant. We abhor and condemn such violence unequivocally.

Abortion and Contraception

The Church's teaching and pastoral efforts on responsible parenthood are appropriately treated more fully in other documents. However, we address the issue here, because some promote widespread use of contraception as a means to reduce abortions and even criticize the Church for not accepting this approach.

It is noteworthy that as acceptance and use of contraception have increased in our society, so have acceptance and use of abortion. Couples who unintentionally conceive a child while using contraception are far more likely to resort to abortion than others. Tragically, our society has fallen into a mentality that views children as a burden and invites many to consider abortion as a "backup" to contraceptive failure. This is most obvious in efforts to promote as "emergency contraception" drugs that really act as early abortifacients.

With Pope John Paul II we affirm that contraception and abortion are "specifically different evils," because only "the latter destroys the life of a human being," but that they are also related (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 13). It is important to remember that means that are referred to as "contraceptive" are, in reality, sometimes also abortifacient. An end to abortion will not come from contraceptive campaigns but from a deeper understanding of our human sexuality, and of human life, as sacred gifts deserving our careful stewardship.

The Issue of Capital Punishment

The United States is the only Western industrialized nation today that utilizes capital punishment. Increasingly the bishops have spoken out against its use, and Pope John Paul II and individual bishops have sought clemency for persons scheduled to be executed. There are compelling reasons for opposing capital punishment—its sheer inhumanity and its absolute finality, as well as concern about its inequitable use and an imperfect legal system that has sentenced innocent people to death.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us: "If...non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person" (no. 2267). Executing the guilty does not honor one who was killed, nor does it ennoble the living or even lessen their pain, for only love and forgiveness can do that. State-sanctioned killing affects us all because it diminishes the value we place on all human life. Capital punishment also cuts short the guilty person's opportunity for spiritual conversion and repentance.

The consequences of widespread loss of respect for the dignity of human life—seen in pervasive violence, toleration of abortion, and increasingly vocal support for assisted suicide and research that destroys human embryos—make it all the more urgent to reject lethal punishment and uphold the inviolability of every human life. "Our witness to respect for life shines most brightly when we demand respect for each and every human life, including the lives of those who fail to show that respect for others" (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 22). Thus we are called to extend God's love to all human beings created in his image, including those convicted of serious crimes. In so doing, we can help to make "unconditional respect for life the foundation of a new society" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 77).

Rededication to the Cause of Life

In this Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life we renew our call for individual Catholics and the many institutions and organizations of the Church to unite in an unprecedented effort to restore respect and legal protection for every human life—to be what the Holy Father asks us to be: a people of life and a people for life (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 78). It is our hope and expectation that in focusing on the need to respect and protect the lives of the innocent unborn and those who are disabled, ill, or dying, we will help to deepen respect for the life of every human being.

The Program

This pastoral plan calls upon all the resources of the Church—its people, services, and institutions—to pursue this effort with renewed energy and commitment in four major areas.

1. Public Information and Education to deepen understanding of the sanctity of human life and the humanity of unborn children, the moral evil of intentionally killing innocent human beings—whether at the beginning of life or at its end—and the mission of the Church to witness to and serve all human life.
2. Pastoral Care for women with problems related to pregnancy; for all who have been involved in abortion; for those who are disabled, sick, and dying, and their families and caregivers; for those who have lost loved ones to violent crime; and for those in prison sentenced to death.
3. Public Policy efforts directed to restoring legal protection to the lives of unborn children and those vulnerable to pressures to end their lives by assisted suicide, and to providing morally acceptable alternatives to abortion and assisted suicide.
4. Prayer and Worship directed to participation in the sacramental life of the Church and in programs of communal and individual prayer, that the culture of death that surrounds us today will be replaced by a culture of life and love.

This plan foresees dialogue and cooperation between the national episcopal conference and priests, deacons, religious, and lay persons, individually and collectively. We seek the collaboration of every Catholic organization in this effort.

Dialogue among churches and religious groups is also essential. We encourage continued interreligious consultation and dialogue on these important issues, as well as dialogue among ethicists.

We urge Catholics to advance pro-life positions within their family, church, and community, as well as within their professional organizations. We ask Catholic health care professionals and medical researchers to continue to be vigilant guardians of every human life.

At every level—national, regional, state, diocesan, and parish—it is important to seek the support of individuals and organizations involved in other ministries and, in turn, to be supportive of their work on behalf of human life as well. Together we are involved in God's work in promoting the dignity of the human person.

Key to the success of this pastoral plan is the work of informed and committed lay people throughout the nation. We are reminded by Pope John Paul II in *The Church in America* that "the presence and mission of the Church in the world is realized in a special way in the variety of charisms and ministries which belong to the laity" (no. 44, quoting Synod for America, proposition 55). In addition, efforts of the laity, especially at the parish level, deserve and require the encouragement and support of priests, deacons, and religious.

1. Public Information and Education

To deepen respect for human life and heighten public opposition to abortion and euthanasia, a twofold educational effort is necessary: one directed specifically to the Catholic community, the other directed to the general public.

The Catholic Community

An ongoing, long-range, and intensive educational effort in the Catholic community can provide an understanding of the issues and lead people to conviction and commitment. Such efforts should utilize the best medical, sociological, and legal information available. This should include the most recent advances in medical technology that demonstrate the continuity of human development from conception onwards. Ultimately, however, moral and theological arguments present the central issue of respect for human life in its most intellectually compelling terms.

We are grateful to those who participate in the Church's teaching ministry for all they have done and continue to do on behalf of human life. We invite them in a special way to be leaders in this campaign to build a culture of life. We note especially

- **lay persons and volunteers**, who through their charisms and unique responsibilities impact individuals and the broader community in a profound way when they assume roles of leadership in their parishes and in society
- **priests, deacons, and religious**, who exercise their responsibility to preach the word "in season and out of season" (cf. 2 Tm 4:2) in the pulpit, in other teaching roles, through parish programs, or through public support for pro-life projects
- all church-sponsored or identifiably **Catholic organizations** involved in adult education and sacramental preparation, whether national, regional, diocesan, or parish-based
- **teachers in schools, religious education programs, campus ministries, and church-sponsored educational agencies** who provide factual information, moral teaching, and motivation to young people
- **seminaries and houses of religious formation** through their academic and pastoral ministry programs
- Catholic **social service and health care agencies** through their educational seminars and other appropriate programs, including efforts to publicize programs and services providing alternatives to abortion, post-abortion reconciliation and healing, and care for those who are terminally ill or disabled
- Catholic **health care professionals** through their provision of prenatal and postnatal care, genetic counseling, and other services in ways that witness to the sanctity of each human life
- Catholic **publications and periodicals** through their articles, editorials, and advertising space promoting the Gospel of Life
- **parents** who, through discussion of critical life issues within the family and by their example and guidance, teach and help to mold their children in faith and respect for all human life from conception to natural death

Especially welcome in this effort is the participation of persons with disabilities and their families, who are not only recipients of care but active and valued members of the faith community. By their example and testimony they can play an indispensable role in witnessing to the inherent dignity of each human life.

Education programs should include the following, as appropriate: biblical and theological foundations that attest to the sanctity and dignity of human life; scientific information concerning the humanity of unborn children, especially that made available by modern genetic science and technology; American founding principles, as articulated in the Declaration of Independence, that reflect unchanging truths about the human person; society's responsibility to safeguard every human life, to defend life by non-violent means wherever possible, and never purposely to destroy innocent human life; discussion of effective and

compassionate care for those who are terminally ill and for persons with disabilities; education on Catholic teaching regarding end-of-life decision making; and information about effective, compassionate, and morally acceptable solutions to the very real and difficult problems that can exist for a woman during and after pregnancy, as well as help for those who suffer from the consequences of abortion.

The most comprehensive overview of the Church's teaching in regard to the sanctity and dignity of human life is found in Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *The Gospel of Life*. This inspiring document applies the teaching in many areas and provides strong and powerful motivation to Catholics to proclaim the Gospel of life. *Living the Gospel of Life*, a statement adopted by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 1998, applies this teaching to our particular situation in the United States.

The annual Respect Life Program sponsored by our episcopal conference provides information on critical issues of the day and relates those issues to the Church's teaching. This nationwide program sets abortion and euthanasia in the context of other issues involving threats to human life and human dignity—for example, capital punishment, war, poverty, population control, child abuse and abandonment, false views of human sexuality, human cloning, and research that destroys human embryos—and calls attention to the way in which each touches on the sanctity and dignity of human life.

The General Public

The primary purpose of an educational effort directed to the general public is the development of pro-life attitudes and the rejection of abortion and euthanasia. Even today, there remains a need for accurate information about these threats to life.

A public information program creates awareness of the threats to human life and human dignity inherent in abortion, research that destroys human embryos, euthanasia, assisted suicide, infanticide, and capital punishment. It allows people to see more readily the need to correct the situation by establishing legal safeguards for the right to life. It gives the issues visibility and prompts those who are uncommitted to reach a firm conviction. It helps to inform the public discussion, and it witnesses to the Church's commitment to a long-range pro-life effort. Such a program can also bring to light information about abortion's negative and often long-lasting impact on many women and others.

Any program that takes place in the public square should affirm the value of human life in the manner of its expression as well as the content, seeking to explain and persuade, while showing respect to all who disagree. It will take a variety of forms: for example, public statements and press releases; accurate reporting of newsworthy events and speaking with media representatives when such events occur; conferences and seminars on pro-life issues; development and distribution of educational materials; public relations and advertising campaigns; newspaper advertising; posters in local stores and community centers.

2. Pastoral Care

Pastoral care encompasses a broad range of services provided with competence, compassion, and dignity. It includes spiritual assistance and essential material help, and may include supplementary services beyond those available in the community. Providing pastoral care to those in need is a primary way that the Church expresses its love for all God's children.

Pregnancy Services

Respect for human life compels us to reach out to those with special needs. With the support of the faith community, Catholic organizations and agencies provide pastoral services and care for pregnant women, especially those who are vulnerable to abortion and who would otherwise find it difficult or impossible to obtain high-quality medical care. Ideally such programs include

- factual and educational information on alternatives to abortion
- nutritional, prenatal, childbirth, and postnatal care for the mother, including information about the latest developments in prenatal and neonatal medicine
- nutritional and pediatric care for the child
- agency-sponsored adoption and foster care services to all who want them, as well as an educational effort presenting adoption in a positive light
- counseling and spiritual assistance that supports those facing difficulties related to pregnancy and parenting, including engaged or married couples who may have concerns about the health of their future offspring
- opportunities for teen and college-age parents to continue their education during pregnancy and after childbirth, including school policies that encourage and enable them to complete their high school education, and counseling and assistance encouraging continued undergraduate or graduate studies
- compassionate understanding, encouragement, and support for victims of rape and other forms of abuse and violence
- education in the virtue of chastity, as well as education in fertility awareness for young men and women, enabling them to take responsibility for their power to generate life
- expansion of natural family planning programs and education in their mission as responsible parents for married and engaged couples

Many of these services involve the dedicated efforts of both professionals and volunteers. Such services have been and will continue to be provided by church-sponsored health care and social service agencies. Collaboration with other private and public agencies and with volunteer groups and local communities, as well as efforts to obtain government assistance, are necessary extensions of the long-range effort.

Parishes are also increasingly providing pregnancy assistance. Such services are sometimes available within the parish; at other times, the parish program links those needing help to local services.

Even when pregnancies do not involve particular challenges, encouragement and support should be given to couples who have conceived a child. In a culture that often gives negative messages regarding parenthood, it is important that our parishes celebrate the gift of new life.

Post-Abortion Healing and Reconciliation

For many women and men, grief and anguish follow an abortion experience, which often last for many years. Women today talk about post-abortion stress and reveal a pattern of common grief in "chat rooms," through published books, and in support groups.

The Church offers reconciliation as well as spiritual and psychological care for those suffering from abortion's aftermath primarily through diocesan-based programs, most often called Project Rachel. Such programs utilize specially trained priests and professional counselors who provide one-on-one care. Other post-abortion ministries that involve support groups and retreats are also available in many areas.

Every church-sponsored program and identifiably Catholic organization and agency should know where to refer those in need of post-abortion healing. Special resources to assist priests in this ministry are available from the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities and from many diocesan pro-life offices.

Care for Those Who Are Chronically Ill, Disabled, or Dying

Euthanasia and assisted suicide can appear a reasonable and even compassionate solution to the suffering of individuals and families struggling with illness or the dying process. Yet these are not real solutions—they do not solve human problems, but only take the lives of those most in need of unconditional love.

As Christians, we are called to help build a civilization of life and of love, in which seriously ill persons and their families are never abandoned, but are supported with services, friendship, and love. In order to do so, we should

- reach out to those in the parish family or broader community who are dying, particularly those who are at risk of dying alone, and keep company with them; provide support to the family, especially with difficult end-of-life decisions; encourage people to volunteer or provide other assistance to the local hospice program
- encourage physicians and other health professionals to provide appropriate palliative care
- foster prayers, at Mass and in homes, for those who are dying and their families to receive the respect and care they need and to be comforted by the peace of Christ
- develop and support programs of respite care for families caring for seriously ill members at home, programs of visitation to nursing homes, or perhaps even parish nurse programs
- foster efforts to fully welcome persons with disabilities into the Church community

Care for Prisoners, Those on Death Row, and Victims of Violent Crime

When violent crime impacts a community there is a temptation to respond with anger and vengeance. But the Gospel calls for rehabilitation, reconciliation, and restoration and teaches us to respect the dignity of all human beings, even those guilty of committing horrendous crimes. To promote these ends, we should

- Encourage outreach to prisoners through programs of visitation or letter-writing
- Ensure that the spiritual needs of prisoners are met and that they can receive the sacraments
- Foster pastoral outreach to victims of violent crime
- Offer emotional and material support to the family members of prisoners, especially children, and to pregnant women and new mothers in prison

3. Public Policy Program

Protecting and promoting the inviolable rights of persons is the most solemn responsibility of civil authority. As Americans and as religious leaders we are committed to governance by a system of law that protects human rights and maintains the common good.

We are reminded that "the Church must be committed to the task of educating and supporting lay people involved in law-making, government and the administration of justice, so that legislation will always reflect those principles and moral values which are in conformity with a sound anthropology and advance the common good" (*The Church in America*, no. 19, quoting Synod for America, proposition 72).

The Declaration of Independence, written more than two hundred years ago, speaks of the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" before making this historic assertion: "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*" Today we see the tensions increasing between these founding principles and political reality. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the continuing effort to ignore the right to life of unborn children, as well as in efforts to legalize euthanasia and assisted suicide.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a "Gospel of life." It invites all persons to a new life lived abundantly in respect for human dignity. We believe that this Gospel is not only a complement to American . . . principles, but also the cure for the spiritual sickness now infecting our society. . . . We cannot simultaneously commit ourselves to human rights and progress while eliminating or marginalizing the weakest among us. Nor can we practice the Gospel of life only as a private piety. American Catholics must live it vigorously and publicly, as a matter of national leadership and witness, or we will not live it at all. (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 20)

The law is not the only means of protecting life, but it plays a key and often decisive role in affecting both human behavior and thinking. Those called to civil leadership, as Pope John Paul II reminds us, "have a duty to make courageous choices in support of life, especially through *legislative measures*." This is a responsibility that cannot be put aside, "especially when he or she has a legislative or decision-making mandate, which calls that person to answer to God, to his or her own conscience and to the whole of society for choices which may be contrary to the common good" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 90).

Public officials are privileged in a special way to apply their moral convictions to the policy arena. We hold in high esteem those who, through such positions and authority, promote respect for all human life. Catholic civil leaders who reject or ignore the Church's teaching on the sanctity of human life do so at risk to their own spiritual well-being. "No public official, especially one claiming to be a faithful and serious Catholic, can responsibly advocate for or actively support direct attacks on innocent human life" (*Living the Gospel of Life*, no. 32).

It is imperative to restore legal protection to the lives of unborn children and to ensure that the lives of others, especially those who are disabled, elderly, or dying, are not further jeopardized.

A comprehensive public policy program should include the following long- and short-term goals:

- passage of a constitutional amendment that will protect unborn children's right to life to the maximum degree possible, and pursuit of appropriate strategies to attain this goal
- federal and state laws and administrative policies that restrict the practice of abortion as much as possible and that prohibit government support of abortion, human cloning, and research that destroys human embryos
- continual challenging of the scope of and ultimate reversing of the decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court and other courts denying the right to life
- support for legislation that provides morally acceptable alternatives to abortion, including funding to expand education, health, nutrition, and other services for disadvantaged parents and their children
- support for federal and state legislation that promotes effective palliative care for those who are chronically ill or dying
- support for efforts to prevent legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide by legislation or referendum
- support for efforts to end the death penalty

A public policy program requires well-planned and coordinated advocacy by citizens at the national, state, and local levels. Such activity is not solely the responsibility of Catholics but instead requires widespread cooperation and collaboration on the part of groups large and small, religious and secular. As U.S. citizens and religious leaders, we see a critical moral imperative for public policy efforts to ensure the protection of human life. We urge our fellow citizens to see the justice of this cause and to work with us to achieve these objectives.

Laws Less Than Perfect

While at times human law may not fully articulate the moral imperative—full protection for the right to life—our legal system can and must be continually reformed so that it will increasingly fulfill its proper task of protecting the weak and preserving the right to life of every human being, born and unborn. In *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II explains that one may support "imperfect" legislation—legislation that, for example, does not ban all abortions but puts some control on a current more permissive law by aiming to limit the number of abortions—if that is the best that can be achieved at a particular time. In doing so one seeks to limit the harm done by the present law: "This does not in fact represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law, but rather a legitimate and proper attempt to limit its evil aspects" (no. 73).

4. Prayer and Worship

*A great prayer for life is urgently needed, a prayer which will rise up throughout the world. Through special initiatives and in daily prayer, may an impassioned plea rise to God. . . . Let us therefore discover anew the humility and the courage to pray and fast so that the power from on high will break down the walls of lies and deceit: the walls which conceal from the sight of so many . . . the evil of practices and laws which are hostile to life. —Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, no. 100*

Participation in the sacramental life of the Church sustains each of us. We encourage dioceses and parishes to sponsor programs of prayer and fasting as well as paraliturgical programs and to encourage Catholics to adopt programs of private prayer.

We ask priests and deacons to preach the truth about the dignity of all human life, born and unborn, and about the moral evil of the purposeful destruction of innocent human life, including abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, and infanticide. We urge them to encourage parishioners and others to treat with compassion those who find themselves in stressful situations, and to offer practical assistance to help them to make life-affirming decisions. Parishes should give special pastoral attention and offer special prayers for those who have suffered the loss of an unborn child due to miscarriage, abortion, or other cause. The readings of the Church's liturgy give ample opportunity to proclaim respect for the dignity of human life throughout the year. The Liturgy of the Hours as well as paraliturgical services also offer opportunities for the celebration of life and instruction in the moral teaching of the Church.

Parishes should include in the petitions at every Mass a prayer that ours will become a nation that respects and protects all human life, born and unborn, reflecting a true culture of life.

Each year, in conjunction with the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* (January 22), a National Prayer Vigil for Life is held at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. Thousands travel from all corners of the country to take part in the opening liturgy and all-night prayer vigil. Dioceses and parishes might conduct similar prayer vigils so that those unable to travel might participate in this prayer occasion. This date is also designated as a particular day of penance in the Roman Missal.

Prayer is the foundation of all that we do in defense of human life. Our efforts—whether educational, pastoral, or legislative—will be less than fully fruitful if we do not change hearts and if we do not ourselves overcome our own spiritual blindness. Only with prayer—prayer that storms the heavens for justice and mercy, prayer that cleanses our hearts and our souls—will the culture of death that surrounds us today be replaced with a culture of life.

Implementing the Program

Restoring respect for human life in our society is an essential task of the Church that extends through all its institutions, agencies, and organizations and embraces diverse tasks and goals. The following schema suggests a model for organizing and allocating the Church's resources of people, services, institutions, and finances at various levels to help restore and advance protection in law for unborn children's right to life and to foster a true culture of life.

We ask that the Committee for Pro-Life Activities periodically inform the full body of bishops on the status of the implementation of this pastoral plan.

State Coordinating Committee

The state Catholic conference or its equivalent should provide overall coordination in each state on matters concerning public policy. The state coordinating committee may comprise the state Catholic conference director and the pro-life directors from each diocese. At least several committee members should have experience in legislative activity. The primary purposes of the state coordinating committee are to

- monitor social, legislative, and political trends, especially those in the state, and their implications for the pro-life effort
- coordinate the efforts of the dioceses in the state in regard to public policy, and evaluate progress. Although grassroots efforts are often undertaken in dioceses and parishes, the state coordinating committee can encourage the dioceses to undertake a particular project simultaneously for maximum impact.
- analyze relationships within the various political parties and coalitions at the state level as they affect local implementation efforts
- encourage cooperation among pro-life groups in the state

Diocesan Pro-Life Committee

The diocesan pro-life committee coordinates activities of the pastoral plan within the diocese. The committee, through the diocesan pro-life director, will receive information and guidance from the national episcopal conference's Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities and from the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment.

The diocesan committee is headed by the diocesan pro-life director, a person appointed by and responsible to the diocesan bishop. Its membership, in addition to the diocesan pro-life director, may include the following: the diocesan respect life coordinator (if a separate post); representatives of diocesan agencies (e.g., family life, education, youth ministry, post-abortion ministry, diocesan newspaper, liturgy, health apostolate, social services, etc.); representatives of lay organizations (e.g., Knights of Columbus, Catholic Daughters of the Americas, Daughters of Isabella, Council of Catholic Women, Holy Name Society, etc.); medical, legal, public affairs, and financial advisors; representatives of local pro-life groups (e.g., state Right to Life organization, pregnancy aid center); and representatives of parish pro-life/respect life committees. The diocesan pro-life committee's objectives are to

- direct and coordinate the diocesan and parish pro-life information and educational program, providing appropriate resources as necessary
- provide educational opportunities and time for sharing program information among members of parish pro-life committees
- support local programs that counsel and assist women with problems related to pregnancy; promote establishment of new programs where needed
- encourage and support a diocese-wide post-abortion ministry

- encourage and support local programs that provide care for the dying
- encourage and coordinate programs of prayer and worship that focus on the sanctity of all human life
- maintain working relationships with local pro-life groups and encourage the development of local pro-life lobbying networks
- maintain a local public information program that monitors print and broadcast media's treatment of pro-life issues, and prepare appropriate responses
- undertake, depending on financial resources, appropriate public advertising campaigns
- develop responsible and effective communications with each elected representative: getting to know them personally through one-on-one visits, telephone calls, letters, and e-mail
- maintain communications with the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities and with the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment
- report periodically to the diocesan bishop on the status of implementation of the pastoral plan

Parish Pro-Life Committee

Actively promoting a renewed respect for human life is the responsibility of every Catholic. The parish pro-life committee assists in a special way by helping to make the parish a center of life, a place where parishioners understand the issues and the importance of meeting the needs of those who are most vulnerable—especially mothers and their unborn children, and those who are seriously ill or dying and their families. It may be a distinct committee, or it might be a subcommittee of another parish organization. Whatever its structure, its membership should include representatives of both adult and youth parish groups, members of organizations that represent persons with disabilities, persons of minority cultures, and those responsible for education and pastoral care.

The chairperson of the parish committee is appointed by the pastor, and it is important that the two be able to work well together. The chair recruits volunteers to help meet the needs the committee serves. Parish committees should be mindful of the need for renewal from time to time in regard to membership, talents, and interests.

The parish committee relies on the diocesan pro-life director for information and guidance. The committee should play a vital role in parish life and enjoy the strong support of priests and other key personnel. The committee should also dovetail its efforts from time to time with other programs of the parish. For example, in many parts of the country, parishes conduct programs where parishioners study and discuss the teachings of the faith. Members of the pro-life committee should take part in such programs and invite other program leaders to take part in pro-life initiatives.

The objectives of the parish pro-life committee are to

- coordinate parish implementation of the annual Respect Life Program, promoting it to agencies and organizations in the parishes, especially schools and religious education programs; and encourage parish discussion groups to use the program as a basis for their discussions
- promote and assist pregnancy counseling and comprehensive maternity support services, as well as post-abortion counseling and reconciliation programs, and make these well known in the parish and local community
- develop or adopt, where feasible, a parish-based ministry to pregnant women and their children
- encourage and support parishioners' involvement in services to help those who are chronically ill, disabled, or dying and their families
- sponsor programs of prayer in the parish to pray for mothers and their unborn children, for those who are dying, for those who are disabled, for prisoners on death row and those they have harmed, and indeed for all who are in need, that the culture of death that surrounds us may be replaced by a culture of life
- foster awareness of the need to restore legal protection to the lives of unborn children to the maximum degree possible and to safeguard in law the lives of those who are chronically ill, disabled, or dying
- keep parishioners informed of upcoming important legislation; and, at the direction of the diocesan pro-life director, organize letter-writing, postcard campaigns, or similar appropriate activities when important votes are expected

The Public Policy Effort at the Local Level

To secure federal pro-life legislation or to pass a constitutional amendment requires the support of members of Congress. Efforts to persuade members to vote for such measures are part of the democratic process and are most effective when carried out locally. This can be done through activities organized on a congressional district basis (sometimes called a "congressional district action committee") comprising citizens within a particular congressional district (involves people of different faiths or none), or it can be accomplished through effective parish efforts. Regardless of how it is carried out, its purpose is to organize people to persuade their elected representatives to support pro-life legislation. The following program objectives can be met effectively by a small group of politically aware and dedicated people:

- educating parishioners and others about the destructiveness of abortion to unborn children, to women and their families, and to society, and about the need for pro-life legislation and a constitutional amendment
- enabling parishioners and others to organize effectively so that their views will be heard and taken into account by elected representatives and political parties
- building effective mechanisms for lobbying elected officials and candidates for public office to support effective legal protection of human life from conception to natural death. These mechanisms might be telephone trees, postcard campaigns, fax and e-mail systems, letter-writing programs in the parish, etc. Collaborative work with other churches is highly encouraged.

In this regard it should be noted that the Church does not engage in partisan politics. Rather, it fosters the responsibility of every Catholic to exercise his or her citizenship faithfully by being well informed on issues, and it recognizes the right to vote as a privilege and a civic responsibility.

Conclusion

It has been more than a quarter-century since the *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities* was first issued and Catholics responded to the call to help restore respect for human life in our society. Through their hard work, prayers, and generosity, especially on the part of those in parishes across the nation, much has been accomplished:

- The numbers and rates of abortions steadily declined in the 1990s. More Americans identified themselves as pro-life, while the number of those who said they are "pro-choice" declined; polls showed that Americans are far more opposed to abortion than our law reflects.
- Despite opposition from powerful and well-funded sources, the pro-life movement continues to be one of the largest and most effective grassroots movements in the nation.
- The moral argument concerning the humanity of the unborn and the sanctity of all human life was advanced, and even those who advocate abortion had to acknowledge that it destroys a human life.
- Services for those facing difficult pregnancies, as well as services for women and men suffering because of abortion, were established and expanded, aiding many thousands in need of help.
- Most state legislatures enacted measures to restrict abortion and reduce its incidence.
- Assisted suicide initiatives were defeated time and again in many states; some adopted new laws against assisted suicide.
- Medical societies, hospice groups, and other organizations worked with Catholic health professionals to provide the best care to those who are terminally ill and to oppose euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Yet the federal law on abortion has changed very little. *Roe v. Wade* continues to make impossible any meaningful protection for the lives of human beings from the time they are conceived until after they are fully born.

The abortion decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court must be reversed. For it is impossible, as our Holy Father reminds us, to further the common good "without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop" (*The Gospel of Life*, no. 101).

Our own commitment will not waver. Our efforts will not cease. We will speak out on behalf of the sanctity of life wherever and whenever it is threatened.

We hold in high esteem all who proclaim and serve the Gospel of life. Through their peaceful activism, education, prayer, and service, they witness to God's truth and embody our Lord's command to love one another as he loves us. We assure them of our continuing prayers. And we renew our appeal to all in the Catholic community to join with them and with us in building a "culture of life."

May the "people of life" constantly grow in number and may a new culture of love and solidarity develop for the true good of the whole of human society.

– Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, no. 101