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Can the Seamless Garment Be Sewn?
The Future of Pro-Life Progressivism

The Consistent Life Ethic: A Look
Back, A Look Around,
A Look Ahead

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Fides et Iustitia

ARTICLE

**THE CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC: A LOOK
BACK, A LOOK AROUND,
A LOOK AHEAD**

JOHN L. CARR*

I. INTRODUCTION

A gathering like this is one of the reasons the University of St. Thomas School of Law came into being. The defense of human life and dignity and this kind of dialogue are at the heart of the mission of this law school. I am very pleased to be a part of this symposium, but I am a bit anxious. Whenever I am introduced by my rather pompous title, I get a little nervous. How would you like to be “Director of Social Development and World Peace for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops”?

I’m reminded of a story I often tell of getting on an elevator in Chicago at a meeting of the bishops’ conference. We wear these very large name tags—“Bishops’ Conference, name, title, etc.” A couple got on the elevator and looked at me rather strangely. The husband declared, “You’re not a bishop!” I don’t know if it was my wedding ring or the way I was dressed that gave me away. I said, “I’m not a bishop; I work for the bishops.” I could see he was reading the rest of the nametag and he said to his wife: “He’s in charge of social development and world peace.” She seemed a little underwhelmed by this and declared, “You need to do a better job!”

We all “need to do a better job” of standing up persistently and consistently for human life and dignity. That’s what brings us here today.

St. Thomas has a special place in my life. My father and I are both alumni. My daughter is a junior at St. Thomas. I am humbled and honored to serve on the board of governors of this impressive new law school with its distinctive, and much needed, mission of linking Catholic social teaching and legal education.

* Sec. Soc. Dev. and World Peace, U.S. Conf. Catholic Bishops. This paper is based upon opening remarks given at the *University of St. Thomas Law Journal*'s symposium, “Can the Seamless Garment Be Sewn? The Future of Pro-Life Progressivism,” Minneapolis, Minn., Mar. 11, 2005.

It is also very appropriate that this dialogue take place here in the Twin Cities given the history of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis. Through the decades, John Ireland, John A. Ryan, John R. Roach, all priests of this Archdiocese, have been leaders of the Catholic Church's engagement in public life. Archbishop Harry Flynn and Fr. Dennis Dease continue this important legacy.

It is also good to be out of Washington, where too often interests trump ideas, polls overwhelm principles, and narrow agendas undermine the search for the common good. Our nation's capital is often paralyzed by excessive partisanship and the demands of powerful interest groups. The consistent defense of human life and dignity is often frustrated by partisan pressures, ideological straightjackets, and political business as usual.

I address this topic with a personal prejudice. I am a product of a "mixed marriage." Both of my parents were Minnesota Catholics, but my mother was from St. Paul and my father from Minneapolis. Of more relevance, my mother was a committed Republican and my dad is a die-hard Democrat. I learned at an early age that people of strong faith and moral conviction could work for human life and dignity in different ways within our democracy.

I am not an academic, an attorney, or policy maker. My comments reflect my experience of helping the Catholic bishops share and apply the Church's teaching on human life and dignity, justice and peace. In these reflections, I draw heavily on statements of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (especially *Faithful Citizenship*¹) and Vatican documents (especially *Evangelium Vitae*² and the *Doctrinal Note on some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*³). However, the analysis and judgments expressed here are my own personal views and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Conference. Since the Conference has a task force dealing with the relationship of bishops and Catholic politicians, I am not addressing those matters or the recent controversies surrounding them.

In these modest reflections, I hope to contribute to this dialogue with

1. **a look back** at the consistent life ethic: what it is and is not;
2. **a look around** at the context for the consistent life ethic: What are "pro-life progressives" up against? What are signs of good news and bad news?;

1. U.S. Conf. Catholic Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, <http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/faithfulcitizenship03.pdf> (2003) [hereinafter *Faithful Citizenship*].

2. Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html (Mar. 25, 1995) [hereinafter *Evangelium Vitae*].

3. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html (Nov. 24, 2002).

3. **a look ahead** at some dangers and directions, some temptations, and some opportunities for a “progressive pro-life agenda.”

II. A LOOK BACK

More than two decades ago, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin first outlined “the consistent life ethic” at a lecture at Fordham University.⁴ Over the next three years, he gave ten lectures on the topic.⁵ This initiative was shaped by his experience as chairman of the USCCB Pro-Life Committee and the committee that developed the bishops’ pastoral letter on war and peace. It was also influenced by his service as general secretary and president of the Conference, his responsibilities as archbishop of Chicago, and ultimately his experience as a person dying of cancer.

A. *Old and New*

The idea was, in his words,

“both old and new. It is ‘old’ in the sense that its substance has been around for years. For example, in a single sentence the Second Vatican Council condemned murder, abortion, euthanasia, suicide, mutilation, torture, subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, and disgraceful working conditions.”⁶

This “old” idea is anchored in the scriptures. In Deuteronomy, we hear the call to “choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live. . . .”⁷ Jesus came so that “they might have life and have it more abundantly.”⁸ Jesus’ parable of the Last Judgments points out we would be judged by our response to the “least” of these.⁹ In the Beatitudes, we learn that the Kingdom of God belongs to those “who hunger and thirst for righteousness” and act as “peacemakers.”¹⁰

The consistent life ethic was *new* in that it directly linked, in a public and explicit way, different threats to human life and called for common Catholic commitment and action to defend human life from conception to

4. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Gannon Lecture, *A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American-Catholic Dialogue* (Fordham U., Dec. 6, 1983), in Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life* 1-11 (Thomas G. Fuechtmann ed., Sheed & Ward 1988).

5. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life* (Thomas G. Fuechtmann ed., Sheed & Ward 1988).

6. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Address, *The Consistent Ethic of Life* (Melbourne, Australia, Feb. 23, 1995), <http://archives.archchicago.org/JCBpdfs/JCBatconsistentethicaustralia.pdf>.

7. Deuteronomy 30:19-20 (New Am. Stand.).

8. John 10:10 (New Am. Stand.).

9. Matthew 25:40 (New Am. Stand.).

10. Matthew 5:3-12 (New Am. Stand.).

natural death, from “womb to tomb.”¹¹ These themes are also “new” as today’s headlines. I point to the surprise and disappointment of some and the satisfaction of others that “moral values” were a key factor in the recent national elections. Despite, in my view, a rather dismal campaign, many voters focused on issues of life and death and war and peace.

B. *Used and Misused*

Cardinal Bernardin’s initial call generated both support and controversy. Supporters welcomed this common moral framework and the call for Catholics to work together to defend life in a society losing respect for human life. Critics suggested Bernardin had embraced a kind of moral equivalence, making no ethical distinctions and insisting that everyone work on every issue of human life and dignity. Cardinal Bernardin sought to reassure his critics, outlining clear distinctions between issues with different levels of ethical gravity and moral demands, but still calling for connections and collaboration.¹²

Cardinal Bernardin put it this way in St. Louis in 1984: “Does this mean that everyone must do everything? No! There are limits, time, energy and competency. There is a shape to every individual vocation. People must specialize, groups must focus their energies.”¹³

As the discussion continued the Cardinal seemed to suggest the consistent life ethic had been both used and misused. He pointed out,

The concept itself is a complex and challenging one. It requires us to broaden, substantively and creatively, our ways of thinking, our attitudes, our pastoral response. Many are not accustomed to thinking about all the life-threatening and life-diminishing issues with such consistency. The result is that they remain somewhat selective in their response. Although some of those who oppose the concept seem not to have understood it, I sometimes suspect that many who oppose it recognize its challenge. Quite frankly, I sometimes wonder whether those who embrace it quickly and whole-heartedly truly understand all its implications.¹⁴

C. *The USCCB and the Vatican*

Over time, the consistent life ethic was accepted and promoted by the United States bishops in differing ways, in the 1985 *Pastoral Plan for Pro-*

11. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Lecture, *A Consistent Ethic of Life: Continuing the Dialogue* (St. Louis U., Mar. 11, 1984), in Bernardin, *supra* n. 5, at 15.

12. *Id.* at 13.

13. Bernardin, Address (Seattle U., Mar. 2, 1986), in Bernardin, *supra* n. 5, at 83.

14. Bernardin, *supra* n. 6.

Life Activities,¹⁵ in Political Responsibility statements, and in *Faithful Citizenship*¹⁶ and *Living the Gospel of Life*.¹⁷ Representative excerpts provide:

We hope that voters will examine the position of candidates on the full range of issues as well as on their personal integrity, philosophy, and performance. We are convinced that a *consistent ethic of life* should be the moral framework from which to address issues in the political arena.¹⁸

Opposition to abortion and euthanasia does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care. Therefore, Catholics should eagerly involve themselves as advocates for the weak and marginalized in all these areas. *Catholic public officials are obliged to address each of these issues as they seek to build consistent policies which promote respect for the human person at all stages of life. But being "right" in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life.* Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the "rightness" of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community.¹⁹

The Pastoral Plan is set in the context of a *consistent ethic* that links concern for the unborn with concern for all human life. The inviolability of innocent human life is a fundamental norm.²⁰

This sweeping vision of respect for all human life has also been articulated, clarified, and extended in John Paul II's landmark encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life).²¹ He has clearly carried it out in his quarter century of teaching and leadership in confronting a "culture of death" and building a "culture of life."²² He became the world's foremost opponent of the evil of abortion, the moral dangers of euthanasia, and the misuse of science to destroy life. He was an effective champion of human freedom, helping to bring down the oppression of communism and warning

15. U.S. Conf. Catholic Bishops, *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life*, <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/pastoralplan.htm> (2001) [hereinafter *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities*].

16. *Faithful Citizenship*, *supra* n. 1.

17. U.S. Conf. Catholic Bishops, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/gospel.htm> (1998) [hereinafter *Living the Gospel of Life*].

18. *Faithful Citizenship*, *supra* n. 1, at 7 (emphasis added).

19. *Living the Gospel of Life*, *supra* n. 17, at ¶ 23 (first emphasis added, second emphasis in original).

20. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Address, *Consistent Ethic of Life Conference* (Portland, Or., Oct. 4, 1986), in Bernardin, *supra* n. 5, at 87.

21. *Evangelium Vitae*, *supra* n. 2.

22. *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities*, *supra* n. 15.

against the human and moral costs of unrestrained capitalism. He strongly advanced and articulated the Church's call to end the use of the death penalty. To the very end of his papacy, he prayed and worked for peace—challenging leaders to find alternatives to war and journeying to the Holy Land to seek both justice and peace.

D. From Seamless Garment to Consistent Life Ethic and Culture of Life

Cardinal Bernardin moved away from the metaphor of the “seamless garment.” He and the U.S. bishops used the term “consistent life ethic” rather than “seamless garment.” The U.S. bishops in 1994 released a statement titled, *Confronting a Culture of Violence*.²³ In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II condemned “the culture of death” and made the building of a “culture of life” a centerpiece of his teaching and leadership.²⁴

In my own view, the so-called “seamless garment” is neither. The consistent life ethic is not “seamless” in weaving all life issues into a single fabric of moral analysis and public action. It brings together different issues of human life involving different moral principles, ethical requirements, and moral claims. Clearly, the direct and intentional taking of innocent, unborn life through abortion is not the same, morally, as the death of a child from hunger in Africa. The targeting and killing of civilians in war or terror campaigns raises different moral questions than high rates of infant mortality resulting from lack of health care. However, for consistent life advocates, this ethic insists that *all* these lives require our respect, protection, and action. Respect for the life and dignity of every person, a foundation of Catholic social teaching, unites us in efforts to defend life whenever and however it is threatened.

This consistent ethic of life is also not a one-size-fits-all “garment,” a huge cloak of moral analysis and reasoning to be cast over all of public life and every policy choice. Rather, it offers a moral framework, and a way of thinking, analyzing issues, and acting with coherence and consistency on related but distinctive threats to life and human dignity.

Rightfully understood, the consistent life ethic is not a moral menu, an issue scorecard, a political tactic, or excuse for failing to act to protect some human lives. It does not make all issues equal. *Faithful Citizenship* points out that “[a]bortion and euthanasia are preeminent threats to human life and dignity because they directly attack life itself.”²⁵ The consistent ethic of life begins with direct attacks on life, but it does not end there. It insists that every life is sacred. It does defend all life and every life, from conception to natural death. It should not be a partisan slogan or ideological sound

23. U.S. Conf. Catholic Bishops, *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action*, <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/criminal/ccv94.htm> (1994).

24. *Evangelium Vitae*, *supra* n. 2, at ¶¶ 87, 95.

25. *Faithful Citizenship*, *supra* n. 1, at 10.

bite, but an expression of what we believe and how we act as a community of faith committed to the sanctity of life.

At the center of the Church's moral and social teaching is the life and dignity of the human person. This has been the centerpiece of Pope John Paul II's quarter century of leadership. "Human Life and Dignity" is the first principle outlined by the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference in its summary of Catholic social teaching.²⁶

In the bishops' formulation—"Human Life *and* Dignity"—life clearly comes first. It is fundamental. Without life, nothing else is possible. "And Dignity" suggests life is directly linked to dignity. Without dignity, life is not truly human. Attempts to divide life and dignity should be resisted. Abortion and euthanasia involve the direct destruction of innocent human life. They are intrinsically wrong and cannot be defended. At the same time, dignity is not something we earn by our good behavior. It is something we have as children of God. Therefore, those things which make life truly human—faith and family, work and education, a decent place to live, enough to eat, and access to health care—are not luxuries or optional benefits, but human rights integrally linked to the right to life itself.

III. A LOOK AROUND

The pursuit of "pro-life progressivism" in the title of this gathering takes place in a complicated political and ecclesial context. The Second Vatican Council speaks of the "signs of the times."²⁷ I suggest a different metaphor: white-water rafting. We are being pushed along by some powerful "currents"—ecclesial, national, economic, global, cultural, and political. And there are a lot of "rocks" along the way. We need to know the currents and the rocks to get to our destination: a society more respectful of human life and dignity, a culture of life.

Ecclesial: Part of the ecclesial context is a Church under challenge. The clerical sexual abuse scandal undermines trust and credibility, raises issues of accountability and transparency, and requires an unprecedented and ongoing response. The bishops I work for are struggling to get this "right" and rebuild trust. But new policies and structures, while necessary, are not a complete response. An essential way forward is a renewed commitment to mission. This is a time to focus on the Church's mission—not just survival, maintenance, or management. Church leaders have to remind people we are more than our institutional mistakes. We are a community of faith that every day proclaims the Gospel, defends life, feeds the hungry, shelters the homeless, cares for the sick, and educates the young. The

26. U.S. Conf. Catholic Bishops, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*, <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/socialteaching.htm> (1998).

27. Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes* ¶ 4, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (Dec. 7, 1965).

Church in the United States must be not only a “safe” place for young people; it must be a community acting effectively on its mission to defend human life and dignity every day.

National: Our nation is facing fundamental questions of life and death. We are at war—a war where many of the fears and concerns voiced by Pope John Paul II and the U.S. Bishops’ Conference have been sadly realized. The Congress and courts are debating and deciding fundamental issues about the beginning and end of life as well as the moral limits of research and commerce (e.g., embryonic stem cell, cloning, etc.). Thirty years after *Roe v. Wade*,²⁸ the battle over legalized abortion on demand continues, kept alive by remarkable and persistent efforts against daunting elite opinion and power.

Economic: Our powerful economy in some ways pushes us forward and in other ways pulls us apart. Some Americans are moving ahead, seizing the opportunities of globalization with great personal and organizational rewards. Others are left behind struggling for life and dignity without decent work, wages, or health care. The hungry and homeless, those without the right education or skills, without the support of family or community, are often left behind. For the poorest people on earth economic issues are matters of life and death, contributing to hunger, disease, and despair.

Global: The international context starts with a broken and still violent world where many parents cannot feed their children; others are at risk because of their faith, tribe, or nationality; and so many are caught up in deadly violence and war. Millions of lives are destroyed or undermined by desperate poverty, corruption, disease, crushing debt, and a lack of authentic development. The estimated 30,000 people who die every day from hunger and its consequences have an inescapable moral claim on those who seek to defend life.

Cultural: A “culture of violence”²⁹ is a sad part of our context. Our society is trying to remedy difficult problems with violence. We live in a nation where more than a million unborn children are destroyed every year. We are part of a society where euthanasia and assisted suicide are advocated as remedies for age and illness. We are citizens of a country that relies on the death penalty to confront crime. And we are part of a nation increasingly resorting to military force to address international threats and disputes. Our bishops have suggested that a nation that destroys its young, abandons its old, and relies on vengeance and violence is in fundamental moral trouble.³⁰ These are signs of the “culture of death” that Pope John Paul II called us to resist.

28. 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

29. U.S. Conf. Catholic Bishops, *supra* n. 23.

30. *Id.*

Political: The *political context* is both complicated and contradictory. I believe there are some promising signs. Questions about “religion and politics” are now highly visible and much debated in public life. Pollsters tell us “moral values” motivated and shaped the choices of many voters in the last election. Catholics are widely seen as a swing group of voters to be addressed and convinced. My own experience in many dioceses last fall, despite the simplistic headlines, was that many of us are wrestling with new seriousness over what it means to be both Catholic and American, a believer and a voter in this powerful democracy.

There are also disturbing signs. Much of the discussion of religion and politics is shrill and shallow—more about scoring partisan points than living one’s faith in public life. The discussion of “moral values” is often superficial—defining morality by a few vital concerns while ignoring other matters of great ethical significance. The discussion of the “Catholic vote” is often misinformed, ignoring the ethnic, ideological and political diversity within the Catholic community. My suspicion is that people who talk about “*the Catholic vote*” probably don’t know many Catholics. There is no Catholic monolith of voters to be delivered. Church attendance, ethnicity, economic status, party allegiance, union membership, and moral convictions about life, family, justice, and peace all shape Catholic attitudes and political action.

The poor and vulnerable seemed to be missing in the campaign. The bully pulpit was mostly invisible when it came to unborn children and poor families. Code words, targeted mailings, and attack ads often took the place of debate and discussion. After the campaign, it’s worthwhile reminding people that there’s more to being a Catholic than having been an “altar boy.” Our faith is not “private.” Abortion is not simply a “choice.” I believe a “progressive” agenda begins with caring for the weak, and the unborn child is the weakest in our midst. It’s also useful to suggest that the “culture of life” is much more than signing the partial-birth abortion ban. It is also about health care for pregnant mothers, it is about hunger at home and abroad, about war and peace, about no longer trying to teach that killing is wrong by killing.

Speaking personally, I find so much of politics shaped by different kinds of rampant individualism. For many Democrats and those on the cultural left, a kind of lifestyle individualism elevates personal identity and autonomy above all else, making “choice” an ultimate criteria for public life. For many Republicans and some on the economic right, a kind of free-market individualism dominates, insisting the market solves all problems and winners and losers are simply inevitable. Both these directions neglect a sense of the common good and have very little room for a priority for the poor and vulnerable. Maximizing “choice” and exclusive reliance on the unfettered workings of the market come from different ends of the political spectrum, but they can come together in a utilitarian ethic that can under-

mine human life and dignity as well as values of family, community, and sacrifice.

For many Democrats, you can disagree on the war, on trade, on many other issues, but if you believe *Roe v. Wade* was wrongly decided or unlimited abortion on demand is wrong, you are outside the “mainstream” and you are an “extremist,” unfit to represent the Democratic Party or, more significantly, serve on the Supreme Court.

For some Republicans, who talk about “compassionate conservatism,” often conservatism trumps compassion. The cost of the war and tax cuts overwhelm other needs. The rhetoric on overcoming poverty at home is often not matched by resources.

Sadly, and speaking personally, I fear that the intense polarization in public life may be finding its way into ecclesial life. The *New York Times* last November described “a battle between pro-life and social justice groups” within our Church. Newspaper ads and blogs attacking bishops and others who do not share a particular view are signs of a strategy of division—separating “us” and “them,” good and evil within our community of faith. Respect, civility, and complexity are often lost in the battle of the moment. Some bishops are called “partisan” when they teach clearly and conscientiously on the life of the unborn. Others are called “soft” or “unfaithful” when they talk of other threats to human life and dignity. Division may help raise money and get attention, but it does not build up the Body of Christ. All of us need to ask: “Does our faith shape our politics or is it the other way around?”

In the face of this context, I echo the challenge Rev. Jim Wallis has outlined. When so many of our leaders and people have their finger to the wind, we need to “change the wind.”

How do you change the wind on issues of human life and dignity? Where do you go? I believe you come to places like this law school and this university. These institutions and our community of faith have assets that can help “change the wind.” Among those assets are

- moral principles: a consistent ethical framework and distinctive way of looking at the world and its challenges;
- everyday experience: reaching out to pregnant women and children, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick and vulnerable, etc.;
- institutions and structures: universities and law schools, parishes and schools, state Catholic conferences, Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services, etc.;
- leaders: Pope John Paul II, the bishops of Minnesota, those who have led this struggle for life and dignity through the years; and
- people: students, professors, parishioners, allies, the people gathered here today.

A community organizer once told me, “if you got your act together, you would be dangerous.” That’s what this day is about: How do we get our act together? How can we really be “dangerous” in confronting a lack of respect for human life and dignity?

IV. A LOOK AHEAD

In his addresses on the consistent life ethic, Cardinal Bernardin said: “I propose the consistent ethic not as a finished product but a framework in need of development.”³¹ “A consistent ethic of life must be held by a constituency to be effective. The building of such a constituency is precisely the task before the Church and nation.”³² Two decades later, this remains the task and challenge. The scriptures say, “Without a vision, the people perish. . . .”³³ It is also true that without a people, the vision can be invisible. Clearly, there can be no future for “pro-life progressivism” without pro-life progressives—principled, organized, and engaged in public life.

A. *Some Directions and Dangers*

Build Bridges: As defenders of human life and dignity, we’re in this together. We should be bridge-builders between issues and constituencies. We can divide up the work, but we should not divide up the Church. As John Paul II said, we should be “people of life and for life.”³⁴ There are different roles for academics and advocates, professors and pastors, policy-makers and citizens. There are differing tasks and priorities. There are diverse forums—classrooms and hearing rooms, law reviews and parish bulletins. However, we should not act as competing factions or interest groups, but members of one family of faith working toward the common goal of a culture of life.

Anchor in Faith and Express in Worship: The defense of human life and dignity is a work of faith, not a political platform or ideological agenda. Worship and work for life and dignity should enrich and shape each other. Prayer is not just a way to open a meeting. It should remind us who calls us to this work and why we pursue it.

Integrate, Don't Isolate this Work: The defense of human life and dignity is not another “program.” This is not the topic for one conference or one class. This is not the work for a couple professors and a few students who “like that sort of thing.” The commitment to human life and dignity cannot just be the work of a few activists or advocates, but must be the task of this entire community of faith and learning. It needs to be integrated into every aspect of this law school—teaching and research, curriculum and

31. Bernardin, *supra* n. 13, at 84.

32. Bernardin, *supra* n. 4, at 9.

33. Proverbs 29:18 (New Am. Stand.).

34. *Evangelium Vitae*, *supra* n. 2, at ¶¶ 6, 78, 101, 105.

governance, faculty selection and evaluation, awards and honors, and service and forums.

Share "the Secret": This message of human life and dignity and the themes of Catholic social teaching have been called our "best kept secret." There should be no excuse for it remaining a secret. These principles need to be shared and applied every day. This tradition is not a set of pious platitudes or abstract generalities. It has intellectual substance, moral content, academic relevance. This requires more than encouraging service, as necessary and good as that is. Catholic social teaching can offer an ethical framework for learning, research, reflection, analysis, and action for this law school and the larger community. No student of this law school, given its mission, should leave without understanding our commitment to human life and dignity and knowing these principles.

Support the "Salt of the Earth": The defense of human life and dignity is the work of the whole community, not primarily the hierarchy. The leaders of the Church have their own responsibilities to share, apply, and act on this tradition, to preach and teach, to encourage and support. But, it is essentially the task of laywomen and men to learn, understand, and put these principles into practice. This is advanced not only by extraordinary acts of witness or service, but also by ordinary choices and commitments. The way most people advance this "agenda" is in our families and homes, in our work and profession, and in the tasks of citizen and neighbor. This law school has unique opportunities to encourage and prepare future lawyers to better integrate their knowledge and professional skills with the defense of human life and dignity.

Link Service and Action: This law school and this university have encouraged a practice and ethic of service. It's expected and sometimes required. The inter-disciplinary approach here at St. Thomas can move students not only to continue service of the vulnerable, but also to become skilled advocates for human life and dignity in the courts, the legislative arena, and the public square.

More than Elections: Politics is obviously more than an election every two or four years. In the current context, the consistent life ethic can leave many uncomfortable with the choices we face at election time. Some feel "politically homeless"—not comfortable or welcome in one party because of commitment to defense of the unborn and not fully comfortable in another party because of concerns about the war or the poor. There is a temptation to withdraw or retreat in frustration or cynicism. However, defenders of human life and dignity need to get more, not less, involved—running for office, supporting and working for others who share our values, working within electoral structures.

In addition, much can be done away from the stress and storms of electoral politics. We can work together across party and issue lines for policies that protect all human life and dignity. The archdiocesan "Voices

for Justice” legislative network, grassroots community organizations, Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life, Bread for the World, Feminists for Life, and other groups provide vehicles in good times and bad to stand up for life and dignity. Outside of partisan politics, people can unite in common advocacy and challenge those who represent us, whatever their party, to defend life and dignity on a consistent basis.

Change the Culture: We need to change the culture—the way our society thinks about human life. We need to persuade, not just proclaim. I am personally convinced we will not prevail on abortion and euthanasia, we will not make progress on the death penalty or embryonic stem cells, we will not reshape the debate on war and peace, until we address together the lack of underlying respect for human life in our culture. When human beings are regarded as things, as collateral damage, as burdens on parents or society, then we should not be surprised the defense of life is “politically incorrect” or the work of “extremists.”

Advocates of a “progressive pro-life agenda” must be in the forefront of those seeking to build a culture of life. We need to help build the new kind of public life called for by the U.S. bishops, with politics focused

- more on moral principles than the latest polls;
- more on the needs of the weak than the contributions of the strong; and
- more on the search for the common good than the demands of powerful interests.³⁵

The Danger of Moral Equivalence and Dividing Life and Dignity: Some advocates (and some partisans) make no ethical distinctions between different issues of life and dignity. They seem to suggest that more than a million abortions a year has the same moral significance as cuts in the appropriations for the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) feeding program. The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life is always wrong. Abortion, euthanasia, and intentional targeting of civilians in warfare are intrinsically evil. They cannot be ignored or dismissed as just another issue. On the other hand, some dismiss or ignore other essential moral issues that are at the center of Catholic teaching such as war and peace, family life, economic justice, and the rights of workers. While these matters often require prudential judgments on how best to apply Catholic teaching, this reality does not render them unimportant or non-essential.

There are two dangers. One is to minimize abortion or euthanasia as just another issue among many others. The other is to dismiss as morally irrelevant other issues of life and dignity that have serious claims on the consciences of believers.

These distinctions are played out in many ways. Some speak of “non-negotiables”—abortion, euthanasia, the definition of marriage, cloning, and

35. *Faithful Citizenship*, *supra* n. 1.

embryonic stem cell research. I believe the language of “non-negotiables” is unfortunate. It comes across as more political than moral. These matters clearly are fundamental in Catholic teaching, but they do not exhaust the moral obligations of Catholics. As the Vatican “Doctrinal Note on Catholics in Public Life,” released by Cardinal Ratzinger, points out:

A well formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals. The Christian faith is an integral unity and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church’s social doctrine does not exhaust one’s responsibility towards the common good.³⁶

No Catholic can ignore the biblical calls to “choose life,”³⁷ care for “the least of these,”³⁸ to hunger and thirst for justice,³⁹ and to become peacemakers.⁴⁰ No Catholic can set aside major dimensions of the Church’s moral and social teaching for partisan or ideological purposes. Defending human life *and* human dignity is “non-negotiable” for Catholics who take their faith seriously.

The Danger of Self-Righteousness: Confidence in strong convictions and moral principles can lead to arrogance and self-righteousness. It is important to resist the temptation to assume the worst, judge harshly, and even demonize those who do not share our convictions.

The Danger of Selective Orthodoxy: In my own experience in Washington, I often encounter people who support the bishops’ strong and clear defense of unborn children as prophetic leadership, but see moral questions on the war or opposition to the use of the death penalty as just “politics.” Others welcome the Church’s advocacy on human rights, peace, and economic justice, but ask when will the Church get over the “obsession” with abortion. Consistency can require courage and resisting the temptation to shape our principles to fit our political preferences or gain the acceptance of others.

The bishops’ *Faithful Citizenship* statement offers some other additional directions and dangers:

Political, Not Partisan: The new focus on religion and politics can be manipulated in cynical and partisan ways. It can be used to re-package the same old program of right and left. New words can mask old policies. Speaking personally, I sometimes find the “religious right” more right than religious. Where is the “least of these” in their agenda? I also wonder

36. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *supra* n. 3.

37. Deuteronomy 30:19 (New Am. Stand.).

38. Matthew 25:45 (New Am. Stand.).

39. Matthew 5:6 (New Am. Stand.).

40. Matthew 5:9 (New Am. Stand.).

about what I call “politically correct Christians” who will defend the eggs of endangered species, but not the lives of unborn children. There is a danger these days in being co-opted for partisan purposes, sounding like the Democratic Party at prayer or the religious caucus of the Republican Party.

The Church cannot be cheerleader for any particular candidate, chaplain for any party, or apologist for any administration. We need, in the words of our bishops, to strive to become a “community of conscience” which measures ourselves and “all candidates, policies, parties, 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.”⁴¹

Principled, Not Ideological: This ethic calls for the defense of life and dignity whenever it is threatened. This is fundamental and can’t be bargained away. But how life is best protected, how dignity can be best advanced in particular circumstances is often a matter of strategy, tactics, and judgment. There are several issues, but one message—the moral measure of policies is whether they protect or threaten human life, promote or undermine human dignity.

Civil, Not Soft: A community which calls for justice and charity in public policy should practice them in public life. This is a time for persuasion, not just proclamation. Civility and respect are not signs of weakness, but contributions to constructive dialogue. No position is advanced by impugning motives or calling names. Calling people “war criminals” or “baby killers” is probably not the best way to persuade. Relationships often matter more than press releases or lectures.

Engaged, Not Used: Photo-ops are no substitute for advocacy for policies that respect human life and dignity. Our institutions, forums, awards, and invitations should help us make *our* case for life and dignity, not serve as a platform for others to make their case. The new interest in faith-based institutions should offer new and better opportunities to share this mission and message.

V. CONCLUSION: A MODEL AND A TASK

Pope John Paul II is clearly approaching the end of his life and his leadership. Many are offering words of praise and admiration. For thirty years, he has been a model of principled engagement in defense of human life and dignity. We do not have his enormous gifts and responsibilities or his worldwide stage, but each of us has to find our own ways to stand up for human life and dignity. All the world knew where he stood on life and dignity, on war and peace. We saw him in Poland with Solidarity, in South Africa speaking against apartheid, at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem praying for peace and calling the world’s leaders to step back from the brink of war.

41. *Faithful Citizenship*, *supra* n. 1.

In our country, we remember him on the Mall in Washington insisting the measure of our nation is how we protect unborn life, at Yankee Stadium pleading for the poor of the world, in St. Louis calling us to be “unconditionally pro-life” as he asked us to join him in ending the use of the death penalty. He reached out to all, met with the faithful and the controversial, challenged saints and sinners. Our modest contribution to his legacy should be for each of us in our own small ways to follow his powerful example of defending human life and dignity persistently, courageously, and consistently.

This task is not new. This impressive gathering addresses an old and timeless task: “I have set before you life and death Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.”⁴²

42. Deuteronomy 30:19 (New Am. Stand.).