

A Consistent Ethic of Life: Continuing the Dialogue

The William Wade Lecture Series
St. Louis University

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin
March 11, 1984

I first wish to express my appreciation to St. Louis University for the invitation to deliver the 1984 Wade Lecture. "The William Wade Lecture Series" is a fitting way to celebrate Father Wade's life as a priest, a philosopher, and a teacher. His interest in the moral issues confronting today's Church and society was an inspiration to all who knew him. I hope that my participation in this series will help to keep alive his memory and his ideals.

Three months ago I gave a lecture at Fordham University honoring another Jesuit educator, Father John Gannon, and I addressed the topic of a consistent ethic of life. That lecture has generated a substantial discussion both inside and outside the Church on the linkage of life issues, issues which, I am convinced, constitute a "seamless garment." This afternoon I would like to extend the discussion by expanding upon the idea of a consistent ethic of life.

The setting of a Catholic university is one deliberately chosen for these lectures. My purpose is to foster the kind of sustained intellectual analysis and debate which the Jesuit tradition has cultivated throughout its history. The discussion must go beyond the university but it will not occur without the involvement of Catholic universities. I seek to call attention to the resources in the Catholic tradition for shaping a viable public ethic. I hope to engage others in the Church and in the wider civil society in an examination of the challenges to human life which surround us today, and the potential of a consistent ethic of life. The Fordham lecture has catalyzed a vigorous debate; I seek to enlarge it, not to end it.

I will address three topics today: (1) the case for a consistent ethic of life; (2) the distinct levels of the problem; and (3) the contribution of a consistent ethic to the Church and society generally.

I. The Seamless Garment: The Logic of the Case

The invitation extended to me for both the Gannon Lecture at Fordham and the Wade Lecture today asked that I address some aspect of the bishops' pastoral, *"The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response."* While I would gladly have spent each lecture on the question of war and peace, I decided that it was equally necessary to show how the pastoral is rooted in a wider moral vision. Understanding that vision can enhance the way we address specific questions like the arms race. When I set forth the argument about this wider moral vision—a consistent ethic of life—it evoked favorable comments, often from individuals and groups who had supported the peace pastoral but found themselves at odds with other positions the Catholic Church has taken on issues touching human life. At the same time, the Fordham address also

generated letters from people who fear that the case for a consistent ethic will smother the Catholic opposition to abortion or will weaken our stance against the arms race.

Precisely in response to these concerns, I wish to state the essence of the case for a consistent ethic of life, specifying *why* it is needed and *what is* actually being advocated in a call for such an ethic. There are, in my view, two reasons why we need to espouse a consistent ethic of life: (1) the dimensions of the threats to life today; and (2) the value of our moral vision.

The threat to human life posed by nuclear war is so tangible that it has captured the attention of the nation. Public opinion polls rank it as one of the leading issues in the 1984 election campaign; popular movements like the "nuclear Freeze" and professional organizations of physicians and scientists have shaped the nuclear question in terms which engage citizens and experts alike.

The Church is part of the process which has raised the nuclear issue to a new standing in our public life. I submit that the Church should be a leader in the dialogue which shows that the nuclear question itself is part of the larger cultural-political-moral drama. Pope John Paul II regularly situates his examination of the nuclear issue in the framework of the broader problem of technology, politics, and ethics.

When this broader canvas is analyzed, the concern for a specific issue does not recede, but the meaning of multiple threats to life today—the full dimension of the problems of politics and technology—becomes vividly clear. The case being made here is not a condemnation of either politics or technology, but a recognition with the Pope that, on a range of key issues, "it is only through a conscious choice and through a deliberate policy that humanity can be saved." That quote from the Holy Father has unique relevance to nuclear war, but it can be used creatively to address other threats to life.

The range of application is all too evident: nuclear war *threatens* life on a previously unimaginable scale; abortion *takes* life daily on a horrendous scale; public executions are fast becoming weekly events in the most advanced technological society in history; and euthanasia is now openly discussed and even advocated. Each of these assaults on life has its own meaning and morality; they cannot be collapsed into one problem, but they must be confronted as pieces of a larger pattern.

The reason I have placed such stress on the idea of a consistent ethic of life from the beginning of my term as chairman of the Pro-Life Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops is twofold: I am persuaded by the interrelatedness of these diverse problems, and I am convinced that the Catholic moral vision has the scope, the strength and the subtlety to address this wide range of issues in an effective fashion. It is precisely the potential of our moral vision that is often not recognized even within the community of the Church. The case for a consistent ethic of life—one which stands for the protection of the right to life and the promotion of the rights which enhance life from womb to tomb—manifests the positive potential of the Catholic moral and social tradition.

It is both a complex and a demanding tradition; it joins the humanity of the unborn infant and the humanity of the hungry; it calls for positive **legal** action to prevent the killing of the unborn or the aged and positive societal action to provide shelter for the homeless and education for the illiterate. The potential of the moral and social vision is appreciated in a new way when the *systemic* vision of Catholic ethics is seen as the background for the *specific* positions we take on a range of issues.

In response to those who fear otherwise, I contend that the systemic vision of a consistent ethic of life will not erode our crucial public opposition to the direction of the arms race; neither will it smother our persistent and necessary public opposition to abortion. The systemic vision is rooted in the conviction that our opposition to these distinct problems has a common foundation and that both Church and society are served by making it evident.

A consistent ethic of life does not equate the problem of taking life (e.g., through abortion and in war) with the problem of promoting human dignity (through humane programs of nutrition, health care, and housing). But a consistent ethic identifies both the protection of life and its promotion as moral questions. It argues for a continuum of life which must be sustained in the face of diverse and distinct threats.

A consistent ethic does not say everyone in the Church must do all things, but it does say that as individuals and groups pursue one issue, whether it is opposing abortion or capital punishment, the *way* we oppose one threat should be related to support for a systemic vision of life. It is **not** necessary or possible for every person to engage in each issue, but it is both possible and necessary for the Church as a whole to cultivate a conscious explicit connection among the several issues. And it is very necessary for preserving a systemic vision that individuals and groups who seek to witness to life at one point of the spectrum of life not be seen as insensitive to or even opposed to other moral claims on the overall spectrum of life. Consistency does rule out contradictory moral positions about the unique value of human life. No one is called to do everything, but each of us can do something. And we can strive not to stand against each other when the protection *and* the promotion of life are at stake.

II. The Seamless Garment: The Levels of the

Question

A consistent ethic of life should honor the complexity of the multiple issues it must address. It is necessary to distinguish several levels of the question. Without attempting to be comprehensive, allow me to explore four distinct dimensions of a consistent ethic.

First, at the level of general moral principles, it is possible to identify a single principle with diverse applications. In the Fordham address I used the prohibition against direct attacks on innocent life. This principle is both central to the Catholic moral vision and systematically related to a range of specific moral issues. It prohibits direct attacks on unborn life in the womb, direct attacks on civilians in warfare, and the direct killing of patients in nursing homes.

Each of these topics has a constituency in society concerned with the morality of abortion, war, and care of the aged and dying. A consistent ethic of life encourages the specific concerns of each constituency, but also calls them to see the interrelatedness of their efforts. The need to defend the integrity of the moral principle in the full range of its application is a responsibility of each distinct constituency. If the principle is eroded in the public mind, all lose.

A second level of a consistent ethic stresses the distinction among cases rather than their similarities. We need different moral principles to apply to diverse cases. The classical distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means has applicability in the care of the dying but no relevance in the case of warfare. Not all moral principles have relevance across the whole range of life issues. Moreover, sometimes a systemic vision of the life issues requires a combination of moral insights to provide direction on one issue. At Fordham, I cited the classical teaching on capital punishment which gives the State the right to take life in defense of key social values. But I also pointed out how a concern for promoting a *public attitude* of respect for life has led the bishops of the United States to oppose the *exercise* of that right.

Some of the responses I have received on the Fordham address correctly say that abortion and capital punishment are not identical issues. The principle which protects *innocent* life distinguishes the unborn child from the convicted murderer.

Other letters stress that while nuclear war is a *threat to* life, abortion involves the actual *taking of* life, here and now. I accept both of these distinctions, of course, but I also find compelling the need to *relate* the cases while keeping them in distinct categories.

Abortion is taking of life in ever growing numbers in our society. Those concerned about it, I believe, will find their case enhanced by taking note of the rapidly expanding use of public execution. In a similar way, those who are particularly concerned about these executions, even if the accused has taken another life, should recognize the elementary truth that a society which can be indifferent to the innocent life of an unborn child will not be easily stirred to concern for a convicted criminal. There is, I maintain, a political and psychological linkage among the life issues—from war to welfare concerns—which we ignore at our own peril: a systemic vision of life seeks to expand the moral imagination of a society, not partition it into airtight categories.

A third level of the question before us involves how we relate a commitment to principles to our public witness of life. As I have said, no one can do everything. There are limits to both competency and energy; both point to the wisdom of setting priorities and defining distinct functions. The Church, however, must be credible across a wide range of issues; the very scope of our moral vision requires a commitment to a multiplicity of questions. In this way the teaching of the Church will sustain a variety of individual commitments.

Neither the Fordham address nor this one is intended to constrain wise and vigorous efforts to protect and promote life through specific, precise forms of action. Both addresses do seek to cultivate a dialogue within the Church and in the wider society among individuals and groups which draw on common principles (e.g., the prohibition against killing the innocent) but seem convinced that they do not share common ground. The appeal here is not for anyone to do everything, but to recognize points of interdependence which should be stressed, not denied.

A fourth level, one where dialogue is sorely needed, is the relationship between moral principles and concrete political choices. The moral questions of abortion, the arms race, the fate of social programs for the poor, and the role of human rights in foreign policy are public moral issues. The arena in which they are ultimately decided is not the academy or the Church but the political process. A consistent ethic of life seeks to present a coherent linkage among a diverse set of issues. It can and should be used to test party platforms, public policies, and political candidates. The Church legitimately fulfills a public role by articulating a framework for political choices by relating that framework to specific issues and by calling for systematic moral analysis of all areas of public policy.

This is the role our Bishops' Conference has sought to fulfill by publishing a "*Statement on Political Responsibility*" during each of the presidential and congressional election years in the past decade. The purpose is surely not to tell citizens how to vote, but to help shape the public debate and form personal conscience so that every citizen will vote thoughtfully and responsibly. Our "*Statement on Political Responsibility*" has always been, like our "Respect Life Program," a multi-issue approach to public morality. The fact that this Statement sets forth a spectrum of issues of current concern to the Church and society should not be understood as implying that all issues are qualitatively equal from a moral perspective.

As I indicated earlier, each of the life issues—while related to all the others—is distinct and calls for its own specific moral analysis. Both the Statement and the Respect Life program have direct relevance to the political order, but they are applied concretely by the choice of citizens. This is as it should be. In the political order the Church is primarily a teacher; it possesses a carefully cultivated tradition of moral analysis of personal and public issues. It makes that tradition available in a special manner for the community of the Church, but it offers it also to all who find meaning and guidance in its moral teaching.

III. The Seamless Garment: A Pastoral and Public Contribution

The moral teaching of the Church has both pastoral and public significance. Pastorally, a consistent ethic of life is a contribution to the witness of the Church's defense of the human person. Publicly, a consistent ethic fills a void in our public policy debate today.

Pastorally, I submit that a Church standing forth on the entire range of issues which the logic of our moral vision bids us to confront will be a Church in the style of both Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* and in the style of Pope John Paul II's consistent witness to life. The pastoral life of the Church should not be guided by a simplistic criterion of relevance. But the capacity of faith to shed light on the concrete questions of personal and public life today is one way in which the value of the Gospel is assessed.

Certainly the serious, sustained interest manifested throughout American society in the bishops' letter on war and peace provides a unique pastoral opportunity for the Church. Demonstrating

how the teaching on war and peace is supported by a wider concern for all of life may bring others to see for the first time what our tradition has affirmed for a very long time: the linkage among the life issues.

The public value of a consistent ethic of life is connected directly to its pastoral role. In the public arena we should always speak and act like a Church. But the unique public possibility for a consistent ethic is provided precisely by the unstructured character of the public debate on the life questions. Each of the issues I have identified today—abortion, war, hunger and human rights, euthanasia and capital punishment—is treated as a separate, self-contained topic in our public life. Each is distinct, but an *ad hoc* approach to each one fails to illustrate how our choices in one area can affect our decisions in other areas. There must be a public attitude of respect for all of life if public actions are to respect it in concrete cases.

The pastoral on war and peace speaks of a "new moment" in the nuclear age. The pastoral has been widely studied and applauded because it caught the spirit of the "new moment" and spoke with moral substance to the issues of the "new moment." I am convinced there is an "open moment" before us on the agenda of life issues. It is a significant opportunity for the Church to demonstrate the strength of a sustained moral vision. I submit that a clear witness to a consistent ethic of life will allow us to grasp the opportunity of this "open moment" and serve both the sacredness of every human life and the God of Life who is the origin and support of our common humanity.