

Brief Adult Catechesis: A Full *Pro-Life* Agenda

As a parish we've been hearing a lot from the pulpit lately about our responsibility as Catholics to participate in public life, to wrestle with the issues that determine our nation's future, and to vote with an informed conscience. In this election year, the issue decisively shaping the debate among Catholics is that which is most often referred to as a "pro-life" position. So, as we seek to vote responsibly it is crucial that we ask what a "pro-life" agenda consists of. Our Scriptures and Catholic Social Teaching give us the answers we need.

They teach us that the human person is made in the image and likeness of God. The ultimate criterion upon which we base all our moral and political decisions must therefore be the sacredness and dignity of **all** human life. So let's be specific: what is a pro-life position and how do we bring that position to bear upon our vote this November? Our bishops provide us a starting point: "We are convinced that a **consistent ethic of life** should be the moral framework from which to address issues in the political arena."

The bishops give us a litmus test by which to evaluate our prospective candidate: "Our responsibility," they say, "is to measure all candidates, policies. . . and platforms by how they **protect or undermine the life, dignity, and rights of the human person—whether they protect the poor and vulnerable and advance the common good.**" The idea of a consistent life ethic was originally given to us by our esteemed Cardinal Bernardin in the 1980s and has become the foundation for all of our Catholic social teaching since that time.

Bernardin observed that our advancing technology presents us with a whole range of moral issues and multiple threats to life previously undreamed of. This new context calls for an ethic of life that corresponds to these challenges and complexities, one that addresses the "full spectrum of life from womb to tomb," and sees the "**linkage among all the life issues.**"

Among the critical issues he lists are "genetics, abortion, capital punishment, modern warfare, and the care of the terminally ill." At the same time, he also insists that these issues must be considered within a broader moral framework. In the case of abortion, for example, Bernardin maintains that "our moral, political, and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented and the unemployed worker." This life ethic must impact our positions on such issues as tax policy, social programs, and health care, as well as our foreign policy.

So a full "pro-life" position, or consistent life ethic entails both the "protection of the right to life and the promotion of the rights that enhance [that] life," making it possible along the whole spectrum of life. . . The protection of life. . . the promotion of life. . . all of a piece, forming one "**seamless garment.**"

Based on this ethic, our bishops offer us the image of a **table**, and pose a question by which we may evaluate our prospective candidate on the full range of life issues: "Who has a place at the Table of Life?" The unborn child? The single mother struggling desperately, once the child is born, to feed, house, clothe, and educate that child—very possibly begging the utility company not to turn off their power?

Who has a place at the Table of Life: the American soldier, the Iraqi child, victims of prison abuse and torture? The immigrant? Those sick and dying without health care? The prisoner on death row? Who among these has hope for the future? We must demand of our candidates that all of God's children have a place at the Table. As we vote, let us keep before us this consistent ethic of life.