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'Seamless garment' marks 25th anniversary

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

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Bernardin had been invited to speak about the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace," published six months earlier under his direction. He indicated, however, that he would use the letter "as a starting point for shaping a consistent ethic of life in our culture."

The Catholic moral tradition, he pointed out, "has something valuable to say in the face of the multiple threats to the sacredness of life today, and I am convinced that the church is in a position to make a significant defense of life in a comprehensive and consistent manner."

The pastoral letter, he reminded his Fordham audience, had linked the questions of abortion and nuclear war. "No other major institution presently holds these two positions in the way that Catholic bishops have joined them."

"I am convinced," he continued, "that the pro-life position of the church must be developed in terms of a comprehensive and consistent ethic of life." As the new chairman of the bishops' pro-life committee, he committed himself to "shaping a position of linkage among the life issues."

The cardinal posed two questions about these life issues: "In an age when we can do almost anything, how do we decide what we ought to do?" and "In a time when we can do anything technologically, how do we decide morally what we never should do?"

The spectrum of life issues, he observed, cuts across genetics, abortion, capital punishment, modern warfare and the care of the terminally ill.

That is why the bishops' "Respect Life" program, he said, views opposition to abortion and nuclear warfare as "specific applications of this broader attitude."

"When one carries this principle into the public debate today, however, one meets significant opposition from very different places on the political and ideological spectrum." Some regard the bishops' concern about issues of national security to be overstepping their bounds, while others claim that opposition to abortion violates the realm of private choice.

"If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus," Bernardin declared, "then 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 immigrant and the unemployed worker."

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"Consistency means that we cannot have it both ways," Bernardin argued. "We cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous public policy to protect the rights of the unborn and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of the society or are beyond the proper scope of governmental responsibility."

A consistent ethic of life, however, needs a supportive constituency if it is to be effective. "The building of such a consistency," the cardinal insisted, "is precisely the task before the church and the nation."

He readily acknowledged that the building of such a consensus on the spectrum of life issues is "far from finished," even among Catholics.

"We need the kind of dialogue on these issues which the pastoral letter generated on the nuclear question. We need the same searching intellectual exchange, the same degree of involvement of clergy, religious and laity, the same sustained attention in the Catholic press."

Because ours is a pluralistic society, he noted, it is all the more imperative that we follow the example that the bishops provided in their pastoral letter on peace. That letter won the respect of non-Catholics because its compelling moral analysis did not require any kind of religious assent.

On sensitive issues like abortion, the cardinal said, "we should maintain and clearly articulate our religious convictions, but also maintain our civil courtesy. We should be vigorous in stating a case and attentive in hearing another's case; we should test everyone's logic, but not question his or her motives."

What we surely need more than anything else today is the kind of enlightened pastoral leadership and wisdom that Cardinal Joseph Bernardin gave the church until his death in 1996.

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