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focus

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Promoting a Respect for Life

"We are called to create a society capable of recognizing the dignity of every person and sharing the gift that each person is to the other."

Pope Francis, Address to Augustinian Recollects, 10/20/16

From a baby's conception through their first heartbeat, from a child's initial breaths through a person's last moments on Earth, life has value. Some lives last a few brief moments; others stretch long into old age, but each is a gift because it was made in God's image. As a result, all people have inherent dignity and deserve respect.

Unfortunately, society places limitations on how individuals should be treated, based on their perceived value. Pope Francis calls these limitations the "throwaway culture," a culture that discards individuals when they are no longer deemed to be living lives of usefulness. This happens too often; whether it is an unborn child diagnosed with a disability, a prisoner on death row, an elderly person that cannot live independently, or an individual fighting terminal illness. The throwaway culture believes everything can be disposed of or replaced. The Catholic Church's message of love, however, challenges this notion. At the Last Supper, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment: "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (*John 13:34*). This message is central to the faith, calling all to respect one another as people loved by God.

The Catholic Church teaches abortion is not the answer to difficult circumstances. Assisted suicide, the death penalty, embryonic stem cell research, and gun violence do not solve societal problems. And treating human beings as

things to be used should never be a response. Instead, the Church challenges people of faith to serve and to walk with those in need. The Church encourages Catholics to hold the hands of these individuals and to affirm their value, from beginning to end, even when it becomes challenging. Embracing "encounter and acceptance" is the desired response, placing human beings at the center of all discussions, policies, and actions.¹

Joseph Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago coined the term "consistent ethic of life" in describing the Catholic Church's pro-life position during a 1983 lecture at Fordham University. Cardinal Bernadin emphasized that every life is sacred, and that "the taking of even one human life is a momentous event." A consistent ethic of life means preserving and enhancing life every step of the way. As part of this mentality, Catholics are encouraged to pray for the unborn, to promote adoption and alternatives to abortion, to call for end-of-life care that truly respects each patient, and to stand against threats that plague American society such as assisted suicide, the death penalty, embryonic stem cell research, and gun violence. A respect for life also motivates people of faith to serve the poor, to welcome refugees and immigrants, and to seek quality health care and education for all in the community. This **focus** highlights several critical respect life issues and encourages people of faith to examine the variety of ways they can promote human dignity. ■

Alternatives

to Abortion

For most parents, bringing a child into the world is a time of celebration and joy. Unfortunately, for others, the news of a pregnancy can be overwhelming and unexpected. To those facing challenging circumstances, abortion may seem like the only answer. According to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the state reported 26,395 induced abortions in 2016. The lives lost and the pain caused to individuals and families are significant. These children would have been brothers and sisters, moms and dads, friends and spouses, colleagues and neighbors. Catholics are called to reaffirm the value of all children and mothers. There is a need to accompany women through difficult situations, especially “where abortion appears as a quick solution to their profound anguish,” to help them see options that respect the life of their child.²

One such initiative is the Michigan Pregnancy and Parenting Support Services Program, administered by the Pennsylvania-based nonprofit Real Alternatives. After years of advocating for this program, Michigan Catholic Conference first saw funding included in the 2013–2014 state budget.



The program's goal is to promote childbirth and to provide alternatives to abortion for women in crisis pregnancies—in other words, accompanying women in need. These women gain confidence and skills and receive pregnancy counseling, prenatal health information, and parenting education. They also obtain material support, such as clothing, diapers, and formula for their child's first year of life. This program contributed to the decrease in state abortions by 2.8 percent from 2015. Currently, Real Alternatives is partnering with eight service providers in nineteen locations across Michigan. Since its inception, the program has helped almost 6,000 clients, from forty counties in the state, with approximately 20,000 client visits.³ The Michigan Pregnancy and Parenting Support Services program is the only state-funded program that specifically provides women in unexpected pregnancies with alternatives to abortion. Coupled with other efforts from pregnancy centers, maternity homes, and pro-life organizations, important work is happening to recognize the dignity of every mother and baby. ■

Post-Abortive

Counseling

In *Evangelium Vitae*, St. John Paul II recognized the decision to have an abortion is often “tragic and painful for the mother,” motivated by outside pressure, suffering, economic struggle, or depression and anxiety about the future. Trends over the past thirty years show higher percentages of women who have had two or more abortions, from 14.6 percent in 1985 to 23.0 percent in 2016.⁴ Supporting the physical and emotional healing of women along with pursuing efforts to eliminate abortion are critical priorities.

Project Rachel is a post-abortion healing ministry launched by the U.S. Catholic Church. Focused on individuals suffering emotional and spiritual pain, the ministry offers pastoral counseling, support groups, retreats, and referrals to licensed mental health professionals. Rachel's Vineyard, another critical ministry, includes weekend retreats for those who are hurting, which provides space and assistance to deal with a variety of painful emotions after abortion. Men are also encouraged to attend. Abortion has a strong impact on fathers—and indeed the whole family—not just mothers. Research about how abortion impacts relationships shows men are more likely to cope alone, to experience feelings of despair long after the abortion, and to experience chronic grief.⁵ ■

Legislative Successes

for Human Life

During his 2015 address to the U.S. Congress, Pope Francis reminded lawmakers of their responsibility “to protect and defend human life at every stage of development.” His charge, however, is not just for elected officials. Catholics, too, are called to live their faith in the public realm, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* instructs Catholics to “participate...according to [their] position and role, in promoting the common good” (*par. 1914*). Michigan has consistently adopted pro-life policies and, as such, is regarded as a strong pro-life state. Successes include bills requiring abortion clinics to be licensed and regulated, prohibiting taxpayer funding of abortion coverage in the state health care exchange, providing funding to promote alternatives to abortion, and banning partial-birth abortion, abortion coercion, and the sale of fetal tissue and parts from elective abortions. Legislative advocacy has also defeated past efforts to reinstate the death penalty and to legalize assisted suicide. At the same time, more work remains. All policies should be examined based on how they support or detract from the dignity of human life. Michigan Catholic Conference supports policies that:

- Provide and expand alternatives to abortion and assistance to pregnant women, including adoption.
- Limit abortion and promote the safety of women.

- Regulate research which violates the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of life.
- Seek to reduce violence in society, including gun violence.
- Uphold the constitutional ban on the death penalty and the statutory ban on assisted suicide.
- Expand and improve palliative care. ■

What Can You Do to Support Life?

- Volunteer at or donate to a local pregnancy help center or other organization that works to support pregnant women and their babies.
- Call **1-888-LifeAid** for free and confidential pregnancy/parenting support services.
- Pray for the unborn, especially during a campaign such as 40 Days for Life, which highlights the consequences of abortion through prayer, fasting, vigil, and outreach.
- Become an adoptive parent, or encourage others to become one.
- Promote ministries such as Project Rachel and Rachel's Vineyard, so those suffering after an abortion become aware of opportunities that offer hope and healing.
- Join Michigan Catholic Conference in advocating for measures that contribute to a culture of life and against those that threaten human dignity at www.micatholic.org/can/.
- Learn about end-of-life decisions. Fill out an advanced medical directive and select a durable power of attorney for healthcare decisions: <https://goo.gl/C7kn8W>. ■

1. “2014 Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees,” Pope Francis, <https://goo.gl/n72uf6> 2. *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, 2013, <https://goo.gl/hMzkiX> 3. “Characteristics of Induced Abortions Reported in Michigan, 1982–2016,” Michigan DHHS, <https://goo.gl/JijPWW> 4. “The Hollow Men’: Male Grief and Trauma Following Abortion,” Vincent Rue, Ph.D., <https://goo.gl/tGzySy> 5. “A Primer on Assisted Suicide Laws”, pg 23, Patients Rights Action Fund, 2017, <https://goo.gl/DmRWqX> 6. *Deadly Compassion*, Rita Marker, pgs 104–105

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