

perspective. A consistent ethic recognizes that there is justification for placing priority emphasis on certain issues at certain times. To ignore the priority attention that the problems of abortion and euthanasia demand is to misunderstand both the consistent ethic and the nature of the threats that these evils pose. To again quote Cardinal Bernardin, *"A consistent ethic of life does not equate the problem of taking life (e.g., through abortion and in war) with the problem of promoting human dignity (through humane programs of nutrition, health care, and housing). But a consistent ethic identifies both the protection of life and its promotion as moral questions"*(Wade lecture, as above). *"The fundamental human right is to life—from the moment of conception until death. It is the source of all other rights, including the right to health care"* (*The Consistent Ethic of Life and Health Care Systems*, Foster McGaw Triennial Conference, Loyola University of Chicago, May 8, 1985).

On Respect Life Sunday, 1 October 1989, Cardinal Bernardin issued a statement entitled "Deciding for Life," in which he said, *"Not all values, however, are of equal weight. Some are more fundamental than others. On this Respect Life Sunday, I wish to emphasize that no earthly value is more fundamental than human life itself. Human life is the condition for enjoying freedom and all other values. Consequently, if one must choose between protecting or serving lesser human values that depend upon life for their existence and life itself, human life must take precedence. Today the recognition of human life as a fundamental value is threatened. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of elective abortion. At present in our country this procedure takes the lives of over 4,000 unborn children every day and over 1.5 million each year."*

The numbers are staggering. Comparing them, for example, to capital punishment (which we must also actively oppose), we find that more babies are destroyed by abortion in the course of five days (about 20,000) than have ever been executed by capital punishment (close to 19,000) in the entire history of our nation.

Disputes among candidates about *how* to best secure rights that we agree people have (to food, clothing, shelter, education, protection from crime, etc.) are quite different from the fundamental dispute as to *whether they have any rights in the first place* or even belong to the human community (i.e. the status of the unborn before the law). No issue is more important to the political process than who belongs to the political community.

Making these assertions and clarifying these principles is not equivalent to partisan politics or campaigning for candidates, because any candidate of any party at any time is free to embrace and defend the right to life. In this election season 2000, let our pulpits, our pens, and our public and private conversations proclaim louder than ever before that protecting the right to life is the first obligation of any public official -- or, as someone expressed it to me more simply, "Father, if those politicians can't respect the life of a little baby, how are they going to respect mine?"

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#### **Pamphlet 037**

## **Elections and the Right to Life**

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Another election season is upon us, and our bishops have given us valuable guidance in how to assess the issues and the candidates. The document of the US Bishops, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics* (1998) and the document of the Administrative Board of the USCC, *Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium*, are so helpful in this regard that Priests for Life is making them available free of charge, and has also prepared camera-ready bulletin inserts containing excerpts from them.

A few key points they make are that a) active and informed participation in the political process is a *virtue* which we should foster, and every vote counts; b) we must embrace a consistent ethic of life, but within that ethic, realize that abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent issues because they directly attack innocent human life; c) one cannot be considered a practicing Catholic as long as he/she publicly advocates a pro-choice position.

I would like to focus on point "b" for the purposes of this article, drawing additional assistance from the key spokesperson for the consistent ethic, who was Joseph Cardinal Bernardin.

The "consistent ethic of life" is a critically important but widely misunderstood teaching. Cardinal Bernardin began his public reflections on this theme in the context of the work he did on the US Bishops' pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*, and of his position as Chairman of the Pro-life Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. He saw that in order to

effectively articulate the Christian response to a wide range of menacing threats to human life, brought about by a new kind of interconnection between the forces of destruction made possible by modern technologies, it was necessary to highlight the interconnection of the many and varied efforts to defend human life. He noted that progress in the defense and protection of life in one arena meant progress for the defense of life in all arenas.

Some object to the idea of the consistent ethic because they interpret "consistency" to mean "of equal importance or urgency." But that is not what the teaching means, as the Cardinal himself made clear many times.

What links the many issues of human life is that such life is sacred: it comes from God, it belongs to God, it returns to God. All human beings have equal dignity, and nobody may ever directly destroy the innocent. These principles apply whether we are talking about abortion, capital punishment, war, poverty, drug abuse, street violence, or any other of the multitude of problems we face in society. But that does not mean that these issues are morally equivalent. Each issue, along with the overall principles which we have already stated, has its own particular principles and moral considerations which need to be brought into the discussions whenever one treats of that particular issue. These particularities could conceivably result in divergent opinions about what specific policies should be implemented, while at the same time those who disagree acknowledge the same essential principles.

Nor do all of these issues constitute an emergency of equal gravity and urgency. Some do more damage and claim more victims than others.

*Living the Gospel of Life* explains the situation this way: "Adopting a consistent ethic of life, the Catholic Church promotes a broad

*spectrum of issues. Opposition to 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. Therefore, Catholics should eagerly involve themselves as advocates for the weak and marginalized in all these areas. Catholic public officials are obliged to address each of these issues as they seek to build consistent policies which promote respect for the human person at all stages of life. 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"* (US Bishops, *Living the Gospel of Life*, 1998, n. 23).

This assertion is not new for the bishops. In the 1985 Reaffirmation of the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities, the bishops wrote, "Because victims of abortion are the most vulnerable and defenseless members of the human family, it is imperative that we, as Christians called to serve the least among us, give urgent attention and priority to this issue of justice □ This focus and the Church's firm commitment to a consistent ethic of life complement each other. A consistent ethic, far from diminishing concern for abortion or equating all issues touching on the dignity of human life, recognizes the distinctive character of each issue while giving each its proper role within a coherent moral vision"(p.3-4).

Furthermore, in their 1989 *Resolution on Abortion*, the bishops declared, "Abortion has become the fundamental human rights issue for all men and women of good will."

The 1999 statement *Faithful Citizenship* expressed it this way: "Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. The conviction that human life is sacred and that each person has inherent dignity that must be respected in society lies at the heart of Catholic social teaching. Calls to advance human rights are illusions if the right to life itself is subject to attack. We believe that every human life is sacred from conception to natural death; that people are more important than things; and that the measure of every institution is whether or not it enhances the life and dignity of the human person" (Administrative Board, US Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship*, 1999, p.13).

"Faithful Citizenship" is the latest in a line of statements on political responsibility issued every four years since the mid-1970's. In 1984, Cardinal Bernardin had this to say about the role of such statements: "The purpose is surely not to tell citizens how to vote, but to help shape the public debate and form personal conscience so that every citizen will vote thoughtfully and responsibly. Our "Statement on Political Responsibility" has always been, like our "Respect Life Program," a multi-issue approach to public morality. The fact that this Statement sets forth a spectrum of issues of current concern to the Church and society should not be understood as implying that all issues are qualitatively equal from a moral perspective □ As I indicated earlier, each of the life issues—while related to all the others—is distinct and calls for its own specific moral analysis. Both the Statement and the Respect Life program have direct relevance to the political order, but they are applied concretely by the choice of citizens" (*A Consistent Ethic of Life: Continuing the Dialogue*, The William Wade Lecture Series, St. Louis University, March 11, 1984).

Notice that the Cardinal stated that not all issues are qualitatively equal from a moral