Opinion
NCR Voices



Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich listens to a Ukrainian refugee family talk during a July 1, 2023, visit at the Basilian Sisters' monastery in Lviv, Ukraine. Cupich spoke Sept. 26 at Fordham University to commemorate Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's "consistent ethic of life" speech in 1983. (OSV News/Gina Christian)



by Michael Sean Winters

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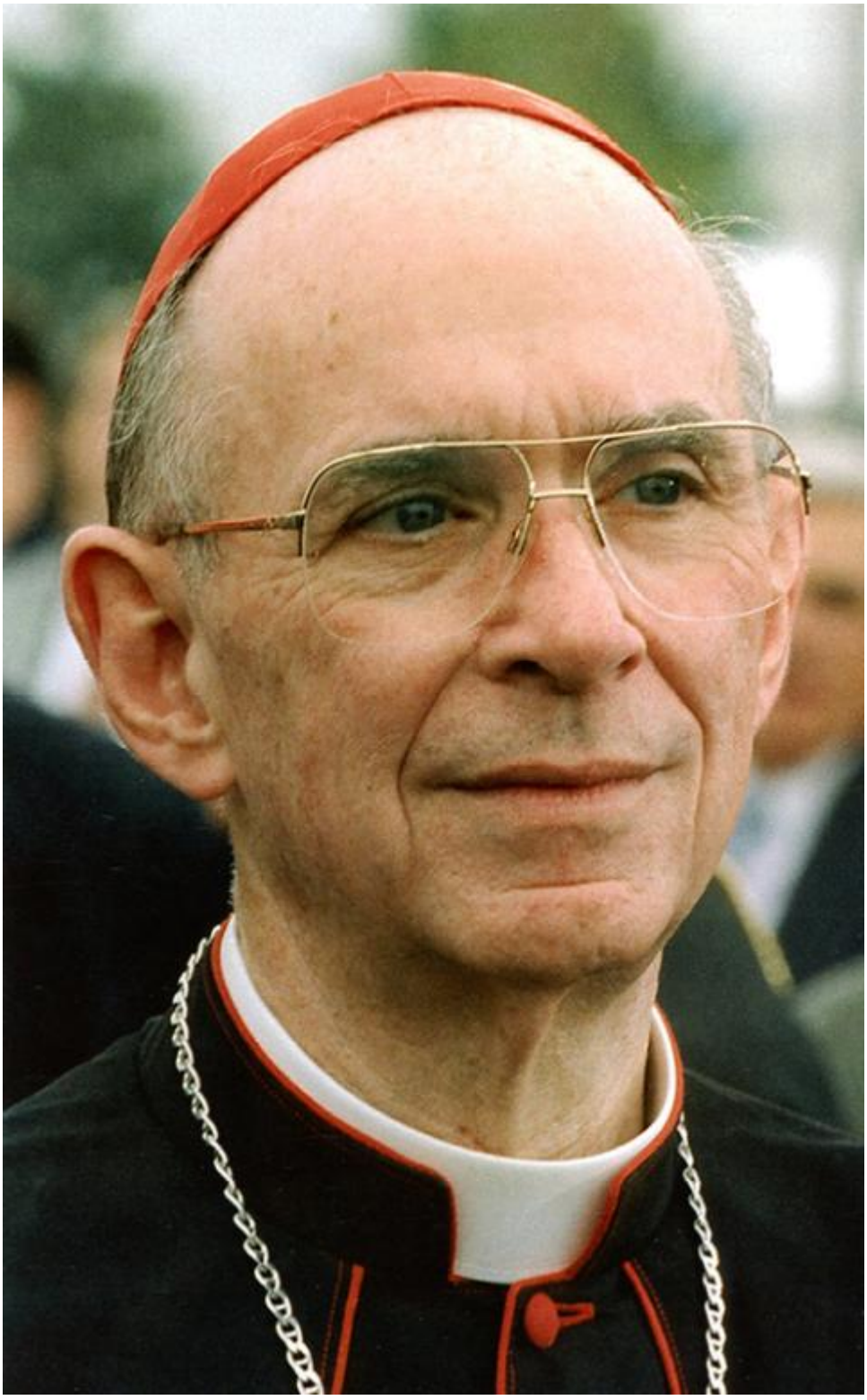
Cardinal Blase Cupich commemorated the 40th anniversary of his predecessor Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's "consistent ethic of life" speech by returning last night to the site of that famous 1983 address, Fordham University. Cupich delivered his own address that clarified and defended what Bernardin had said, and then pivoted the concept to call for an integral ethic of solidarity. Now, as then, it remains to be seen if those who most need to hear the words of the archbishop of Chicago will do so.

The talk, which was sponsored by two of Fordham's on-campus think tanks, the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies and the Center on Religion and Culture , drew over a hundred New Yorkers to the school's Lincoln Center campus, including professors, students, seminarians and clergy. The full text of Cupich's remarks about Bernardin's "consistent ethic" was published this morning at L'Osservatore Romano.

"As a community of believers, we find ourselves beset by division, buffeted by a set of new questions about the church's relationship with the wider society, and even with itself," Cupich noted. "In many ways, we need this teaching now more than ever."

After listing the many issues Bernardin placed on the table as subject to his consistent ethic of life, Cupich added, "Cardinal Bernardin rooted these diverse issues in a single principle of Catholic faith: that the loss of even one human life is a momentous event. Seen in this context, abortion, nuclear war, poverty, euthanasia, and capital punishment all share a common identity in their denial of the right to life. That commonality calls for consistency."



The late Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin is seen in this 1995 photo. (CNS files)

Consistency is not the same thing as leveling, and Cupich clarified a point that often got lost both among Bernardin's critics and his supporters. "The cardinal was not

claiming that all life issues are equivalent. Instead, he forcefully argued for their distinctiveness, each requiring its own system of analysis, while emphasizing the reality of the interrelatedness of all threats to human life," Cupich said. He added that Bernardin "sought to leverage the analogical character of Catholic thought to engage a whole range of moral issues, each distinctively urgent, but all inextricably linked by the fundamental value of human life."

The confusion, intentional or not, about what Bernardin did and did not say was present from the beginning and it was rooted not in theology but in the strategy of some pro-life activists. What we know now, which was only beginning to be apparent 40 years ago, is that Catholics no longer approach issues of public policy, even issues with obvious moral significance, as Catholics first, but as Democrats or Republicans first. Cupich rightly looked at the role the politics of abortion played in this development: "The great sorting had begun."

NCR published the text of a follow-up speech by Bernardin, delivered at St. Louis University, in its April 6, 1984, issue, as well as some of the reactions to the series of speeches promoting the consistent ethic of life he began at Fordham. "Most parish level pro-life activists surveyed by NCR recently expressed concern that linking life issues, as suggested by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in his 'seamless garment' statements, may dilute the anti-abortion movement," NCR reported.

Pro-lifers react to Bernardin

MOST PARISH LEVEL pro-life activists surveyed by *NCR* recently expressed concern that linking life issues, as suggested by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in his "seamless garment" statements, may dilute the anti-abortion movement.

More than two dozen pro-life committee volunteers from dioceses throughout the nation responded to an informal poll. It indicated that most agreed that a "womb to tomb" respect for life should be reflected in Catholic teachings, but it also indicated what appeared, at times, to be a misunderstanding of the cardinal's remarks.

Pro-lifers frequently stated that their primary task is to halt abortions. Nearly every parish representative said anti-abortion lobbying is the sole function of their pro-life committee.

Below is a sampling of comments:

Dennis Breitenstein, St. Joan of Arc
St. Louis, Mo.

"I can understand what he's talking about. But we can look right now and see innocent children being killed. I kind of go along with him on capital punishment, and I believe that as a nation we can sit down and talk rather than threaten nuclear war. But the abortion issue is so near and dear to my heart that I don't want to take on a lot of other things and see the Human Life Amendment pushed into the background.

"I'm not saying the issues Cardinal Bernardin raises shouldn't go together, but I can't see how they can be put together in a program."

Audrey Barr, St. Philomena
Chicago, Ill.

"As far as I'm concerned, that's the way to go. We need a kind of umbrella under which to approach the anti-life tendencies in modern society. Sure, the issues are different, but there is a common denominator."

Barr said the St. Philomena pro-life committee has long stressed respect for life on a variety of issues. The term "pro-life," she said, is too often co-opted by those "passionate" people who "refuse to consider any other societal problem except abortion."

Francine Markiewicz, Holy Cross
Deerfield, Ill.

"I don't mind the cardinal telling pro-lifers they must support nuclear peace, but I don't hear him telling the freeze people that they must oppose abortion. The knife has to cut both ways. I don't see the wisdom of joining life issues together as long as the obligation falls equally on both sides." Markiewicz said that many freeze advocates are openly pro-abortion and somewhat smug about it. Even if the seamless garment idea catches on, she said, the top priority must still be given to opposing abortion.

Some pro-lifers call Bernardin's linking of all life issues "the way to go" and say they "agree wholeheartedly"; others call it "a tremendous sorrow and a disappointment" and say the idea will lead to "confusion . . . and divisiveness among the people."

Richard Ryan Jr., Tennessee Volunteers for Life
Memphis, Tenn.

"I feel the nuclear issue and the anti-capital punishment issue are not as down-to-earth and here-and-now . . . they only touch a handful of people." Ryan said he sees difficulties if the abortion movement is linked with others.

"To combine them will lead to confusion as to what the term 'pro-life' means and divisiveness among the people."

Sharon Horgan, Presentation of the Blessed Virgin
Maplewood, Minn.

"I am delighted with Bernardin and wish more Catholics would see the need for consistency (on life issues). It is crucial for our identity as Catholics to project the image of respect for life across the board. I cannot see how we can profess to be consistent if we cannot lump both ends of the spectrum into our understanding of what respect for life is."

Horgan said the 1973 Supreme Court decision on abortion "knocked me out of my cozy world and really prompted me to get more involved." Horgan added that she has been involved in the nuclear freeze issues, Bread for the World and the Nestle boycott.

Charles Williamson, Long Island Coalition for Life
North Bellmore, N.Y.

"Certainly, Cardinal Bernardin's remarks constitute a watering-down of our pro-life efforts, but it just represents a continuation of our struggle. This is part of their strategy. To neutralize anything, you have to absorb it. And that's just what they're trying to do.

"To me, it's a tremendous sorrow and a disappointment. But the candle in the darkness is Archbishop O'Connor of New York, who, in just the first two days of his office, has greatly buoyed the hopes of the pro-life movement.

"It's unfortunate, on the other hand, that Cardinal Bernardin was selected to be head of the bishop's pro-life committee. He has the capacity to do a lot of good, but he also has the capacity to do a lot of damage."

Doris Colin, South Shore Pro-Life Committee
Roosevelt, N.Y.

"I don't think Cardinal Bernardin meant his remarks to be divisive, and he has subsequently made a statement reaffirming the problem of abortion as one of his top priorities. If Cardinal Bernardin's remarks carry any effect, I would hope that it would bring about an end of indifference to abortion."

Linda Wehunt, Good Shepherd
Tallahassee, Fla.

"That really says it all. I agree with that 100 per cent.

"All life should be respected. It is feeding the poor; it is visiting prisoners; it is ending capital punishment; it is putting a stop to wars.

"Each life is a sacred gift, and each life must be treated as such."

Digital scan of the top-half of "Pro-lifers react to Bernardin," on Page 28 of the NCR print issue dated April 6, 1984 (NCR archives)

Two months later, (see the scanned article below) reporting on Bernardin's appearance at the National Right-to-Life convention, NCR noted, "On the meeting's first day, Bernardin presented his 'consistent pro-life ethic' position to about 600 but received a cooler reception than [Rev. Jerry] Falwell did."

Bernardin, Falwell talk to pro-lifers

By JIM McMANUS
Staff Writer
Kansas City, Mo.

THE REVEREND Jerry Falwell and Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin were featured speakers at the 12th annual National Right To Life Committee (NRLC) convention here June 7-9, and the 1,200 pro-life activists extended a more enthusiastic welcome to Falwell's message of conservative politics and fundamentalist religion than to Bernardin's "seamless garment" pro-life arguments.

On the meeting's first day, Bernardin presented his "consistent pro-life ethic" position to about 600 but received a cooler reception than Falwell did. Many NRLC members disagree with Bernardin's effort to link what he has called the pro-life issues: opposition to abortion, capital punishment, the nuclear arms race, euthanasia and infanticide. Said one priest in the audience, "I hope he gets himself off the hook."

Convention organizers tried to dispel the group's reputation for being single-minded in its conservative politics and religion, but the different receptions afforded Bernardin and Falwell clearly posited the group closer to Falwell's political views than Bernardin's. As Falwell

Digital scan of "Bernardin, Falwell talk to pro-lifers," on Page 10 of the NCR print issue dated June 22, 1984 (NCR archives)

Alas, even now that the pro-life community has achieved its primary goal of overturning *Roe* v. *Wade*, the community remains confused about how to proceed. It is difficult not to conclude that some of that confusion would be less had they seen the value of Bernardin's approach. By putting politics first, they ended up winning their legal victory as part of an alliance with Donald Trump, who taints everything he touches, and in a way that left many state legislatures enacting via statute libertarian abortion laws what *Roe* had done by judicial fiat. The pro-life movement still has to convince the culture that all human life possesses dignity and inherent worth.

Cupich offered a fine analysis of changes that have made Bernardin's moral intuitions even more relevant in the intervening 40 years. But he doesn't leave it there. Instead, he takes up Bernardin's metaphor and retrofits it for our time.

"The consistent ethic of life could serve as a logical scaffolding for our analysis of life issues. Putting them into effect in a committed way — as Cardinal Bernardin had hoped — leads to an integral ethic of solidarity," Cupich said. "That ethic grounds our respect for life both interpersonally and within the human family. Solidarity points to the interconnectedness of all human beings, to the unity that they should strive for, and the responsibility for the common good that we all share. Solidarity is a moral virtue. It is a disposition of gratitude to God for the gifts he bestows upon us, and of service to those who suffer."

This section of his talk echoed a speech Cupich delivered to the Chicago Federation of Labor back in 2015. At Fordham last night, you could see that his thinking about solidarity has been deepened and developed, not least on account of the social magisterium of Pope Francis.

Cupich suggested, firstly, that a consistent ethic of solidarity should be grounded in Scripture as well as natural law, that an exclusive reliance on natural law reasoning can become dry, appealing only to reason. "And in the current cultural climate, reason is too rarely welcomed," he noted.

Second, the cardinal said a consistent ethic of solidarity must be rooted in the virtue of compassion, and empathy. He noted that a project undertaken by the U.S. bishops 14 years ago looked at ways to bridge the gap "between Catholics who were passionate about ending abortion but opposed to the church's stance on quality-of-life issues, and Catholics who were passionate about Catholic teaching regarding the poor, but opposed or neutral on the protection of the unborn." The point of contact between the two camps was compassion.

"Compassion frustrates the logic of team sports, which seems to govern civic life today, in which cruelty toward one's ideological opponents has taken on a perverse form of cultural currency," Cupich said. "It does so by replacing the logic of competition with the logic of love. When we let go of what we think we know is best, when we give up the need to control outcomes, we make room for God."

Cupich called for the ethic of solidarity to possess a "global perspective" and a "synodal" character, clearly showing the influence of Pope Francis on his thinking. Lastly, he said the ethic must be rooted in prayer.

It is difficult even to hope that Cupich's talk will resolve any of the internal tensions that afflict the church in the United States. He notes, correctly, that Bernardin had harbored a similar hope for his talk 40 years ago but a newfound unity did not come to pass. Cupich's discussion of Bernardin's contributions to the life of the church was heartfelt and powerful, a living, breathing example of the apostolic succession. There is plenty in this talk for theologians to unpack and develop but it is also highly accessible to a lay audience and young people. It was very fine. It should be seminal.

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 13-26, 2023** print issue under the headline: Cupich calls for ‘integral ethic of solidarity’ at Fordham.