

A Preview of the Catholic Bishops' Respect Life Program

"Created, Loved, Redeemed by God. Priceless!"

BY Susan E. Wills

Respect Life Sunday, October 1, 2006, marks the start of the 35th annual Respect Life educational program of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. That day, and throughout the month of October, parishes across the country sponsor a variety of events and activities to help deepen respect for human life in all stages and conditions of dependency.

The theme of this year's program is Created, loved, redeemed by God. Priceless!

This year's Respect Life packet features six articles on topics of current interest. They are available in both pamphlet-length printed versions (great for pamphlet racks and Sunday bulletin inserts) and in full-length versions on the accompanying CD.

Western civilization is rooted in the principle that human rights and dignity inhere to every individual as a creature made in God's likeness, and possessing attributes of intellect, reason, conscience, and free will. America's founders freely acknowledged their debt to this principle in establishing a government of, for, and by the people, in contrast to one imposed by royal succession or Platonic guardians.

Of course, one need not profess the Christian faith or, indeed, any faith to recognize that the existence of a secure, just, free, and prosperous society depends on the recognition of every individual's right to life. Every human is by nature unique, unrepeatable, and priceless.

But many cultures and political systems even today value humans by a purely utilitarian calculus. Some individuals enjoy power and privilege; others are dehumanized and treated as pawns of the state or pests that must be eradicated.

These observations may have brought to readers' minds nations under totalitarian rulers who use terror, genocide, and infanticide to maintain control. But this same mentality has made inroads in our culture, too.

The death toll from Roe v. Wade would suggest that, for many, unborn children are the greatest perceived threat to our security and happiness. Today, some hospital review boards treat patients who are clinging to life or coping with incurable disabling conditions as unprofitable burdens who'd best be dehydrated to death. And we can't overlook the researchers at some of our most prestigious universities who dissect and destroy living human embryos with less apparent concern for their lives than schoolboys display in slicing roundworms.

Two articles, in particular, may interest NRL News readers. Rev. Tad Pacholczyk, Ph.D., of the National Catholic Bioethics Center has put together a concise and eminently clear discussion of "The Ethics of Stem Cell Research" in which he addresses all eight current types of stem cell research. Here's an example of his easy-to-follow reasoning:

"In the United States we have a stringent federal law, the Bald Eagle Protection Act, passed in 1940, that protects not only the national bird, the bald eagle, but also that bird's eggs. If you chanced upon some of those eggs in a nest out in the wilderness, it would be illegal for you to destroy them. ... By force of law, we acknowledge the scientific truth that the eagle's egg (that is to say, the embryonic eagle inside that egg) is the same creature as the beautiful bird that we witness flying overhead. ... If bald eagles are valuable, ... then it is right and fitting to protect them at all stages of their existence.

"The same logic holds for humans, who are valuable not for pragmatic but for intrinsic reasons. It is rather striking how ... when it comes to our own human life, we go through mental gymnastics to dissociate ourselves from our own humble embryonic origins."

Given the confused and misleading media reports on stem cell research and cloning, Fr. Tad's article will greatly assist all of us non-science majors to sift the truth from the hype, the good from the bad research.

The second article—"Partial-Birth Abortion: A Bridge Too Far"—examines ten ways that the public debate over the legality of partial-birth abortion (PBA) has changed America. By insisting that even this abhorrent method of killing a four-fifths delivered child be sheltered under the mantle of *Roe v. Wade*, the abortion industry staked out an indefensible position.

In the period before PBA became widely known, it was difficult to engage the public on abortion. Many were uninterested in "politics" and others swayed by the compelling stories of the difficult circumstances women might face trying to raise a child alone, and "it" wasn't really human yet anyway, right?

With PBA, the unborn child's humanity and the abortionist's lack thereof were obvious for anyone to see. The undecideds joined pro-life ranks. Journalists who for years had taken at face value abortion industry press releases (and privately agreed with their every word) grew more skeptical. Folks began to vote their pro-life convictions to a greater degree and elected like-minded lawmakers to state and federal office. This, in turn, produced more pro-life laws. Unintended pregnancies and abortions began to steadily decline.

Today, as ever, the power to end abortion rests with the U.S. Supreme Court. Thankfully, its membership has changed since the Court's shocking 2000 decision in *Stenberg v. Carhart*. *Carhart* invalidated Nebraska's ban on partial-birth abortion (and by extension the bans of 29 other states) by making the notorious "health exception" ever more capacious and by feigning confusion over statutory language that was clear enough for ordinary mortals to understand. Congress passed a federal ban on partial-birth abortion (numerous times, in fact) and eventually, a pro-life President signed it into law.

Three challenges to the federal ban have succeeded in the lower courts on the basis of *Carhart*, and two of those appellate decisions will be reviewed by the Supreme Court this term. Oral arguments in the cases styled *Gonzales v. Carhart* and *Gonzales v. Planned Parenthood* are scheduled for November 8. The Court, under its new Chief Justice John Roberts, has the opportunity to end this inhumane practice and, perhaps, to set the course of abortion law in a pro-life direction at long last. Exciting times!

Respect Life materials can be downloaded from the Pro-Life Secretariat's web site at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/rlp0607.htm> and purchased by calling toll-free: (866) 582-0943.

Susan E. Wills is associate director for education of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.