

Every Day CATHOLIC

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Standing Up for Life—Moving From “Either/Or” to “Both/And”

by Jim and Susan Vogt

There is an illness going around that we call “Pro-Life Schizophrenia,” and we are carriers. PLS is caused by trying to honor the dignity of human life and Catholic social teaching in a complex world. Sometimes we feel as if we live in two worlds and aren’t fully accepted in either.

For over 20 years we coordinated our diocesan pro-life ministry. We marched for life in Washington and started Project Rachel to help women heal after abortion. We sponsored pro-life Masses, chastity speakers and essay contests. We supported pregnancy care centers and more. BUT, as fervently as we and others worked to protect human life from its beginning, most of the people we were involved with shied away from other pro-life causes (i.e., elimination of nuclear weapons, support of government anti-poverty and health-care programs, abolition of the death penalty).

Sometimes we differed on the approach to take, and sometimes we simply differed on priorities since it’s



impossible to give equal attention to every cause. Unfortunately, problems came not only in lack of time but also in lack of Christian charity. Too often there was name-calling and denunciation of those who didn’t fully give their efforts to fighting abortion.

On another side of our lives we mixed with social workers, community activists and those working on issues like war, poverty, inadequate health care and the death penalty. Again, we were surrounded by very good and committed people. BUT, some found it difficult to understand our involvement in anti-abortion efforts. Many were mystified as to why we aligned with people who seemed

blind to the dignity of *all* human life, not just the unborn. And so we lived at times as if we had split personalities, fully accepted in neither camp.

The cure for PLS is to move from being “either/or Catholics” to becoming “both/and Catholics.” Our Church offers us the ways and wisdom if only we will hear it: “Catholic teaching about the dignity of life calls us to oppose torture, unjust war, and the use of the death penalty; to prevent genocide and attacks against noncombatants; to oppose racism; and to overcome poverty and suffering. Nations are called to protect the right to life by seeking effective ways to combat evil and terror without resorting to armed conflicts except as a last resort, always seeking first to resolve disputes by peaceful means. We revere the lives of children in the womb, the lives of persons dying in war and from starvation, and indeed the lives of all human beings as children of God” (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, #45).

“The Gospel of God’s love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of life are a single and indivisible Gospel.”

—Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, #2

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Dead Man Walking

by Frank Frost



It's not always easy to live up to our convictions that every human life is sacred. *Dead Man Walking* (1995) brings this home in a compelling way. It's based on the memoir of Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J., who, while working with the poor in New Orleans, agrees to correspond with a death-row convict. She becomes his spiritual advisor, finally accompanying him to his execution.

The movie doesn't minimize the heinousness of the crime committed by Matthew Poncelot (Sean Penn)—murder of a young couple and rape of the woman. Despite his crime and manifestations of racism, Sister Helen (Susan Sarandon) approaches him as a human being. He bursts out at one point, "Why should I respect you? Because you're a nun, wearing a cross around your neck?" She responds, "Because I'm a person. Every person deserves respect."

But giving respect in this situation is complex. Sister Helen is challenged by the victims' parents for ignoring them. She learns that respect also requires her to reach out to them and to understand their loss, pain and anger. She further experiences the grief of the mother and brothers of the condemned man. At the intersection of these intense emotions, Sister Helen must choose life, even as she accompanies a man to his death.

"Only by putting yourself in the parents' shoes," says director Tim Robbins, "can you truly be opposed to the death penalty. If you ignore that, I don't feel you're really doing justice to the real moral issue of taking another human life."

We might well ask ourselves—whether we're considering the death penalty, war, economic exploitation, racism or abortion—are we enablers of those ready to destroy human lives?

Lisa K. Gigliotti, J.D.

Editor's note: Who better to speak in her own words about valuing all life than a woman who struggles with debilitating illnesses and fights to defend life through her profession as an attorney? JM

Be it done unto me according to thy will" (Luke 1:38). This passage has been whispered on my lips and in my mind thousands of times since my diagnosis of severe rheumatoid arthritis (RA) 27 years ago.

I was 20, doing premedical studies and feeling called to be a missionary doctor. The onset of RA was sudden and fierce. Shortly after graduation, I became bed-bound. I was in bed—not in medical school, not ministering to the sick. Instead, I was being ministered to.

I told God: *I promised to give you my whole life...to become a doctor and missionary, to help the sick and poor. You gave me the brains, fire in my heart, determination—why the disease and debilitation?*

My solace came from Mary's words: "Be it done unto me." Her acceptance

brought her criticism, humiliation and the pain of witnessing her son tortured and killed. *O.K., Lord. Let me serve you according to your will.*

I turned again to Mary's words and example when, soon after, my mom and grandmother—my caregivers—were killed in a car accident. Mary again served as a model of listening, acceptance and active fulfillment.

Through seven surgeries, law school, work as policy advisor to the Michigan Senate and policy coordinator to Governor Engler, to my current work as administrative law judge, I still "walk" in faith, strengthened and enlightened by Mary's willingness to serve the Lord no matter how painful, how humiliating.

As policy advisor to the Michigan Senate, I staffed legislation to ban assisted suicide. Jack Kevorkian was taking the lives of vulnerable people in our state, and a proposal was on the ballot to legalize assisted suicide. My knowledge and credentials as an attorney, experiences and credibility as a person with serious illnesses and the losses of my beloved converged—"Be it done unto me."

I had an important role in defeating that ballot proposal and in the passage of a law banning assisted suicide. My public stand resulted in facing scorn, ridicule, even anger from opponents. I believed that if I remained resolute in following God's call and plan for me, God would provide the needed strength and wisdom.

I face three more surgeries. It is through the strength and wisdom of Mary's response, "Be it done unto me," that I am not fearful.

A proposal to allow embryonic stem-cell research will likely be on Michigan's November ballot. I feel called to speak out against ESCR—as an attorney and as a person with serious disabilities—urging instead similar but non-embryonic stem-cell research or adoption of frozen embryos. But taking a public stand can have serious negative consequences on my judge's position. Friends advise me not to jeopardize my job and health care. I have been praying intensely, and all that keeps playing is: "Be it done unto me according to thy will."

MOVIE MOMENTS, CONT'D.

Next time you watch *Dead Man Walking*, ASK YOURSELF:

- Poncelot compares himself to Jesus. What is Sister Helen's response?
- The moral tension of this film is summed up in the execution sequence, where the victims' parents, Sister Helen and the lawyer are present, and where Poncelot's death is intercut with images of his crimes. What feelings and conclusions about life do you draw from this?

PASSING ON THE FAITH



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Passion for Life

by Jeanne Hunt

Scenario

Madelyn sits in the last pew of St. Bernard Church. Her thoughts and prayers go to the faces she encountered that day as the parish director of religious education. First, she treasures the image of little Henry whose parents brought him to the Baptism class. Next, Madelyn sees Clara attending Mass with her daughter, Linda. Clara gets confused now; she's pushing 90 and needs constant care. Finally, she prays for Anna, a sophomore in high school, who is six months pregnant.

A response

Soon to be baptized, Henry weighs only six pounds and came into this world two months early. Madelyn remembers the tears in Henry's parents' eyes as she shared with them God's love for their infant son. Without any regret and with amazing patience, Linda put aside her busy life to be her mother's companion. Madelyn recalls Linda's words, "Once she diapered, fed and cared for me. Now, it's my turn. Life comes full circle." The youth group is planning a baby shower for Anna, and the Young Mothers' group is gathering used items for a nursery. Madelyn makes a mental note to call the baby's father, Aaron, to see how he's doing.

Madelyn's weary "Amen" comes with knowledge that God will keep them all under the shadow of his wing. As she prepares to leave, Madelyn turns and looks at the silent sanctuary and crucifix and thanks Jesus for this Church that cares so passionately for life.

Every Catholic parish is pro-life. We cannot be theoretically in favor of a consistent ethic of life; we must act on

that conviction. From cradle to grave, each Catholic parish must provide support and care for everyone. The most necessary support and care are to those in crisis. Ministry to the unborn, the marginalized, the sick and dying must be our special concern. The gospel is a guidebook in this work. Just as Jesus sought out the lepers, the lame, the Samaritan woman, the children, we need to look around our parish family and help those who struggle.

This response is not a formal one. We don't need an organization or monthly meeting to live the mandate of pro-life. What is needed is awareness and a decision to do something. Catholic families can do simple things like adopt a nursing-home patient who has no visitors or volunteer to provide child care for a family who can't afford to pay a babysitter. We must pray for those who are sick and dying as well as the newly baptized. Keeping God's family is everyone's concern. Church isn't just a place to visit once a week; it's a life choice. Madelyn saw that choice in those faces of her day, putting the gospel of life into action.

PRAYER

Choose Life

by Jeanne Hunt

(for praying alone or with others)

Preparation: a recording of "You Are Mine," prayer table with goblets filled with wine or juice, open Bible and lighted candle

OPENING SONG

"You Are Mine" by David Haas or similar hymn

OPENING PRAYER

"Source of all life, we pledge to support the circle of life. From birth to death, you nurture us. Give us the wisdom to see the little ways in which we can foster growth and security for those who struggle on life's journey. Open our hearts and minds to the needs of others. Amen."

SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (Choose Life!)

RITUAL

(Distribute goblets to participants.)

READER: *L'Chaim* (translated: "to life"; pronounced: **luh-khah-yim**)

L'Chaim tells us a lot about the Jewish approach to life. The phrase doesn't mean to a *good* life, to a *healthy* life, or even to a *long* life. It is simply "to life," recognizing that all life is indeed good and precious and should always be celebrated and savored. *L'Chaim!*

Let us raise our glasses in praise of life and its Creator. *L'Chaim... to life!*

ALL: *L'Chaim... to life!*

(Taste the wine.)

READER: To the innocence of the newborn, the beauty of old age, the wonder of the human body. *L'Chaim... to life!*

ALL: *L'Chaim... to life!*

(Taste the wine.)

READER: May all within us prosper and protect life. *L'Chaim... to life!*

ALL: *L'Chaim... to life!*

(Taste the wine.)



Baby: © iStockphoto.com/Marcos Paternoster; bkgd: ©shutterstock/Telov.Oleksa

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This is the same message that Cardinal Bernardin called the “consistent ethic of life” and the “seamless garment.” It’s not a new idea. In fact, Jesus modeled it when he welcomed children, dined with sinners and had compassion for widows, the infirm and the woman caught in adultery. Jesus respected the dignity of *all* people.

This principle gets muddled in the realm of politics. Can a Catholic vote for someone who is pro-choice or pro-death penalty? It’s hard to find a candidate who aligns with the Catholic Church on all life issues. Politics is complex and not for



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those who want simplistic, sound-bite answers. People of good will can disagree even over life-and-death issues.

For example, many Catholic legislators voted in favor of the Iraq War even though Pope John Paul II condemned it. Thousands of innocent people have died and continue to die in Iraq. Certainly this is a life issue. Likewise, despite Church teaching that there is no justification for the death penalty in modern times, some Catholic judges and prosecutors still use it—even though some innocent people have died. Legislators, judges and jurors are not evil people flaunting Church teaching; they are trying to do the right thing. It’s just that one right thing can sometimes be at odds with other right things. Political decision-making in our pluralistic society demands compromise. Just as Jesus astutely found compromise with Caesar’s coin, we must find creative ways to uphold Catholic principles in a secular society.

So too, most pro-choice advocates don’t favor abortion and would prefer if it were not a choice some women feel pressed to make. Perhaps the most effective way to save unborn lives is for pro-life supporters, in particular Church leaders, to initiate dialogue with pro-choice advocates. Humbly pursuing areas they agree on could reduce the frequency of the choice of abortion. Promoting healthy sexual morals, adoption, support for women choosing life, and quality health- and child-care services would be a start.

What’s a good Catholic to do? The stirring words of Deuteronomy, “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (30:19), challenge us to examine our attitudes and actions toward others. If we want to be radically pro-life, we must change ourselves first.

Consider the following principles that identify people who are authentically pro-life:

- **Listen.** Sometimes being pro-life begins with hearing the hurt of the person who sees the world differently than you do. Respecting the opinions of an opponent can open the door to a solution both can live with.
- **Avoid strategies that polarize.** Name-calling, rudeness and dismissing the other as un-Christian demean everyone and are life-draining.
- **Avoid self-righteousness.** Stubbornly maintaining that “I am right, and you are wrong” can keep us from hearing the truth that the other holds. Fundamentalism, whether religious or ideological, is a source of death. Instead, foster a spirit of respect toward those who see reality differently than you.
- **Love your enemies.** Our enemies typically include anyone with whom we strongly disagree. Looking for good in the other can smooth the way to creative solutions. Reject violence, even as a last resort.

To be authentically pro-life we need to respect the dignity of human life from womb to tomb—and all fragile lives in between.

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MAKING CONNECTIONS

When have you noted the either/or attitude about life issues in others? in yourself? About which life issue do you feel most strongly? Why?

How well are you supporting the “consistent ethic of life” through your words and actions? through your parish or community involvements? What more could you do?

Commit to adopting a broader and more inclusive perspective of life issues. How will this challenge you?

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