

Family Life † Respect Life ARCHDIOCESE of NEW YORK

POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE CHURCH'S PRO-LIFE AGENDA

By Kathleen M. Gallagher

*"Christ be beside me, Christ be before me,
Christ be behind me, King of my heart.
Christ be within me, Christ be below me,
Christ be above me, never to part.*

*Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left hand,
Christ all around me, shield in the strife.
Christ in my sleeping, Christ in my sitting,
Christ in my rising, light of my heart."*

These words, the lyrics to a traditional Christian hymn adapted from the Prayer of St. Patrick, have always held special meaning for me. They seem to sum it all up: if we truly believe God is the center of our lives, then He is with us always and everywhere. This fact will influence all of our behavior, including our moral, social and political decisions. He is with us at the grocery market, in our school or workplace, on the ball field, in the halls of government, and even in the voting booth! We simply cannot separate our spiritual life from our secular life.

Our religious faith *belongs* in the public square just as much as it belongs in the pews of our local church. Democracy depends on people of conviction pressing for what they believe through public debate – civilly, legally, and vigorously. Our Bishops tell us that as believers, we are all called "to become informed, active and responsible participants in the political process. Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts. Every act of responsible citizenship is an exercise of significant individual power."^[1]

Our Church teaches that it is not only our right but our *responsibility* to act in the public policy arena. The issues being debated and decided by our elected officials will profoundly impact children and families, the innocent unborn, the sick and dying, the poor and the oppressed. If we, as Catholics, turn our backs on our duty as citizens, we turn our backs on our neighbors, on God, and on the central beliefs of our faith.

The criterion for our involvement is clear: the life of every human being, from inception through each stage of development to natural death, is sacred, made in the image and likeness of God. Every one is deserving of our respect and worthy of legal protection. In his magnificent encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II said, "It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life,

upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop."^[2] Our Bishops echo this sentiment when they tell us, "We must exercise [our] power in ways that defend human life, especially those of God's children who are unborn, disabled or otherwise vulnerable."^[3]

So where do we begin in order to utilize the tremendous power that we hold? First, we must become informed. What are the political issues affecting human life currently being discussed? Who represents us in government? And where in the process can we step in to make a difference?

THE ISSUES

At the state level, lawmakers are discussing a range of issues affecting human life and human dignity. Perhaps most imminent is the subject of stem cell research. Our elected officials are seriously contemplating authorizing and financing the manufacture of human embryos in order for scientists to harvest their body parts for experimentation! While it sounds like some futuristic horror movie, the horror is, it's true.

Bills are now pending in the New York State Legislature that would promote human cloning and embryonic stem cell research, with price tags of between \$300 million and \$1 billion for taxpayers. The biotechnology industry, pharmaceutical companies, and academic researchers are pressuring state lawmakers to support this research, suggesting it will not only bring cures for disease, but it will boost the economy as well.

The fact is that embryonic stem cell research has not produced any cures for disease or disability and has resulted in troubling results in animal research, including tumor growth and cancer. Yet it is being irresponsibly sold to suffering individuals as their "best hope." Many in the public, as well as in the legislature, are buying it.

We must insist our legislators promote ethical stem cell research using adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood cells. These are realistic and successful alternatives to embryo research that do not rely on the destruction of innocent human life.

Also being discussed by state policy makers across the country are crimes against pregnant women and their unborn children. The 2003 California murders of Laci Peterson and her unborn son Conner put the media spotlight on this topic like never before.

Thirty-one states now prohibit the assault or homicide

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of an unborn child during the commission of a crime against the child's mother. Public opinion polls revealed that 84% of the American public favored a double homicide charge in the Peterson case, and states like Kentucky, West Virginia and Texas changed their laws accordingly.

But New York clings to an antiquated rule that says a person must be "born alive" before he or she can be the victim of a crime. Tragically, there are plenty of cases making headlines in our state where boyfriends or husbands who don't want to be fathers violently assault pregnant women in order to be rid of their child. Women are injured, innocent babies die, families mourn their deaths, and no one can be held accountable under our law. The law cries out to be changed.

A third issue brought up annually in Albany is whether to finance abortions through the Medicaid program using taxpayer dollars. While the bulk of the states follow the federal government's lead and fund abortions only in very limited circumstances, i.e. reported cases of rape or endangerment to the mother's life, New York legislators compel taxpayers to fund any and all Medicaid abortions, forcing us to spend more than \$45 million a year for the destruction of human life.

Citizens do not want their tax dollars subsidizing abortion. We have to do a better job of letting our elected officials know this before they vote each year. After all, they are supposed to be representing us.

GETTING INVOLVED: CATHOLIC ADVOCACY NETWORK

The good news is that communicating with legislators about these and other issues of concern has become quicker, simpler and more efficient. Thanks to the foresight of Edward Cardinal Egan and his brother Bishops in New York State, Catholics can now join a free *Catholic Advocacy Network* to keep them up to date on public policy issues.

Accessible at www.nyscatholic.org, the Catholic Advocacy Network sends out alerts to members with electronic mail access to let them know about upcoming votes and other legislative actions. It then links members to pre-written communications to lawmakers on the issues. Members can edit the pre-written letters if they choose and then e-mail the letters directly to their elected officials, right through the web site!

It takes literally 60 seconds to make your voice heard. And you can do it from the comfort of your living room!

Do lawmakers pay attention to e-mail communications? You bet they do. A recent study by the Congressional Management Foundation found that the

Internet is having a positive effect on the discourse between citizens and their representatives. Congress is now receiving four times more citizen communications than it was ten years ago – and virtually all of the increase is from Internet-based communications. At the state level, lawmakers are most attentive to e-mail communications from their own constituents, and personalizing your notes always helps.

Catholics without access to electronic mail are welcome to join the Network as well, and will receive a monthly newsletter, an invitation to the Catholic Conference annual lobby day, and more. All pro-life people are encouraged to communicate with their elected officials through letters, phone calls and meetings in their local offices.

The New York State Catholic Conference is the official public policy voice of the Catholic Church in the Empire State. As a resource for all Catholics, the Conference provides the legislative agenda of the Bishops in the state, position papers on issues of concern, contact information for lawmakers, and links to Church statements and encyclicals. Visit the Conference online at www.nyscatholic.org or call the office at 518-434-6195.

Of course there are many other facets of pro-life work that are vitally needed and demand our attention: services for pregnant women in need of assistance; counseling for those who have aborted; education in the schools; peaceful vigils outside clinics; prayer. But legislative advocacy is vitally needed as well.

The law is a great teacher; from the time we are small children, we are taught to respect the law. Laws move people in a certain direction, and in this way help to build public consensus. Seen in this light, what an awesome responsibility we have to help shape the law, form consciences and build a society that respects the sanctity of every human life.

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FOOTNOTES

- (1) *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE, UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, 2003.
- (2) *Evangelium Vitae: On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life*, POPE JOHN PAUL II, 1995.
- (3) *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, 1998.