

Family Life † Respect Life ARCHDIOCESE of NEW YORK

BUILDING A CULTURE OF LIFE

By Sister Mary Elizabeth, S.V.

In ever increasing numbers, young people are professing in poll after poll to be more pro-life than in the past. Is it any wonder? Many in this generation identify themselves as “survivors of ‘73”; today’s youth are keenly aware that one-third of their generation has been lost to abortion, and that it could have been them. They have also witnessed the ravaging effects that abortion and the contraceptive mentality have wrought on their families. The humanity of the unborn child is obvious to them, as many had their first baby pictures taken while still in the womb. In the Church’s teaching on human life and love many have found a way to true freedom and lasting joy. Pope Benedict’s words from his Inaugural Homily resound in their hearts and engender hope: “*We are not some casual or meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.*”

Ten years ago, in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II, great architect of the culture of life, called upon all people of good will to be co-workers in building a new civilization of life and love. He placed this mission at the heart of the evangelical efforts of the Church, writing, “*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.*” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 2)

In the Archdiocese we are blessed to have a vast network of pro-life groups dedicated to building a culture of life with activities ranging from public policy advocacy to educational outreach to praying peacefully in front of abortion facilities. One of the best ways to stay on top of what’s happening is to visit our new website, www.flrl.org. In it we include news about upcoming events, educational information, suggestions for parish activities and links to other sites. Below is a description of three areas in which we will be focusing our activities during the upcoming year.

MATERNITY SERVICES

In the Archdiocese we are blessed with many and diverse options for women who are experiencing a crisis pregnancy. For decades, scores of dedicated individuals and organizations have been running pregnancy centers and maternity homes. They offer practical compassion and resources that make possible a woman’s desire to choose life for her unborn child. Although these alternatives are comparatively better than what is available in other parts of the country, there still exists a very significant shortage of resources, especially for those women who statistics reveal are the *most vulnerable to abortion*.

Surprisingly, the majority of abortions are sought by middle class, white women between the ages of 20–32 who are either in college or pursuing a career. When these women experience an unintended pregnancy, it shatters their self-identity as independent single women. They are often abandoned or pressured by the baby’s father, their family, friends, and co-workers to have an abortion, and they are filled with very real, concrete fears about their future livelihood and happiness. Ultimately, many end up succumbing to abortion, as post-abortive women have told us, “Because I felt like I had no other choice.” When asked, “What would have made a difference?” the women expressed these basic needs: emotional support, employment assistance, temporary college tuition/ class adjustments or transfers, affordable medical care, an understanding short-term place to live, counseling, etc.

This upcoming year the Respect Life Office will collaborate with the Sisters of Life in developing a parish-based outreach to better meet the unique needs of these women, as well as anyone else who may be experiencing a crisis pregnancy. The *Visitation Mission* (a local expression of the national initiative called the Gabriel Project) provides a way for a parish and its individual parishioners to place their time and their talents at the service of life, like Mary, who went in haste to visit her pregnant cousin Elizabeth with self-forgetful love. In sharing oneself with someone who is vulnerable – whether it be taking her out for tea, listening to her over the phone, assisting her in finding a new job, or inviting her to live in a spare-room – these concrete actions help her to know she is not alone and they free her heart from fear, allowing life-giving love to grow.

POST-ABORTION OUTREACH

No woman wants to have an abortion. The sad reality is that many feel as if there is no other choice. Often pressured by family, friends, and seemingly impossible circumstances, some make a decision that they will regret for the rest of their lives. There is a growing movement across the nation, breaking the silence that often shrouds the abortion experience, called “*Silent No More*”. For the last three years these courageous women and men have begun to speak out about the tragic experience of their abortions; they have carried signs at the annual March for Life in Washington, DC stating: “*I regret my abortion.*”

Within the Archdiocese and beyond, there are *Days of Prayer and Healing* specifically designed for women and for

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men who are suffering after abortion. There are also various weekend retreats and follow-up gatherings at which many people continue their journey to healing and wholeness. (For more information about these retreats visit our web site.)

We have been engaged in an educational campaign to raise awareness of the far-reaching effects that over thirty years of legalized abortion has had on individuals, families, and society in general. On April 1, 2006 we will be holding a Symposium on Post-Abortion Syndrome in Manhattan, and all are welcome. Experts in the field as well as those who have personally experienced the effects of abortion will give presentations on various topics, including An Overview of Post-Abortion Syndrome, The Abortion-Breast Cancer Link, and The Effects of Abortion on Men.

THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

During the first five years of his pontificate Pope John Paul II delivered a series of homilies entitled the "theology of the body." These take an in-depth Scriptural look at the subject of human sexuality and the dignity of the person. John Paul II relates that through our bodies the invisible mystery of God is made visible. By creating the human person in His image and likeness, male and female, God has invited us to enter into His own Trinitarian mystery of life-giving love. At the core of what it means to be human is the call to give oneself in love to another, and to receive his or her gift of self in return.

If the body is the expression of the person as the image of God, then the call to love includes the person in his or her totality. This makes what we do with our bodies tremendously significant. Sexuality is *not just biology*; it is a profound expression of the person.

Through our Marriage Preparation Curriculum, in weekend parish missions and conferences, we seek to share John Paul II's liberating message. Our experience has been that when men and women are introduced to this teaching, it truly resonates with the deepest longings of their hearts, to love and be loved as God loves – it's what we're made for! When people understand their true dignity and worth they seek to integrate their faith into the most significant and intimate areas of their lives, including their sexuality.

Unfortunately, we live in a society that has been deeply influenced by the logic of the culture of death. Since the advent of the birth control pill, there has been a radical change in the way new life is welcomed. The contraceptive mentality has ruptured the essential link between life and

love. This is a shift in attitude, from receiving a child as a gift and a blessing, the fruit of love, to at times viewing a newly conceived baby as a burden or product to be used or disposed of at our convenience. It is worth noting that as acceptance and use of contraception have increased in our country, so have acceptance and use of abortion, as a "backup" measure. Whereas contraception and abortion are "specifically different evils," (*Evangelium Vitae*, no.13) it is not well known that many forms of "contraception" can also act as abortifacients, ending the life of a newly conceived child (see *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities*, United States Bishops).

But there is another way. Natural Family Planning offers couples a way to authentically practice responsible parenthood while strengthening their marriage. More and more engaged and married couples are coming to learn that Natural Family Planning is not the rhythm method of old. Modern methods are not only up to 99% effective in helping to space or limit pregnancy, but are also relationship-building. Couples who make Natural Family Planning a part of their marriage have remarkably lower divorce rates than the national average!

Recently there has been an encouraging growth in interest in the *Creighton Model* of Natural Family Planning, renowned for helping couples achieve pregnancy, after long struggles with infertility. Working in collaboration with doctors and other healthcare providers our Natural Family Planning teachers are sharing this transforming way of life with an ever-growing number of people, a most hopeful sign of the potential blessings to be found when faith and science meet. Natural Family Planning instruction is readily accessible throughout the Archdiocese in English and Spanish. For more information contact: 212-371-1011 ext. 3184 nfpinfo@archny.org or visit: www.flrl.org

A WORD OF THANKS

Let me close with a word of gratitude to all of the dedicated pro-life volunteers and organizations throughout the Archdiocese who so faithfully and generously have placed themselves at the service of life. Your efforts have made an enormous difference to countless people. And I would like to extend an invitation to everyone to join us in this wonderful mission of building a culture of life.

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