



What's What

A weekly communication that provides an opportunity for our faith community to grow together in faith.

Consistent Ethic of Life — Part I

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What is the consistent ethic of life? It is a comprehensive ethical system that links together many different issues by focusing attention on the basic value of life. In his attempts to defend life, Cardinal Bernardin first joined the topics of abortion and nuclear war in the early 1980s. He quickly expanded his understanding of a consistent ethic of life to include many issues from all of life. Already in the first of a series of talks, this one at Fordham University, Cardinal Bernardin stated: "The spectrum of life cuts across the issues of genetics, abortion, capital punishment, modern warfare and the care of the terminally ill."

Cardinal Bernardin also acknowledged that issues are distinct and different. Capital punishment, for example, is not the same as abortion. Nevertheless, the issues are linked. The valuing and defense of life are at the center of both issues. Cardinal Bernardin told an audience in Portland, Oregon: "When human life is considered 'cheap' or easily expendable in one area, eventually nothing is held as sacred and all lives are in jeopardy."

Along with his consistent linking of distinct life issues, Cardinal Bernardin acknowledged that no individual or group can pursue all issues. Still, while concentrating on one issue, he insisted in another address, the individual or group must not be seen "as insensitive to or even opposed to other moral claims on the overall spectrum of life."

The consistent ethic of life rules out contradictory moral positions about the unique value of human life—and it would be contradictory, for example, to be against abortion but for capital punishment or to work against poverty but support euthanasia.

This linkage of all life issues is, of course, the very heart of the consistent ethic of life. This linking challenges us to pull together things that we might have kept apart in the past. Often our convictions seem to cluster around 'conservative' or 'liberal' viewpoints—as in the above examples. But the consistent ethic of life cuts across such divisions, calling us to respect the life in the womb, the life of a criminal, the life on welfare, the life of the dying.

Where does the consistent ethic of life come from? It comes largely from the insights of Cardinal Bernardin, the teachings of the U.S. Catholic bishops and, most recently and significantly, John Paul II's encyclical *The Gospel of Life*. The ultimate source, however, is the Bible, especially the life and teaching of Jesus.

Cardinal Bernardin spent much time and energy on two issues: abortion and nuclear war. He found committed people concerned about one issue but not the other. As he worked to bring together those seeking an end to abortion and those trying to prevent nuclear war, Cardinal

Bernardin began to emphasize the common link among the life issues. This emphasis has been continued in the teachings of the U.S. bishops.

Pope John Paul II's encyclical *The Gospel of Life* is a bold and prophetic defense of life. Although it does not use the phrase, *The Gospel of Life* strongly affirms the consistent ethic of life. John Paul describes what is going on in our world today: a monumental abuse of life through drugs, war and arms, abortion, euthanasia, destruction of the environment, unjust distribution of resources. This abuse is often caused and supported by the economic, social and political structures of the nations. So the pope speaks of a "structure of sin" and a "culture of death" and a "conspiracy against life" (#12).

The pope also proclaims the Christian understanding of the value of life. Created in God's image, redeemed by Jesus, called to everlasting life, every human being is sacred and social; every human being is a sign of God's love. In much more detail than Cardinal Bernardin's addresses, the pope provides the foundation for building a culture of life by weaving together a wealth of biblical texts which clearly proclaim human dignity.

The consistent ethic of life is ultimately rooted in Jesus, in whom the meaning and value of life are definitively proclaimed and fully given. In

John Paul II's words, "The gospel of life is not simply a reflection, however new and profound, on human life. Nor is it merely a commandment aimed at raising awareness and bringing about significant changes in society. Still less is it an illusory promise of a better future. The gospel of life is something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of the very person of Jesus" (#29).

Who is this Jesus? He is Jesus who was sensitive to the vulnerable at all stages and from every walk of life. In being so, he often was at odds with society's standards, associating with religious and social outcasts. This is the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount who proclaims as blessed not the leaders of society but the mourning and the meek, the poor and the pure, the persecuted and the peacemaker (Mt 5:1-12).

This is the Jesus who praises not power but reconciliation in the story about the forgiving father of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32). This is the Jesus of faithful ministry, of suffering and death, of new life (Mk 14:3—16:8). This is the Jesus who says, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). Who Jesus is and what Jesus means by abundant life, then, are surely different from what the consumerism and individualism of our culture tell us about life.

*by Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J.,
"A Consistent Ethic of Life",
St Anthony's Messenger*



Saint of the Day: St. Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620-1700)

On Monday, January 12, the Church remembers St Marguerite Bourgeoys .

Marguerite had survived many threats in the twenty-six years she had been in wilderness of Canada. She had lived through Iroquois attacks, a fire that destroyed her small village, plagues on the ships that she took back and forth to France, but nothing threatened her dreams and hopes more than what her own bishop said to her in 1679. He told her that she had to join her Congregation of Notre Dame with its teaching sisters to a cloistered religious order of Ursulines. This was not the first time she'd heard this command. Whether from a misplaced desire to protect her Sisters or from discomfort in dealing with an active religious order of women, bishops had long wanted to fit her into the usual mold of cloistered orders.

But Marguerite had overcome many challenges to get to this day and was not deterred. In her own native France, she had belonged to a sodality of women who cared for the sick.

The stories of hardships and dangers in Montreal that made other people shiver had awakened a call from God in her to serve the Native Americans and settlers who endured this adversity. She met with the governor of what was then called Ville Marie and convinced him she was the person he was looking for to help start a school for the children of Montreal.

When she arrived in Ville Marie, as it was called then, she found that few children survived to school age. She helped the remarkable Jeanne Mance, who ran the hospital, to change this tragedy. When she finally had children to teach, she had to set up school in a stable.

So she was not ready to surrender to the bishop. There was too much at stake. She reminded him that the Ursulines because they were cloistered could not go out and teach, as her Sisters had done. The poor and uneducated would not and could not travel to a Quebec cloister over miles of frontier

at the risk of their lives.

But her Sisters were more than willing to live in huts in order to fulfill their call from God. She had set up schools all over the territory, not just for children. When the king, in well-meaning ignorance, had sent untrained orphans over to be colonists she had set up a school for the women to teach them how to survive and thrive in Canada.

How could they do the work for God that they had done so well in a cloister?

The bishop replied, "I cannot doubt, Mother Bourgeoys, that you will succeed in moving heaven and earth as you have moved me!" The Congregation remained an active teaching order, one of the very first of its kind for women. Their rule had to go through one more attempt at turning them into a cloister but Marguerite lived to see the triumph when their Rule was made official in 1698. She was canonized in 1982 by Pope John Paul II..

From <http://www.catholic.org/saints>



The Consistent Life Ethic (CLE) is the underlying principle of our faith that urges us to affirm life from the moment of conception to natural death, in attitude as well as action. Most urgently, the Consistent Life Ethic calls us to protect life that is threatened by forces we oppose: abortion, the death penalty, economic injustice, euthanasia, violence and war.

The Consistent Life Ethic calls us to build a culture that affirms and defends life from conception to death through education, personal service and public advocacy. Roman Catholics will treat all people with dignity and respect because, as a gift from God, all life is sacred. We will defend all people, especially powerless and marginalized people who are threatened by forces we oppose: abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, economic injustice, violence and war. As we pursue this goal in the New Millennium, the Church of Rochester will be a community of faithful disciples of Jesus Christ who have heard Jesus' call to love and have acted on it.

*From the Diocese of Rochester, Consistent Life Ethic Website
<http://www.dor.org/Charities/cle/consistentlifeethic.htm>*

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"What's What" is a publication of the Youth Ministry Department of St Mary, Canandaigua, and St Bridget, Bloomfield.

Our Youth Ministry Mission Statement:

Building on the mission of our parishes to follow the way of Christ in our thoughts, words, and deeds, and to make Christ more fully present in all who live within our community, the Youth Ministry mission is to empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today; to affirm the gifts of our youth and provide opportunities for young people to share their gifts with the larger community; and to meet the religious, spiritual and social needs of all youth with the committed leadership, guidance and support of our parish family, providing an opportunity for our entire faith community to grow together in Christian faith.