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Everyone's life and dignity needs to be protected and respected

by Tony Magliano

Making a Difference

Respect life!

Every October, the Catholic church issues this clarion call. But what exactly does it mean to respect life?

For many Catholics, respecting life means we should pray and work to protect unborn babies from abortion.

With the brutal dismembering of more than 1 million aborted brothers and sisters annually in the United States and the killing of approximately 55 million unborn babies worldwide every year, our efforts to end this grave evil should be maximized and ongoing.

Almost every Wednesday, I join several other people near an abortion mill in Baltimore to witness to the humanity of the unborn and to pray for an end to abortion.

Putting an end to the killing of unborn babies is a priority for me, and it is a priority for the Catholic church. But it is not the only priority.

The concern of Christ and the Catholic church for the suffering of the world is not limited to any one group of people, born or unborn.

Our deep and active concern must be directed to all. For in the words of Blessed Pope John Paul II, "we are all really responsible for all."

So we are not to rank pro-life, social justice and peace issues; we are to link them. It's what the Catholic church calls the "consistent ethic of life."

In 1983, as head of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin championed for our time the early church's consistent pro-life ethic.

During an address at St. Louis University, Cardinal Bernardin said, "The case for a consistent ethic of life -- one that stands for the protection of the right to life and the promotion of the rights, which enhance life from womb to tomb ... is both a complex and demanding tradition.

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"It joins the humanity of the unborn infant and the humanity of the hungry; it calls for positive legal action to prevent the killing of the unborn or the aged and positive societal action to provide shelter for the homeless and education of the illiterate."

So therefore, not just the unborn, not just the poor, not just the hungry, not just the homeless, not just the war-torn, not just the undocumented, not just the medically uninsured, not just condemned prisoners, not just the environment and not just future generations, but all of the above deserve our care. Everyone's life and dignity needs to be fully protected and respected.

Catholics, and all Christians, cannot ignore the Lord's call to consistently build up the kingdom of God -- the kingdom Jesus calls for in the last judgment scene of Matthew's Gospel -- where the hungry are fed, the thirsty are refreshed, the strangers are welcomed, the naked are clothed, the sick are cared for and the prisoners are visited.

In Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's words, "Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential [to the church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel" (*Deus Caritas Est*, No. 22).

During this time when so many of those who hold political and economic power are cutting anti-poverty assistance programs and waging war on the born and unborn, the followers of the God of life and the Prince of Peace must prophetically proclaim, "Thus says the Lord, respect every life! And give priority to the poor and vulnerable!"

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist. He is available to speak at diocesan or parish gatherings about Catholic social teaching. His keynote address, "Advancing the Kingdom of God in the 21st Century," has been well received by diocesan gatherings from Salt Lake City to Baltimore. Tony can be reached at tmag@zoominternet.net.]

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