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Respect Life

For the past 25 years, the Catholic bishops of our country have designated October as Respect Life month. The Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, legalized abortion and thus made abortion on demand a common and acceptable pattern of life. For years, the pro-life movement centered its attention on protection of the unborn. Life in the womb of the mother is certainly human life and an unrepeatable gift from God. Unborn life is not only worthy of respect but has an inherent right to life.

Gradually, the Right to Life movement expanded its horizon to become all-inclusive. All of life is sacred, having infinite value, deserving of respect and concern. The bishops emphasized the consistent ethic of life. As followers of Jesus who offered his life for all, we must always be found on the side of life. To be pro-life across the board is our attitude toward others and demands our concern for the welfare of the other. An analogy often used is that of the seamless garment. This image raises our consciousness about life issues as interconnected and interrelated realities. We have come to realize that it is a contradiction to be pro-life on one issue and anti-life on another. We also recognize that we must be concerned about the quality of life as well as life itself.

Obviously, some of the life issues are more fundamental than others and thus deserve greater attention. Recently the debate over stem-cell research, human cloning and genetic experimentation has captured the headlines. Some pro-life issues are complex and give way to various interpretations and even disagreement. I have in mind such debates as those over concern for the poor in welfare reform, the withdrawal of treatment for the terminally ill, the use of capital punishment, the treatment of those in prison, the arms race and nuclear weapons and international debt relief. Whatever the issues under discussion, the guiding principle must come down on the side of life. What is life-giving as opposed to life-taking? Pope John Paul II describes it so well when he speaks of the culture of life as opposed to the culture of death. The sanctity of life is the foundation upon which we must address the issues of life itself and the quality of life.

The horror of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, when passenger airplanes were turned into weapons of death and destruction, makes us all aware that life is precious and at the same time very fragile and very vulnerable. Our hearts go out to the innocent who lost their lives, the families who lost loved ones and to those suffering extreme pain in hospitals from burns and broken limbs. Just imagine for a moment the terror experienced by those facing death either from a firestorm, a falling building or a plane headed for destruction. For us who watched on TV, the power of evil was unleashed before our eyes. The horror became more real to us as we heard the stories of last-second phone calls to loved ones, or saw pictures of those who lost their lives. In a special way my heart went out to the firefighters, police and EMS personnel who rushed to save lives only to lose theirs in turn.

The response of people nationwide and around the world was instantaneous. People rushed to donate blood, to contribute goods or donations, and mostly to pray in silence or with others. Our Cathedral in Richmond had an overflow crowd at noontime on the Friday "Day of Prayer and Remembrance." Last Sunday I was privileged to participate in an Interfaith Service at Temple Beth El where Jews, Muslims and Christians prayed together. At that service 1,000 people witnessed against hate crimes inflicted on people of Arab heritage, anti-Semitism against our Jewish brothers and sisters and racism against people of color. In prayer, we recognized our common humanity, that we are all God's children and that all of life is sacred and holy.

Being pro-life means that our natural shock in the face of terrorism must not give way to a desire for vengeance and retaliation that leads to the killing of innocent people. We must not render evil for evil by doing the very things that we condemn. To give into hate is to allow the terrorists to rob us of our own humanity. Yes, we have a responsibility to bring the guilty to justice and to make every effort to rid our world of terrorism. Hopefully, as a nation of a wide variety of peoples, we will rise above the ashes to have a greater love and concern for one another and to recognize the giftedness of each other. Rather than being caught up in our own little worlds isolated from, or deaf to the pain and hurt around us, we might resolve to be more neighborly, more kind and considerate and more compassionate to the less fortunate. Let us make being pro-life and having Respect for Life more than slogans, but a living reality.

In closing, let us pray each day for the leaders of our country that God might guide them in making wise and just decisions that will lead to a more lasting peace.

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