

We Are A People of Life: Opportunities & Challenges for the Pro-Life Parish

Patricia F. Sherrod

...and the Pharisees asked him when the kingdom of God would come. He replied, "No one will announce it beforehand. Do not look for it or ask when it will arrive; for behold, the kingdom of God is already here; it is among you." Luke 17:21

The most effective structures for pastoral action are the diocese and the parish. While recognizing the vital roles played by national and regional pro-life groups, a pastoral plan places primary responsibility and emphasis on the clergy, religious, and laity who serve the Church in these structures. The work of informed and committed lay people is indispensable to the success of any pastoral effort; these, in turn, must rely on the support and the encouragement of ordained ministers of the Gospel...particularly on the pastors and parish priests.

from *The Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities* (2001)

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

INTRODUCTION

In *Evangelium Vitae* Pope John Paul II exhorts us to be both “a people of life and a people for life” (#78). The primary focus of this paper is to promote a pro-life model based on the U.S. Bishops’ *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities* (2001) for a typical Catholic parish within a diocese. The model used is the Catholic Pro-Life Committee (CPLC) of North Texas, a ministry of the Diocese of Dallas. It is one of hundreds of such models now operating successfully in our nation. It is our hope and prayer that some day it will be one of thousands. Like all of them, the CPLC is a work-in-progress. In the nearly ten years coordinating pro-life activities among parishes in our diocese, we have seen many changes.

Staff come and go; events and programs receive more or less emphasis; strategies and attitudes shift; changes in laws and public policies demand greater vigilance as the enemies of life constantly test our time, talents, and resources. We in the pro-life community can know discouragement and even burnout—often there seems to be so much to do, and so few to help. Pro-choice forces are many, rich, powerful, and firmly entrenched in many Americans’ attitudes and culture. We know that sometimes ours can be lonely work. It is the loneliness of the long-distance runner, but occasionally we runners see signs and wonders along the way. Near the close of *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II says: “Life is always at the center of a great struggle” (#104). And so we continue trusting—not in our own ingenuity but in God’s goodness and mercy—that we will become better advocates for, and ministers of, a culture of life.

Before presenting the actual CPLC model, I hope to explore some of the challenges and opportunities we face in becoming a “People of Life,” which, as *Evangelium Vitae* asserts, is “the mission of the Christian and of the church...through the service of charity” (#87). In this we come to appreciate the traditional role of the parish in the communal life of the Church, and the exciting opportunities for involving the faithful in pro-life prayer and worship, education, public witness, civic action, and compassionate care. This recent *Pastoral Plan* calls for unity in “an unprecedented effort...of dialogue and cooperation” (#11). Each parish functions individually in terms of events and specific outreach ministries.

Yet, as all parishes comprise a diocese and are under the local ordinary, they function relationally as well. Thus parishes fit within a comprehensive schema of the Church’s agencies and institutions working at diocesan and state levels. Together, they promote a “coherent moral vision and a consistent strategy” supporting the God-given dignity of the human person (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*, 1998). In the overview of the Program in the 2001 *Pastoral Plan*, the Bishops outline the goals and tasks of three major committees: the State Coordinating Committee, the Diocesan Pro-Life Committee, and the Parish Pro-Life Committee. I then show how the CPLC of North Texas, functioning as the pro-life arm of its diocese, helps to inspire, develop, and actively support the ministry work being done in the individual parish.

The CPLC model is one example of a “fleshed out” pastoral plan. We place strong emphasis on fighting the evil of abortion because any policy or practice that results in well over a million deaths each year cannot but diminish respect for life in other areas. Is the CPLC a “complete” model? No. Not everything “works” because not everything is yet implemented. For example, the *Pastoral Plan* calls for parishes to reach out to prisoners, or those victimized by crime. So-called “grief ministries” assist those who are dying, facing difficult end-of-life decisions, or recovering from the loss of a loved one. Many parishes have an outreach of palliative care for the incurably ill, providing emotional and even financial support for their families. While CPLC does not directly address these areas of need, it supports a ministry of prayer, the very heart of the pro-life movement. In this ministry, which will be described shortly, we actively request prayers committing to God’s love and mercy all who are suffering in our communities, especially at the hands of those who neglect or abuse the innocent and vulnerable. We pray that as pro-life awareness and activity grow stronger in the diocese, our opportunities for pastoral care in these areas will grow as well. At the conclusion of the paper, since in my travels promoting Project Gabriel, a parish outreach to pregnant women, the subject of generating finances always comes up, I briefly mention ways Diocesan and Parish Committees can recruit and train workers in their vineyard and raise the funds necessary for their pro-life work.

CHALLENGES

No one need tell Americans that more is better. Ours is nation of more. We pray more, worship more, strive more, educate more, discuss more, build more, develop more, heal more, donate more, and share more. We also acquire more, consume more, spend more, work more, eat more, drink more, drive more, divorce more, incarcerate more, and kill more than virtually any nation on earth. Jesus’s rather stern admonition to the disciples, “For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48), becomes, particularly for us Americans, at the same time a thrilling and sobering message. Surely, as we have been blessed more, in turn more blessings will be required of us, both as

individuals and as a people.

One blessing that American Catholics enjoy, and ironically, tend to oversimplify and under-appreciate, is the unique parochial nature of their Church. It is a familiar, yet remarkable, phenomenon, the Catholic parish in America. Nearly 20,000 parishes are home to over 60 million faithful (USCCB, *Priestly Life & Ministry*, 1999). In many urban areas in the East and Midwest, it is not uncommon to walk a few blocks in any direction and find a Catholic church. In parts of the West, a priest may be hours from his flock and see them only on Sundays, if that often. Yet the question, “What’s your parish?” is one that comes easily to most Catholics. It is their parish that draws them time and again to encounter God. It is the place where, as St. John Chrysostom says, “... there is a great multitude, where exclamations are cried out to God as from one great heart, and where there is something more: the union of minds, the accord of souls, the bond of charity, the prayers of the priests” (*De incomprehensibili* 3,6). Sixteen hundred years later, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* would define “parish” as

... a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to the pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop. It is a place where all of the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist...where it initiates [them] into the ordinary expression of liturgical life; it teaches Christ’s saving doctrine...it practices the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love. (#2179)

Put simply, our parishes are “what’s happening” when it comes to liturgical expression, faith formation and growth in the spiritual life, and apostolic service. While Catholics, by definition, belong to a “universal” body, most parishioners understandably relate to their local parish community more than to the diocesan or universal church. *For this reason we must never underestimate our involvement in our parish community to build up the Kingdom, which, as Christ tells us, is already in our midst.*

This Kingdom that we celebrate, instruct, and serve is said in the Scriptures to be many things: “salt and light,” “a city set on a hill,” “a

treasure in a field,” “a sheepfold,” “a vineyard bearing good fruit.” These are among the many vivid metaphors that Jesus uses to describe the reign of God and its presence among his people. These compelling images of everyday things had meaning to the people of Jesus’s day. If they fall short for us, perhaps it is because they are not human enough. More often in the gospels, Jesus likens the Kingdom of Heaven to people who are usually engaged in daily work or service: the ten wise and foolish virgins coming out to meet the Bridegroom (Matt. 25:1-13), a farmer going out to sow seed on his land (Mark 4:1-9), the shepherd who leaves the flock to search for one lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7), a Samaritan man on a journey to Jericho (Luke 10:30-37). If these images appeal to us, maybe it is because what we are called to be is more human, not less.

God may have made us “little less than the angels,” but his Son did not come to earth as an angel, but as a man. Over fifty times in the gospels Jesus equates himself in some way with life. In St. John’s gospel, he says, “I came that they may have life and have it in abundance” (John 10:10); a few chapters later he declares: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6); and in another place, he assures the Sadducees that “...the Lord is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matt. 22: 32). So what is our Church, the Bride of Christ, but a *pro-life* Church? What are we called to be but a “People of Life”?

“People of Life” seems a natural name for those who profess to follow Christ, and as such Catholics should have no claim on it, yet somehow we do. It is, I think, a great mystery. The mystery is the Incarnation, yes, but more than that because it implies the day-to-day following of Jesus and trying to imitate him in his humanity, if not his divinity. Being a People of Life is a tall order in light of what Pope John Paul II so frequently has called our “culture of death.” So common is violence and abuse in our homes, schools, and streets, so paralyzing and polarizing is it in our communities—yes, sadly, even in our churches—that we can no longer envision modern culture without it. For all our American “can-do” spirit, for all our commitment to human freedom, human rights, and human dignity, for all our social and scientific achievements, we have allowed ourselves, defensively, to become numb to human loss and distress, often when it is closest to us, in our own

families, indeed, in the very wombs of our mothers.

Yet, we like to think of ourselves as people of peace. “Peace be with you,” we respond to the priest and offer to each other at every Mass and liturgical event, but what does this mean? Many of us expressed discomfort with the Sign of Peace rite when it was first introduced as one of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II. The idea was that you came to Mass to worship God, not to be chummy with your neighbors. Some considered it superficial, hollow, even hypocritical, and Americans rank hypocrisy right up there with intolerance as a thoroughly distasteful and unattractive trait. But it caught on, despite some initial unpopularity, and now most of us actually mean it (or try to) when we extend our hands over the pews to persons we may or may not know. But as Dr. Martin Luther King said, “Peace is not the absence of conflict.” Until we are truly a People of Life, we cannot truly be a people of peace.

Drawing on ancient Scriptural traditions and following in the footsteps of Jesus, who embraced the despised and vulnerable in society, especially women and children, Church Fathers clearly taught the sacredness of life and our immense dignity as human beings. In pastoral documents throughout history, particularly *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, and the 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, the Church speaks in a prophetic and counter-cultural voice for all innocent and vulnerable life. As believers, we accept the Lord’s challenge to “Choose Life!” in all its beauty and complexity. As Americans, we believe in a bountiful, free, and just society that should protect life before, as well as after, birth. As Catholics, the Church is where our beliefs take root and flourish into the fruit of our faith. “The Gospel of Life,” says the Pope, “is none other than the gospel of Jesus Christ. Becoming a ‘People of Life’ is not only an option for some, but for all, because the gospel of Jesus Christ is not an option” (*The Gospel of Life*, #20). So, when a parish says it is “pro-life,” it is not identifying itself politically or socially, but spiritually.

A parish not being pro-life is akin to not offering all the Sacraments. How strange it would be to hear, “Well, here at Holy Rosary we do Baptism, Matrimony and Penance, but you have to go over to St. Agnes if you want Confirmation and Eucharist.” No, pro-life belief, teaching,

and action are not options. They demand that we live out what we are called to proclaim—namely, that God is our Creator and Father. We, his creatures and children, are *made in his image and called to be prophets to the nations* (Jer. 1-5). This call to be prophets must resound in all our parishes, indeed in each body that calls itself Christian. How we answer the call is how we become a People of Life.

To say that we do not exist in a culture of death is to ignore the proverbial “elephant in the drawing room.” First, it cannot be done; second, those who try to do it end up looking like fools. Long before the shooting tragedies at Columbine High School and the terrorists’ attacks on the World Trade Towers, we had cause to worry.

A culture of death does not come about because violent crimes like rape, murder, and weapon assaults increase, which they did nearly 400% in the years between 1965 and 1994 (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1995). Nor because the number of firearms in American homes quadruple, which they did in the same time period from 60 to 215 million (National Center for Health Statistics, 1994). Nor because American children witness over 10,000 murders and 100,000 acts of abuse and violence in movies and on television, which most do before they ever leave elementary school (American Psychological Assn., 1993). Not even because 50% of women under forty who die violent deaths do so at the hand of a spouse or live-in partner, up from 22% in 1974 (*Journal of the American Medical Assn.*, 1996). Clearly, these facts are not causal, but symptomatic. They merely reflect the underlying lack of cultural values that creates an environment where violence breeds and grows.

In searching for answers to end, or at least to ameliorate, the culture of death, we constantly challenge our laws, our courts, our churches, our schools, to somehow do better by us. In 1994 the U.S. bishops accepted that challenge. They issued a pastoral message calling for a Catholic community framework to recall people to a renewed vision of life and hope. In it they state that it won’t do to lay the blame at the feet of social programs from either conservatives or liberals. In failing fundamental moral tests, we have allowed it to happen:

Respect for human life is the starting point for confronting today’s culture of

violence, [but] clearly, we are losing our respect for human life. How do we teach the young to curb their violence when we are so quick to embrace it as the solution to social problems? Millions of abortions and mass sterilizations solve problems of unwanted pregnancies and overpopulation; euthanasia and assisted suicide cope with burdens of age and disease; use of the death penalty—even for those who are underage or mentally incompetent—effectively lessens crime; cloning and varying forms of biological manipulation create healthier, smarter, prettier people. (USCCB, *Confronting A Culture of Violence*, 1999)

The bishops noted that to restore this great loss, we need a framework for action, a framework in which respect for life should be a central measure of *all* our institutions, spiritual, social, political, and legal. But before that can happen, there *must* be a call to conversion. Before our policies and programming can change, our hearts must change first. Is membership in the parish a panacea for these many and pervasive evidences of the culture of death? As much as we would like “silver bullets” to do the job, they seldom can. But I do believe that *the parish can be the single most vital, dynamic, and effective means by which we can hope to replace the culture of death with a culture of life.*

“Where do we begin?” The question appears daunting, but actually has an easy answer that flows naturally from our love of God and belief in the dignity of the human person: a commitment to respect and protect life from conception to natural death. “That means never killing, by direct or indirect means, any innocent human life, no matter how broken, disabled, or desperate that life may seem” (*Living the Gospel of Life*, #21). So, identifying the challenges to becoming a People of Life is obvious. A culture of death, the Holy Father implies, is at the root of the sickness of our age. Disposal of the unborn, the aged, and the outcast achieves new status when done in the name of “freedom of choice” or scientific advancement. And done with the State’s legal sanction and financial support, such actions become not only justified but commendable. But, as the *Dred Scott* decision has taught us, legal does not always mean moral:

This culture of death is actively swept by powerful cultural, economic and political currents, which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency... Crimes against life are ‘legitimate expressions’ of individual

freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights. (*Evangelium Vitae*, #12, 18)

If the challenge is obvious, so is our response as Catholics: Enact a plan that calls upon all resources of the Church—its people, services and institutions—and especially the laity at the parish level. Ground it in prayer and infuse it with truth, compassion, and urgency. “We are a People of Life” will then become not a just slogan, but a reality.

OPPORTUNITIES

Not surprisingly, the catalyst for the first *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities* occurred in January 1973. It was then that the U.S. Supreme Court, in the landmark case *Roe v. Wade*, struck down existing state laws forbidding abortion on the grounds that they violated a woman’s right to privacy under the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution (*Roe v. Wade*, 409, U.S.S.C. 314, 1973). A day later, in a companion case, *Doe v. Bolton*, the Court ruled that the compelling reasons for allowing abortion *at any time during the pregnancy* lay solely in the hands of the woman’s physician. In his “best clinical” judgment, the physician could determine that an abortion was necessary if the mother’s life was directly at risk, or if continuing the pregnancy would seriously compromise her *life and or health*. A 1971 statute pending in the District of Columbia had been written to include the psychological as well as the physical well-being of the mother. The Court’s decision in *Doe* in essence upheld this statute. It was this substantial broadening of the word “health” that effectively swept away most barriers to legalized abortion. Abortion as necessity became abortion on demand (*Doe v. Bolton*, 410 U.S.S.C. 179 [1973]).

Few in the Church actually believed—somewhat naively, if they had read the signs of the times—that *Roe v. Wade*, much less *Doe v. Bolton*, would actually pass. When they awoke on January 24, 1973 and read the headlines, they were numb. As expected, the Vatican and Catholics worldwide reacted with shock and outrage. Within a few months the American bishops held hearings and convened *ad hoc* committees comprised of both clergy and lay persons to draft an action plan that

would ultimately reverse *Roe v. Wade*.

In February 1975 the first *Pastoral Plan* was published. The initial document called for a program in defense of human life in three areas: education, pastoral care, and public policy. Still reeling from the impact of *Roe*, pastors and parishioners spoke out strongly, in the hopes that their collective outcry would cause the Court to rethink its decision. Many parishes hastily formed discussion groups to explore what the ruling would mean in their Church and in the larger society. All too soon we knew. Twelve years after *Roe*, the American bishops updated the original statement and entitled it the *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation*. It included a concern for the inequitable use of the death penalty and the need for heightened civic awareness and responsibility among the faithful. Finally, in November 2001, the *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life* was published. In the Introduction the bishops put forth “a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability” (PP #1) demonstrated by “a commitment and renewed energy in four major areas: Public Information and Education; Pastoral Care; Public Policy; and Prayer and Worship” (PP #12).

THE PROGRAM

I. Public Information and Education

Before we can love and serve God, we first must know him. The U.S. bishops place knowledge and understanding of the sanctity of human life and the moral evil of killing the innocent and helpless at the forefront of their plan to support life. It calls for a two-fold educational effort aimed at the Catholic community and the general public. The first requires cooperation among all levels of the Church, bishops to clergy to laity, individually and collectively. It seeks “the collaboration of every Catholic institution and organization” as well as “inter-religious dialogue and consultation” (PP #13). Among those the U.S. bishops say are in unique positions to understand the issues and lead others to awareness and action are:

- *Lay persons, especially parents.* Their work—especially in leadership

roles—is crucial to the success [of this effort], both by faith example and guidance of their children, and their ability to impact the broader community through charisms unique to the laity.

- *Priests, deacons and religious.* They exercise a responsibility to proclaim the gospel of life in the pulpit, through teaching, parish programs, and public witness at pro-life events.

- Teachers in Catholic Schools and religious education programs. Teachers are in a special position to inform and inspire the young and to motivate them to pro-life action and service.

- Catholic health and social service professionals and staff. Their direct relation to our lives at the times of birth and death, and their ability to offer counseling and authoritative witness is of inestimable value; with many opportunities to meet Christ, as Mother Teresa says, “in the distressing guise of the poor” they can reaffirm their dignity in our society. (PP #16)

There is no lack of material on which to build a good pro-life education program. American Catholics have a three-fold heritage to inspire us: first, a moral vision of, and commitment to, the rights of the human person as articulated by the Founding Fathers, particularly in the Declaration of Independence; second, an “extraordinary history of charity in the Church...at the service of life” (*Evangelium Vitae* #87); finally, the Church’s firm and clear teaching voice that (as early as the second century up to now) has rejected the deliberate destroying of human life (*Didache* 2, 2; cf. *Ep. of Barnabus*, 19, 5). With these as a foundation, the Catholic community can look to the many passages in both the Old and New Testaments that testify to God’s will for life (Gen. 1:27; Ex. 4:11-12; Jer. 1:5; Matt. 18:10; Rom. 9:19-21). Modern science and technology, sometimes seen as enemies of life, can in fact provide irrefutable evidence for the humanity of the unborn, if not its intrinsic value. Certainly the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) is the most comprehensive and available document on the sanctity of life and the promotion of authentic human freedom that we have. *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics* (1998) is a statement by the U.S. bishops that applies the Pope’s teaching to our particular situation in

the United States. An excellent tool for parishes and classrooms is the Respect Life Program published yearly by the USCCB:

This nationwide program provides information on critical issues of the day and relates those issues to the Church's teaching. It sets euthanasia and abortion 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 human cloning and cell manipulation—and calls attention to the way in which each touches on the sanctity of human life. (PP #18)

Despite these long-standing traditions and teachings, Catholics' acceptance of the Church's staunchly pro-life position is by no means guaranteed; some do consider themselves "pro-choice" on abortion and euthanasia. But pro-life educational efforts aimed at the general public can be even more challenging without these bases. The need is for accurate information on how *every human life at all its stages, regardless of its perceived place or value in society*, is at risk today from abortion, reproductive and even therapeutic cloning, assisted suicide, euthanasia, infanticide, and capital punishment.

A public education program accomplishes several things. It witnesses to the Church's firm commitment to the ultimate victory of life over death; it raises concerns about the common good from the standpoint of legal safeguards; it brings life issues to the forefront and prompts those who are uncommitted to take a firm stand; it gives all persons, especially millions of women who have had an abortion, a chance to see how abortion has failed to solve their problems but only created countless others. Yet, the bishops note that an educational program enacted "in the public square" must be sensitive to people of all faith traditions, or even of no faith:

It must choose the manner of its expression as well as the content, seeking always to clearly explain and gently persuade, while showing respect to any who disagree. It will take a variety of forms: e.g., radio and TV interviews; press releases; public relations and advertising campaigns; accurate reporting of newsworthy events; conferences and seminars focusing on pro-life issues... development and distribution of good pro-life materials; newspaper advertising, posters in local stores and community centers. (PP #19)

II. Pastoral Care

Pastoral care is the most direct, most human, way to bring the gospel of life to others and show them God's love for his children. It reaches mothers and their unborn, fathers, siblings, grandparents—indeed, not a single facet of society remains untouched when a woman's motherhood is protected and nurtured. A recent report noted that “in the U. S. there are nearly 1,900 places that perform abortion services, all at substantial financial cost; however, over 4,000 crisis pregnancy centers help a woman choose life for her child and do so at no cost; in nearly all cases, [CPCs] provide free services and material help to mothers and their families” (*Life Insight*, vol. 10, no. 6).

With the support of the faith community, Catholic organizations and social service agencies like Catholic Charities Counseling/Maternity and Adoption assist those in need. Women, especially those at risk for abortion, can find a safe haven where caring staff and volunteers, specially trained in crisis pregnancy counseling, can help them and their families in making difficult decisions. There they can receive:

- factual and educational information on alternatives to abortion
- free pregnancy tests and ultrasound with information on fetal development
- nutritional, prenatal, childbirth, and post-natal information
- Medicaid assistance and physician referrals
- information on agency-sponsored adoption and foster care
- compassionate understanding and support for victims of rape, incest or abuse
- information on natural family planning for engaged or married couples
- education in the virtue of chastity and the consequences of unhealthy lifestyles
- opportunities to participate in a mentoring program during pregnancy
- spiritual and psychological healing following the trauma of an abortion.

(PP #21, 22)

III. Public Policy

The Declaration of Independence asserts that men are “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” Such rights are from “Nature and Nature's God” and, as such, cannot be bestowed, awarded, transferred, or taken away because they belong to us by virtue of our human nature, our personhood. This increasing “tension between

founding principles and political reality” is greatest when society debates legal protection for the unborn and the rights of the aged, disabled, and terminally ill (PP #26). Pope John Paul II reminds us: “Those [called to civil leadership]...have a duty to make courageous choices in support of life, especially through *legislative measures*.” They cannot shun this responsibility, the Pope says, but must “answer to God...and to the whole of society for choices which may be contrary to the common good” (*Evangelium Vitae* #90. In a later statement, the bishops concurred, but with an even stronger voice: “No public official, especially one claiming to be a faithful and serious Catholic, can responsibly advocate or actively support direct attacks on innocent human life” (*A Challenge to American Catholics*, #32). Catholics not in public office are nonetheless bound in faith and conscience to bring about a more just and moral society. Privileges we enjoy as citizens—to assemble peacefully, express our views, participate in public forums, criticize our leaders when necessary, and above all, vote for candidates who will protect our people and their rights—should not be misused, or worse, not be used at all: “We cannot be indifferent to or cynical about the obligations of citizenship. As voters and advocates, candidates and contributors, we are called to provide a moral leaven for our democracy” (*Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility in the New Millennium* #7).

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

- pursuit of appropriate strategies that will result in passage of a constitutional amendment protecting unborn children’s right to life.
- federal and state laws that restrict the practice of abortion as much as possible and guarantee full rights to parents of minors contemplating abortion.
- challenging of and ultimate reversing of the decision of the 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 to the disadvantaged.
- 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.

The bishops end this section of the *Pastoral Plan* by urging a “well-planned and coordinated advocacy” by all citizens and religious and secular groups, Catholic and non-Catholic, “to see the justice of this cause” and to cooperate and collaborate with us in these public policy efforts on behalf of life (PP #28-29).

IV. Prayer and Worship

Last, but not least, the bishops call for prayer to ground the work of the pro-life parish. The pro-life movement’s first and most important aim is to transform God’s people, the people he has called to be his own, into a People of Life. This is not mainly the work of laws, or programs, or agencies, or campaigns, but of prayer. To imagine that we can be in the least successful in changing a culture of death into a culture of life without prayer is to be spiritually blind and totally self-absorbed. Again, we heed the words of Pope John Paul II:

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 laws and practices which are hostile to life. (*Evangelium Vitae* #100)

The *Pastoral Plan* suggests many opportunities for personal and communal prayer, especially within the liturgical cycle. The Sunday readings abound with references to our life in Christ and the need to respect and foster that life in everyone we encounter. Solemnities and feast days like Mary, the Mother of God (Jan. 1), the Annunciation (March 25), the Visitation (May 31), Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Unborn (Dec. 12), Christmas Day, and the Holy Family (first Sunday after Christmas) call to mind Mary’s key role in salvation and her intercession and protection for all mothers and children. Some dioceses suggest other feasts which are relevant to pro-life: St. Joseph, foster-father of Jesus (March 19), St. Maximilian Kolbe, Patron of the

Pro-Life Movement (Aug. 14), and the Holy Innocents, conversion of abortion providers (Dec. 28). Each year on January 22, a National Prayer Vigil for Life is held at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. as part of the *Roe v. Wade* observances. Many dioceses and parishes conduct similar prayer vigils in unity with the thousands who give public witness to this tragic decision.

Fr. Frank Pavone, founder of Priests for Life, explains this great and consistent need for pro-life prayer in our churches:

... faith and worship are not disconnected from life. In the first chapter of Isaiah, God rejects the sacrificial offerings and incense of worshipers whose 'hands are full of blood' (1:15), not shedding the blood themselves, but doing nothing about the bloodshed around them. Instead, 'Make justice your aim; redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow' (1:17). The God who rescues us expects us to rescue one another. We acknowledge, in prayer, our responsibility to those brothers and sisters who are helpless. (*Priests for Life Newsletter*, vol. 2, # 12)

The Mass is the greatest prayer of the Church, and when we celebrate the Eucharist, we are, by definition, celebrating life. "*Dying you destroyed our death; rising you restored our life.*" Those who eat the Bread of Life will necessarily be concerned with attacks on life. Each time we pray for life in the liturgy, we remind ourselves of the awesome challenge we face: to become a People of Life and renew our world. Consequently, the *Pastoral Plan* calls for pro-life petitions at *every* Mass, not just at on Respect Life Sunday or the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. The repetition of this theme is important, for we remember what we repeat and keep the memory live in our minds and hearts.

Finally, the Eucharist sends us forth to renew the earth. The priest's dismissal, "Go in peace, the Mass is ended," is our commission to bring the truth and grace we have received in the Eucharist to the rest of the world.

THE CPLC MODEL

The Diocese of Dallas is located in north central Texas. Established in 1890, its nine counties cover an area of approximately 7,000 square

miles. Sixty-six parishes and eight missions are home to just under 850,000 Catholics (25% of the total population). Charles V. Grahmann has presided over the diocese as Bishop since 1990, and Joseph Galante as Coadjutor Bishop since 2000. The strong pro-life convictions and leadership of these men have placed the diocese at the forefront of pro-life awareness and action in the nation. It is somehow fitting (even providential) that our city should now be playing such a key role in promoting the culture of life. The eyes of the world were on Dallas in 1973 when, in two distinct but related cases, *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*, the Supreme Court denied the rights of personhood to the child in the womb and allowed its termination through all nine months of pregnancy. It was here that Norma McCorvey, the Jane Roe of *Roe v. Wade*, lived. She was poor, pregnant, and desperate when she met the two young lawyers who would successfully use her as the plaintiff in a case that challenged the Texas state law prohibiting abortion. Although she never aborted her child, Norma nonetheless found herself a *cause celebre* in the dizzying days of the feminist movement, which had “reproductive rights” at its cornerstone. Later, while working inside the abortion industry, Norma came to see the lies that lay behind the “choice” rhetoric, how abortion degraded women and worsened their problems. Describing herself as a woman “won by love,” Norma McCorvey was baptized a Christian in 1995. In 1998 she “found home” in the Catholic Church (*Roe No More Ministries*, 2001).

I. History

Shortly after becoming Bishop of Dallas, Charles Grahmann commissioned the Bishop’s Pro-Life Committee, under the leadership of Fr. Edward Robinson O.P., as Pro-Life Coordinator for the Diocese. Drawing on previous issues of the *Pastoral Plan* (1975, 1986), the Committee sought to intervene where help is most needed, at the abortion centers themselves, and expanded the *Plan* to include a fifth program, Public Witness, which essentially took pro-life “on the streets.” In the Convert-to-Life ministry, trained sidewalk counselors follow the peaceful, prayerful methods developed by Msgr. Philip Reilly of Brooklyn, New York. This new structure, named the “Five-Point Plan,”

comprised ministries within programs of Prayer, Education, Public Witness, Civic Action, and Supportive Services. The Bishop's Pro-Life Committee functioned well for seven years. By June 2000, the Committee had nine ministries, a Board of Directors, an extensive donor base, twenty-plus paid staffers, and hundreds of volunteers. To reflect its growth and influence outside the Dallas Diocese, it was renamed the Catholic Pro-Life Committee of North Texas (CPLC).

II. Mission

The immediate mission of the CPLC is to protect, from deliberate abortion, the lives of our fellow humans who are waiting to be born. Our wider mission is to promote respect for all human life from conception to natural death, and to assist preserving its dignity against any threat, whether of accidental or willful origin. Our concern is not only for the unborn baby, but also includes the parents and the whole of our political society.

III. Ministries

1. *Prayer.* Prayer is the foundation of all we do in defense of human life. It infuses every aspect of our efforts, every project, every event, every individual. Prayer Ministry sponsors over thirty prayer-centered events annually, including the National Night of Prayer for Life, the Roe Memorial Mass, and a staff retreat. Its goal is on-going, heartfelt prayer for all workers in the pro-life vineyard, and for conversion of hearts from the culture of death. Prayer is encouraged in parishes, schools, nursing homes, and religious communities.

2. *Project Gabriel.* Project Gabriel is a parish outreach to mothers experiencing a crisis pregnancy. Trained volunteers called "Gabriel Angels" are referred to mothers through the White Rose Women's Center, or other local crisis pregnancy centers, or from a direct call to the 24-hour hotline, 972-BABY-DUE. The Angels offer spiritual guidance, emotional support, and practical help, when necessary.

3. *Abortion AfterCare-Healing.* Abortion AfterCare-Healing ministers to women and men suffering from the trauma of abortion. As an outreach affiliated with the national program, Project Rachel, it offers

access to spiritual direction and reconciliation, physical or mental health referrals, and emotional support. Teams are made up of clergy and mental health professionals who lead Rachel's Vineyard Retreats, in both English and Spanish, four times a year.

4. *Speakers Bureau.* Each year the Speakers Bureau gives presentations to hundreds of young people and adults in parishes and parish schools on a variety of life-related topics, including chastity, fetal development, contraception, natural family planning, population control, stem-cell research and cloning, euthanasia, and capital punishment.

5. *Convert-to-Life.* Trained sidewalk counselors offer help and alternatives to women coming to the abortion centers, as well as referrals for post-abortion counseling. On-site and off-site prayers are offered for these mothers and their babies, and for the conversion of abortion providers. Each parish is asked to pray for a particular abortion center, and the counselors who witness there daily. Parishioners are encouraged to attend quarterly Masses and Rosary Processions to the abortion centers.

6. *Parish Coordination.* The diocese is divided into eight geographical clusters, each with an average of ten parishes and a leader. In turn, each parish has a pro-life group headed by a parish coordinator. The ministry supports them by assisting them in implementing the goals of the Pastoral Plan and helping facilitate activities and projects, such as the BABY-DUE signs, the Baby Bank campaign, and the Parish Support Project. Currently, 88% of Dallas parishes have a pro-life coordinator and group.

7. *Civic Action.* Civic Action seeks to inform voters and restore laws that protect life from conception to natural death. It promotes awareness of pro-life and pro-family issues at the grass-roots level. The group encourages voting, monitors pending legislation, publishes candidate surveys, and encourages dialogue on life issues with elected representatives.

8. *Hispanic Outreach.* Hispanic Outreach informs the Hispanic community about life issues and encourages increased participation in pro-life activities, especially at the parish level. It brings the life message in Spanish through presentations, literature, and volunteer recruitment

and works closely with organizations in predominantly Hispanic parishes.

9. *Youth-For-Life*. Youth For Life (YFL) is a peer-based outreach designed to help today's become more pro-life. It networks closely with youth ministers to reach today's teens with the truth about chastity, sacramental marriage, dating, abortion, and other life issues. YFL sponsors teen groups to the state capital and Washington, D.C. for the annual March for Life each January 22nd.

THE PARISH: A PEOPLE OF LIFE

In examining the *Pastoral Plan*, we have seen some of the challenges inherent in creating a culture of life. This section describes how a pro-life outreach impacts parish life by involving the pastor, organizations, and individuals, and gives some practical tips on how to overcome common obstacles, essentially what works and what does not (at least most of the time). In our ten-year history, we have learned that the nature of parish life is both simple and complex, both insular and broad. While allowing for major differences in size, affluence, ethnic diversity, manner of liturgical expressions, and even members' theological and moral interpretations, the parish is still the foremost witness to the gospel message of God's love for life and for his people.

THE PARISH PRO-LIFE COMMITTEE

The parish pro-life committee assists every Catholic in his or her responsibility to actively promote a renewed respect for human life. It is the place where people learn the issues and how to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable—especially mothers and their unborn children. It may be a separate committee, or subsumed under another. Whatever its structure, it should have members from adult and youth groups, persons with disabilities, minorities, and those in education and pastoral care. Whenever possible, it should dovetail its efforts with existing programs and events. Coordinators are usually appointed by the pastor, or suggested as someone the pastor knows and trusts. In the CPLC model, the Director of Parish Coordination personally visits the pastor and requests his help in searching for someone suitable for this

role. The Coordinator relies on the Director for guidance and distributing timely information; in the case of the CPLC, it is through quarterly meetings, e-mails, and a monthly mailer.

PRO-LIFE COMMITTEE OBJECTIVES

- Implement the annual Respect Life Program, promoting it in schools and religious education programs and using it as a basis for discussion groups.
- Promote pregnancy counseling and maternity support services, and post-abortion reconciliation programs.
- Promote programs of prayer for the unborn, their mothers, and families, for the dying, disabled, condemned prisoners, and to change the hearts of all those who promote and profit by abuses against life.
- Foster awareness of the need to restore legal protection to the unborn and to enact laws that safeguard life in all its stages, from conception to natural death.
- Keep parishioners informed of upcoming legislation on pro-life issues; distribute candidate surveys; organize letter and postcard campaigns. (PP #38)

PRO-LIFE COMMITTEE STRATEGIES

- Get involved in parish life. Be visible through liturgical ministries, religious education, planning committees, festivals and fairs, etc.
- Get to know your pastor personally. In a relaxed, non-pressured meeting (maybe over lunch), tell of your commitment to pro-life. Let him perceive you as a respectful, organized person who “follows through.” Ask, don’t tell, the pastor how the parish can best become “a people of life.”
- Examine your own spiritual life. Be a person of prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you to bring salt and light to others.
- Be a team person. Delegate tasks to capable people and then let them work.
- Get to know those on the liturgy committee and work with them to incorporate life issues into the liturgical year. Advance planning is

- crucial.
- Be informed. Know the Church's teachings on all the life issues. Stay abreast of current news and consider how best to educate and involve people.
 - Decide your needs and how much they will cost. Request a budget line item for yearly expenses, or ask permission to raise the money. Groups like the Knights of Columbus are very pro-life and can be helpful in fundraising.
 - Enroll your pastor in Priests for Life. It is his best and most available resource for pro-life homily texts, pamphlets, video and audio tapes, all designed to help priests and deacons proclaim the gospel of life in their parishes.
 - Contact mothers groups about organizing a kids' clothes closet, donating baby furniture and maternity items to the local crisis pregnancy center. Ask seniors to knit blankets and layette items. Sponsor a baby shower for a needy mother.
 - Use the Sunday bulletin to announce pro-life events, recruit counselors and Gabriel Angels. Keep pamphlet racks filled with materials on abortion, chastity, fetal development, capital punishment, and natural family planning.

PERCEPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

If we in the Catholic Pro-Life Committee of North Texas are able to boast at all, we, like the Apostle Paul, boast in the Lord (2 Cor 10:17). The works we have accomplished since our beginning in 1993 are what they are by the grace of God. He has opened many doors that we had thought were closed to us; he has given us financial stability in the generous Life Partners who support our work, to the extent that we are able to hire several full- and part-time staff. He has blessed us with two supportive bishops, and many fine and caring priests and deacons who give of their personal time and allow us to come into their parishes to tell the truth that people are, literally, dying to hear. Our model works, but it is clearly not perfect. Certain perceptions and impede progress in helping transform parishes into People of Life:

- (1) Abortion has been called the "scourge of our age." And some

say that the ethical sea-change coming in the future through euthanasia and assisted suicide will be even more devastating. But we often hear critics say: “Pro-life is a single-issue. What about war, terrorism, poverty, racism, homelessness, prison reform, the environment, immigration, exploitation of women and children?” To them we answer in the words of the U.S. bishops: “To focus on the evils of abortion and euthanasia is not to ignore the many other urgent conditions that threaten human rights and dignity, and does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence, and injustice. *But being ‘right’ in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice [about] direct attacks on human life*” (PP #3).

(2) In the past, unwise, and even violent, tactics used by some pro-lifers to combat the terrible abuses against life have received more notoriety than the crimes themselves. Acts like destroying clinics and killing abortionists themselves deny the fundamental value of each human life, perpetuate the cycle of violence, and worst of all do irreparable harm to genuine pro-life witness. The Church must and does denounce them. One of the best things about doing pro-life work in a *diocesan and parish environment* is the great sense of solidarity, joy, and peace that pervades our mission. Yet some people, including clergy, retain an image of pro-lifers as strident, uncaring, and judgmental. CPLC methods are anything but this, but they cannot or will not see the pro-life cause in any other guise. The pickets, the protests, the police, the bullhorns can play a role (as they did in the civil rights movement), but for the most part CPLC has replaced them with gentle people, silent except for their prayers and caring offers of hope and real help.

(3) Another perception is how we fit in the schema of pro-life organizations. State, national, and regional groups abound, each with its own focus. The word “Catholic” certainly identifies us to a degree; the words “A Ministry of the Diocese of Dallas” appear on all our materials, allowing us access into parishes, schools, and Church-related groups. But since pro-life organizations are always seeking funds, and from a relatively small segment of the population, it can get confusing. Organizations such as Texas Life Coalition, The Caring Foundation, The Heidi Group, American Life League, Priests for Life, and Human Life

International are certainly worthy, and can positively impact the broader community with the pro-life message.

(4) Some limitations have to do with our organizational structure and finances, some with personnel. Most of the work done by the CPLC is done in staffers' homes. Internal communication is largely by e-mail. We do not have an office in the Chancery (by choice); our office space and secretary's salary are partly donated. Of our nine Ministry Directors, four are volunteers, two receive a small monthly stipend, two a part-time salary, one a full-time. The Executive Director and Ministry Director are full-time on an appropriate scale for non-profit agencies; the Development Director's salary is underwritten by a generous donor. All sixty parish coordinators and eight cluster leaders are volunteers, and this, as expected, can pose problems. Some are on fire for pro-life, always faithful, always eager to help. Some do little or nothing but attend a meeting occasionally, and, as expected, their parishes reflect minimal pro-life activity. Parish Coordination always seeks better ways to communicate with and motivate these coordinators, but some are a "weak link" in the CPLC ministry.

(5) Another way in which CPLC is currently limited is in our affiliation with minority groups. Seen nationally, the pro-life communities are largely white, middle-class, Catholic or Evangelical Protestant. Most Hispanics and African-Americans identify themselves personally, but not actively or politically, as pro-life. In 1998 CPLC began our Hispanic Outreach to help raise traditional Hispanic pro-life sympathies to new levels of awareness and activism. And since nearly 40% of minority pregnancies end in abortion, as compared to 27% of white pregnancies (The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1992), it is imperative that more black people hear the Church's truth about life, rather than Planned Parenthood's. To this end, CPLC recently hired an African-American woman as Community Relations Coordinator, whose special focus is on post-abortion reconciliation and healing.

FUNDING

"Show me the money" is what many people, eager to make pro-life inroads in their parish, say to their bishops and pastors. Implementing a

Pastoral Plan requires funds, especially for high-need areas such as Education and Pastoral Care. In many dioceses, the Respect Life ministry is part of the overall Peace and Justice or Family Life Ministry programs and receives a small portion of the yearly Catholic Community Appeal. However, with the bishop's blessing, CPLC is entirely free to generate and distribute its own funds. This is an on-going challenge, but it works. The 2002 budget is projected at over half a million dollars. Funds come from four main sources: Life Partner pledges, the annual Bishop's Pro-life Dinner, yearly fundraisers such as the Baby Bank Campaign and CPLC Golf Classic, and individual donations. Approximately two-thirds of these funds go directly to support the nine ministries; the remaining third is spread among Administration, Communications, and Development. Appeals go out regularly in the form of the CPLC Newsletter, *LifeMatters*, and a monthly *Life Partner* letter, which includes a calendar of events and a Ministry Update. CPLC values its upper donors highly and thanks them whenever possible with hand-written notes, gifts and even homemade cookies at Christmas, acknowledgments in the Bishop's Dinner *Program*, and an annual Donor Appreciation Reception. Without them, the CPLC could not exist and do its life-saving work. The effects of their generosity are tangible. In 2001, 387 abortion-minded mothers chose life through intervention of sidewalk counselors; over 3,000 adults and youth heard talks on life issues and chastity; the Respect Life Curriculum is available in every parish and parochial school; more than 120 women and men have participated in Rachel's Vineyard Retreats, and over 20,000 Voter Guides were placed in parishes and made available on our web site. In addition, our Project Gabriel ministry has grown steadily. In 1995, five parishes displayed the BABY-DUE pregnancy hotline sign; now 38 parishes choose to witness to life in this powerful and compassionate way, with more planned.

"The great lie of our age," the bishops say, "is that we are powerless in the face of compromises, structures and temptations of mass culture" (*We Are a People of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics* #17). A great lie, indeed. We are not powerless. We belong to the Lord; in him is our strength and through his grace we can make a difference. We can become a People of Life, and in doing so, we can change the world.

REFERENCES

- Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Edition. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 2000.
- John Chrysostom, *De incomprehensibili dei natura seu contra Anomoeos*. 3,6, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 526.
- John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1995).
- New American Bible for Catholics*. Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1986.
- Pavone, Frank. *Priests for Life Newsletter*, No.2, Vol. 12, Staten Island: March-April, 2002.
- Second Vatican Council. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. (Gaudium et Spes)* in *Vatican Council II, Vol. I: The Conciliar Documents*. Northport: Costello Publishing, 1996.
- U.S. Catholic Bishops. *Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility in the New Millennium*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1999.
- U.S. Catholic Bishops. *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1998.
- U.S. Catholic Bishops. *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1985.
- U.S. Catholic Bishops. *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life*. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Catholic Conference, 2001.
- U.S. Catholic Bishops. *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1998.
- U.S. Catholic Bishops. *Priestly Life & Ministry*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1999.
- U.S. Catholic Bishops. *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1994.
- U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Doe v. Bolton*, 410,179. Washington, D.C.: 1973.
- U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Roe v. Wade*, 409, 314. Washington, D.C.: 1973.