



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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### Pastoral Letter on Pro-life Matters

My fellow Catholics and men and women of good will, the Catholic Church in the United States has for many years observed October as Respect Life Month. Our faith challenges us to revere the human being from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death, so we recall more intensely this month what is always true: that every human being has been created by God and, for that reason alone, deserves respect for his or her physical life and the opportunity to experience conditions that allow for human flourishing.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago seized on the image of Jesus' seamless garment (see *John 19:23-24*) to speak of the inter-connectedness of the various dimensions of human life that should be protected and cherished. The image unites concerns for humanity around key protections for life and the promotion of human flourishing in matters such as people's access to food and clean water, the right to an authentic ethnic or regional culture, respect for freedom of conscience, renunciation of torture, providing all adults with meaningful work and fostering peace among nations and groups.

A garment, however, needs a hem to keep it from fraying at the edges and coming apart. That hem for the seamless garment that unites the many life issues is respect for the physical life of the human being. Whether it is capital punishment, assisted suicide, euthanasia, abortion or infanticide, these assaults on a human being's physical life disrespect the person and make irrelevant any other rights or needs. These evils demand our vigorous opposition and positive efforts to find remedies for the problems they pretend to solve.

With respect to the taking of human life, abortion stands out for its cruelty, not only because the unborn child lacks the possibility of self-defense and the ability to advocate for his or herself but also because the child has committed no evil that could justify the taking of his or her life. The unborn child's offense is simply that he or she exists. His or her humanity is accorded no value. As Pope Francis has said, abortion is an extreme example of the throw-away culture that masquerades as wisdom in contemporary society.

Pope St. John XXIII used the phrase *the signs of the times* in 1961, when he convoked the Second Vatican Council. It reflects Jesus' comment to the Pharisees and Sadducees that *you know how to judge the appearance of the sky but you cannot judge the signs of the times* – they did not understand that in Jesus the long-awaited Messiah had appeared (*Matthew 16:3*). If we judge rightly *the signs of the times* in our country, we understand why the American bishops have called abortion “the pre-eminent issue.”

All the life issues contained in the seamless garment matter, but some are more urgent at a certain time and place than others. The people of the United States in the first half of the

nineteenth century read the *signs of the times* and understood that slavery was the pre-eminent issue of their time, even though there was considerable agitation over immigration, public education, labor and capital relations and religious freedom for Catholics. Slavery was the issue that most deeply divided the country, as abortion does now, and it was over slavery that the Civil War was fought. As Abraham Lincoln put it, citing Jesus Christ: “*A house divided against itself cannot stand.*” I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.” A country that claims to honor “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” for its citizens cannot remain permanently divided over how it will treat the unborn child.

Those who support abortion access have read *the signs of the times* and have concluded that abortion is the pre-eminent issue. They have encouraged leaders across America to put their eggs in that basket in the pursuit of political power. That is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. We who support the value of every human being should be just as astute in recognizing the importance of the abortion issue as are its proponents. All of the life issues depend on preserving the physical life of the human being, which is precisely what abortion attacks.

We West Virginians live in a state that has recently passed legislation that restricts abortion more sharply than in many other states. This law is actually saving lives. But it is not enough to simply let the child be born. We have to create positive conditions for the child and help pregnant women whose circumstances of life may push them toward abortion. We must be pro-woman as well as pro-child. As Pope St. John Paul II urged, we must show a “radical solidarity” with pregnant women who need our support.

How do we serve both mother and child? The US Bishops’ Conference initiated a program called “Walking with Moms in Need.” It connects parishes with pregnancy resource centers in their area so that the parishes can offer tangible support such as volunteers, diapers, formula and other baby needs, and financial help. Some parishes have taken advantage of that program while others have shown initiative on their own. St. Francis of Assisi Parish in St. Albans, with the help of the local Knights of Columbus, started a baby pantry called “Little Blessings” to provide clothing and other things babies need. St. Joseph’s Parish in Martinsburg opened Mary’s Refuge earlier this year for pregnant women with nowhere to live. Up to nine women can live there for a year after the birth of their child, receiving various services before and after they give birth. St. Francis de Sales Parish in Morgantown has planted a garden to grow fresh vegetables for families in need. Is your parish partnered with a local pregnancy resource center in Walking with Moms in Need or engaged in some other outreach to pregnant women, new mothers and young children?

On a diocesan level, on October 5 of this year the Office of Social Ministries, directed by Kathy Barton, sponsored the first-ever Life Expo in Wheeling, bringing together more than 20 organizations dedicated to serving women and children in need. The goal was to show our parish communities that wrap-around services exist in this region to care for pregnant mothers and their born and unborn children who may be at risk. Did anyone from your parish attend Life Expo?

I should not neglect to mention Catholic Charities of West Virginia’s “Birth to Three” program, which tracks young children for developmental deficiencies, such as hearing or vision

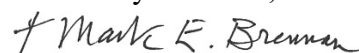
impairments, and finds appropriate help. This is a true service to poorer families and is in addition to the counseling services, financial assistance and disaster relief efforts that Catholic Charities already offers. Our Church, as you can see, is already engaged around the state in efforts to support pregnant women and young children, even as we strive to do more.

The state of West Virginia has stepped up with some support for pregnant women and families, including creating a fund to assist organizations working to provide material support and other assistance to pregnant women and new babies, expanding the adoption tax credit and enhancing eligibility for early intervention services for adopted children. The state could do more by helping to pay attorneys' fees that are a hardship for some adoptive parents and by expanding support for kinship families. It could provide an enhanced child tax credit against state income tax obligations and make credit payments to families monthly rather than waiting until after taxes are filed (a happy feature of the now-abandoned federal child tax credit expansion during the pandemic). Paid parental leave for government employees would help young families, as would funding tax incentives for private businesses to provide paid parental leave or to make childcare available and affordable for their employees. Our Mountain State is already a leader in curtailing the practice of abortion, but we could also be a leader in supporting mothers, children and families that call West Virginia home.

In discussing abortion and the help we should offer pregnant women and their families, I do not discount the importance of other issues. Some of our political leaders want to restore the death penalty, which West Virginia abolished in 1965. Violence begets violence, not social peace. Our state can do better than to revert to using the same violence that criminals have employed. Respect for human life also means recognizing the humanity of immigrants and racial and sexual minorities and challenging those who demonize them. All of God's children deserve respect and fair treatment. These are only some of the concerns we must have as disciples of Jesus Christ. His seamless garment holds them all together.

The Lord Jesus teaches us *love one another as I have loved you*. But our concerns and the rights of the living are irrelevant if a person is dead. I have focused on abortion as the pre-eminent issue dividing our people because that is what my reading of the *signs of the times* tells me. I judge that passively allowing the killing of unborn children has already made other forms of violence against persons easier to accept. The hem of the seamless garment, already ripped, must be repaired, lest the garment itself disintegrate. *You shall not kill*, says God. We must first respect the physical life of the unborn child and then apply our energies and talents to provide a more just society for that child and the child's family so that, striving to reach our full stature in Christ, we may be, as St. Irenaeus taught eighteen centuries ago, "the glory of God: the human being fully alive."

Sincerely in Christ,



+Mark E. Brennan  
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston