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### A Consistent Ethic of Life

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#### Recommended Citation

Based on the ancient scriptures and attentive to contemporary experiences, the consistent ethic of life provides a moral framework for confronting the many moral dilemmas of today's world. It helps to promote the full flourishing of all life.

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## A Consistent Ethic of Life

Everyone knows there is darkness in our lives, in our world. Violence of all kinds threatens life: in our homes, in our cities, in nations near and far. “Violence has many faces: oppression of the poor, deprivation of basic human rights, economic exploitation, sexual exploitation and pornography, neglect or abuse of the aged and the helpless, and innumerable other acts of inhumanity. Abortion in particular blunts a sense of the sacredness of human life.”

We see this passage from the U.S. bishops’ 1983 pastoral letter on peace exemplified almost every day in the headlines. Many of us have directly encountered some form of violence in our own lives. Many more of us suffer with families and friends who have. How can we respond to this violence and death? How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and becoming evil ourselves?

A moral vision that holds together these many different issues and offers not only direction for action but also energy and hope is the consistent ethic of life. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin articulated this perspective in the early 1980s, and it became a centerpiece of the U.S. Catholic bishops’ moral teaching. Though it has not been emphasized in recent statements by the U.S. bishops, we would do well to retrieve the consistent ethic of life, both its content and spirit. Pope John Paul II affirmed similar themes in his 1995 encyclical *The Gospel of Life*. In this chapter, we will explore the richness of this teaching.

### A Moral Framework

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. 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.

### **Sources of Life**

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 Pope 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 was 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 that 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 (Matthew 5:1–12).

This is the Jesus who praises not power but reconciliation in the story about the forgiving father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). This is the Jesus of faithful ministry, of suffering and death, of new life (Mark 14:3–16:8). This is the Jesus who says, “I came

so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 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.

### **Abundant Life**

The consistent ethic of life challenges us every day. (1) It encourages us to hold together a great variety of issues with a consistent focus on the value of life. (2) It challenges us to reflect on our basic values and convictions that give direction to our lives. (3) It leads us to express our commitment to life in civil debate and public policy.

**From womb to tomb.** A consistent ethic includes all life issues from the very beginning of life to its end. An excellent example of how the life ethic holds together many distinct issues can be found in the U.S. bishops’ 1996 statement, *Political Responsibility*, that provided direction concerning many issues, including abortion, racism, the economy, AIDS, housing, the global trade in arms, welfare reform, immigration, and refugees.

Several examples can give the spirit of *Political Responsibility* and help us examine our consciences. The bishops oppose the use of the death penalty, judging that the practice further undermines respect for life in our society and stating that it has been discriminatory against the poor and racial minorities. The bishops express special concern for the problem of racism, calling it a “radical evil” that divides the human family. Dealing with poverty, the bishops claim, is a moral imperative of the highest priority for poverty threatens life. In the domestic scene, there is a need for more jobs with adequate pay and decent working conditions; at the international level, the areas of trade, aid, and investment must be reevaluated in terms of their impact on the poor.

Capital punishment, racism, poverty: certainly these are very different issues, with different causes and different solutions (many that may be very complex). Still, underneath all these differences is life and, for us, the challenge of respecting the lives of people who may be very different from us. What actions concerning these issues would a consistent ethic of life suggest?

Here are a few possibilities. For capital punishment, spend time learning why many churches are opposed to the death penalty; then write to your governor and other officials expressing your opposition. For racism, start or join a parish group that is working to bring together people of different races, perhaps by a formal, ongoing interchange between two parishes (“twinning”). For poverty, read the bishops’ pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*; volunteer in a soup kitchen or an AIDS clinic; if possible, exercise your leadership in business or politics to change oppressive policies and regulations. Surely, we cannot do everything, but we can do one thing.

**A question of values.** The consistent ethic of life also leads us beyond the specific issues to the depths of our convictions about the meaning of life. A careful and prayerful study of *Political Responsibility* allows us to appreciate not only the expanse of the seamless garment of the consistent ethic of life but also its profound challenge to our most important attitudes and values.

Emphasizing the consistent ethic of life and recognizing its countercultural directions, the bishops state: “Our moral framework does not easily fit the categories of right or left, Republican or Democrat. We are called to measure every party and movement by how its agenda touches human life and human dignity.”

It is not sufficient to be pro-life on some issues; we must be pro-life on *all* issues—no matter what our political party, business, union, talk shows, advertising, or family may say. These powerful forces significantly shape our values and convictions, sometimes away from a consistent ethic. Yet our faith ought to be the deepest source of our values.

We should not underestimate the challenge of being pro-life; it might seem easier to appeal to common sense or accepted business practice—or even ethical relativism. In *The Gospel of Life*, John Paul II urges all persons to choose life—consistently, personally, nationally, globally. This invitation is really a profound challenge: to look deeply into ourselves and to test against the gospel some of our own deeply held beliefs and practices.

John Paul writes: “In a word, we can say that the cultural change which we are calling for demands from everyone the courage to *adopt a new lifestyle*, consisting in making practical choices—at the personal, family, social and international level—on the basis of a correct scale of values: *the primacy of being over having, of the person over things*. This renewed life-style involves a passing *from indifference to concern for others, from rejection to acceptance of them*” (98).

**Public policy.** Our Church leaders have necessarily discussed the relationship between moral vision and political policies. Indeed, the consistent ethic of life was developed to help shape public policy. Political policies and economic structures provide means to create a societal environment that promotes the flourishing of human life. During the past century, bishops and popes have addressed these very issues in their social teachings.

As Cardinal Bernardin told the audience at Fordham University, we must also be able to state our case “in nonreligious terms which others of different faith convictions might find morally persuasive.” For example, we may be opposed to euthanasia and assisted suicide fundamentally because of our faith convictions about God as giver of the gift of life and about our own stewardship of life. For public policy discussion, however, we may stress other reasons, such as human dignity, the undermining of trust in the medical profession, the threat to women and the vulnerable.

*Political Responsibility and The Gospel of Life* emphasize that faithfulness to the gospel leads not only to individual acts of charity. It also leads to actions involving the institutions and structures of society, the economy, and politics. The U.S. bishops, for example, state: “We encourage people to use their voices and votes to enrich the democratic life of our nation and to act on their values in the political arena. We hope American Catholics, as both believers and citizens, will use the resources of our faith and the opportunities of this democracy to help shape a society more respectful of the life, dignity and rights of the human person, especially the poor and vulnerable.”

Clearly, religion and politics must mix in our lives! We face the challenge of consistently embodying an ethic of life in the candidates we support and in our own direct involvement in forming public policy (whether that be in the Girl Scouts, in a parish committee, in a local school board, or in the U.S. Congress).

**Discipleship’s Challenge**

In this new millennium, world events and Church teachings direct our attention to life itself as the very center of our concern. The consistent ethic of life provides both a solid foundation and a powerful challenge to live as faithful disciples and involved citizens. It calls into question all views that contradict the message and meaning of Jesus. It challenges us to reject the culture of death. It challenges us to create a culture of life every day, at home, at work, and in society.

How? The way we vote, the jokes we tell, the language we use, the attitudes we hand on to children, the causes we support, the business practices we use, the entertainment we attend, the way we care for the sick and elderly—in all these ordinary activities, we express consistency in respecting life or we get trapped in contradictions.

If we are consistent, we must speak and act concerning abortion and euthanasia but also concerning welfare and immigration, sexism and racism, cloning and health care reform, trade agreements and sweatshops, the buying and selling of women for prostitution, genocide, and many other issues. Based on our ancient Scriptures and attentive to contemporary experiences, the consistent ethic of life provides an ethical framework for confronting the moral dilemmas of our new millennium. It helps us to promote the full flourishing of all life.

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