

WHAT IS THE WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE?

The WCC is the public policy voice of the state's Roman Catholic Bishops. It was founded in 1969 by the Bishops of Wisconsin. The Conference seeks to fulfill the vision of Vatican Council II, which called upon the Church to be more involved in the world.

With the message of the Gospel and the social teachings of the Church as its foundation, the WCC offers a specifically Catholic contribution to state and federal public policy debates. The Conference also offers a statewide response to issues common to its five dioceses. It achieves this in several ways:

- Serves as an advocate on matters related to the interests and values of the Church;
- Provides lawmakers and other decision leaders with studied positions on social and moral issues;
- Offers a forum for diocesan personnel to meet, exchange information, deliberate and recommend policies or actions;
- Formulates and publishes opinions and positions on legislation and public policy.

STRUCTURE

The Bishops of Wisconsin comprise the Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference. The Board meets three times a year to review issues and set the WCC's legislative agenda. For more information or to subscribe to the WCC's Capitol Report newsletter contact:

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A CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC:

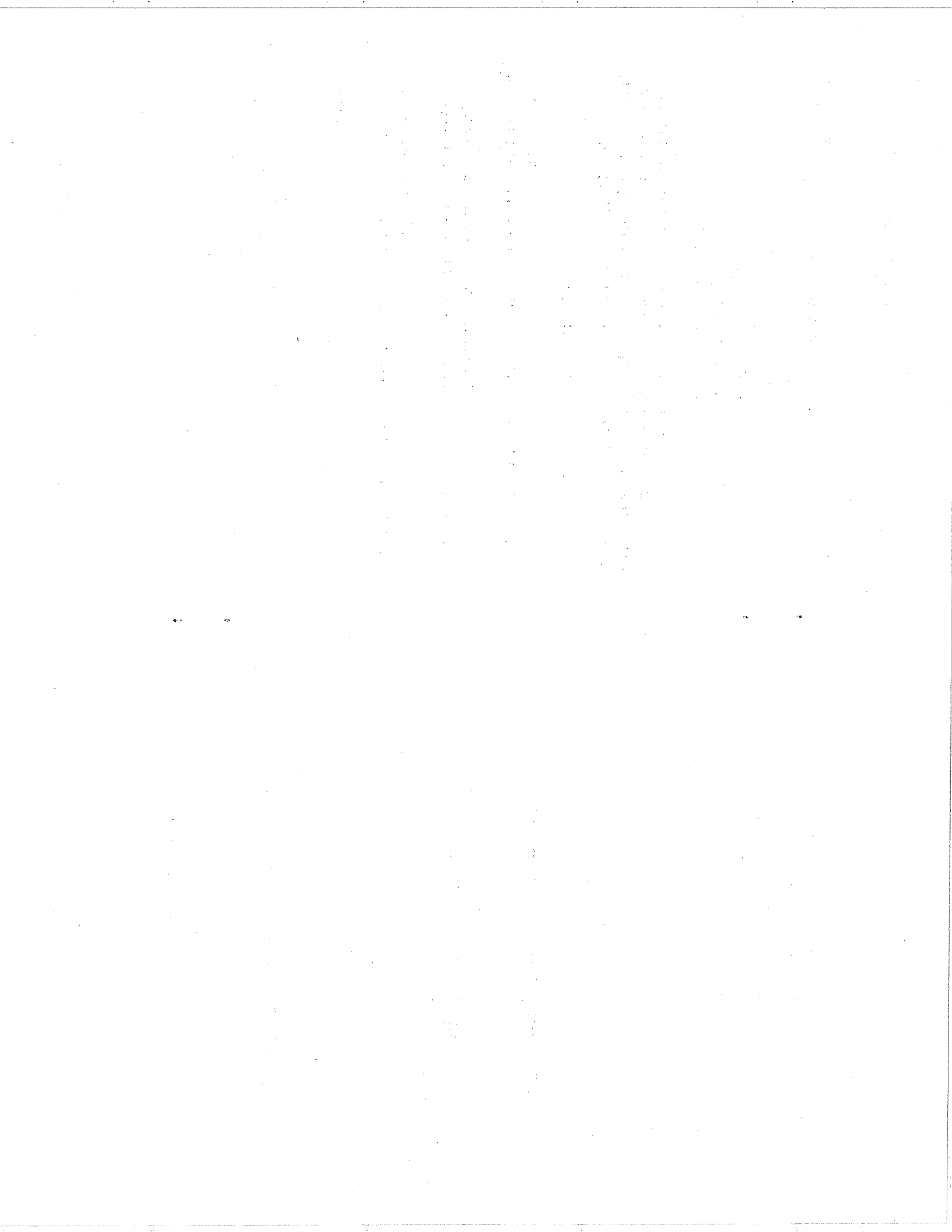
A Demand of Discipleship

A Statement by the

Wisconsin Catholic Conference

January 1997

Second Edition



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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1989, acting through the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) we issued a statement on the need to apply a "consistent life ethic" to our personal and public decisions. This statement, "The Consistent Life Ethic: A Demand of Discipleship", was well received in both Catholic and non-Catholic circles.

Events since the first edition of this statement offer reminders that a discussion of the consistent life ethic is always pertinent to our lives as disciples in the Church and to our responsibilities as citizens in the community.

For all people of good will and especially for Catholics, any reflection on the sacredness of life can now draw strength and support from Pope John Paul II and his powerful encyclical Evangelium Vitae, (the Gospel of Life). In this encyclical, the Holy Father gives flesh to an idea that is prevalent in the documents of the Second Vatican Council: each human being born on this earth has a unique sacredness, worth, and dignity.

Evangelium Vitae reminds all of us that human dignity is not derived from some kind of "contract" with society, but is given to each by the Creator. The sacredness of each person does not depend on accomplishments, social rank, nor human recognition. This sacredness, and the human rights that flow from it come, as President John F. Kennedy said, "not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God."

These rights and the dignity they reflect are not something added on to life. They come from the uniqueness of each of us as persons created by God, loved by God, and willed by God. As Christians we believe that each person is welcomed into a friendship with God that binds all of us together as one family. Hence, each of us is called to be our brother's and sister's keeper when life and dignity are endangered.

Evangelium Vitae also offers a realistic appraisal of how the world has responded to the good news of life. The Pope has found many positive signs of a renewed commitment to life and the call to be our brother's and sister's keeper. Yet he has also taken note of trends and developments that support not a life ethic but a "culture of death."

The encyclical reinforces some key themes in the first edition of our earlier statement. The Pope reminds us that while individual passages in Scripture seem to justify the taking of life, the Bible's overall message is "a forceful appeal" for respect for life. (#40) Evangelium Vitae also calls attention

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to the need to halt abortions not merely by laws that restrict the practice but also by policies and structures that are friendly to families. (#59) And, we are called to engage in dialogue with those who do not share our beliefs. (#95)

The consequences of a consistent life ethic are clear. If human life is sacred, then it must be protected. Human life is not more sacred at one point than another. People of one race or nation are not more sacred than others. The lives of the rich are not more sacred than those of the poor.

In the years since our first consistent life ethic statement appeared, debates over the value and dignity of life have been pointed, sometimes heated. Discussions over abortion and end of life issues have intensified and been influenced by technology. Growing concerns over crime and violence have rekindled old debates over the death penalty. Concern about the effects of some social welfare programs have sometimes made us forget the need to affirm the dignity of life of the poor.

Perhaps most distressing of all, the last several years has seen a decline in the civility of our public dialogue and discussion. This development has implications for our commitment to the value of life. It is more difficult to affirm life when we deny the good will and decency of our fellow citizens.

Though our still too violent and overly selfish society has much to learn in trying to live out a consistent life ethic, we remain confident and hopeful that the years ahead will show continued progress in our efforts to respond to the demands of discipleship and that more of us will apply the consistent life ethic to our values, words and deeds.

It is in that spirit of hope that we offer this second edition of The Consistent Life Ethic: A Demand of Discipleship and invites all people to reflect on its message.

I. WHAT IS A CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC?

1. An ethic is a value which guides a person toward the right decision when confronted with a choice. A consistent life ethic assists the individual disciple in making right decisions by affirming that the value of human life occupies a central place in the Christian's response to the call of the Gospel to choose life over death.
2. Simply defined, a consistent life ethic directs the disciple to evaluate his or her choices, be they public or private, in light of their impact on human life and dignity in all its stages and forms. A consistent life ethic will be a point

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of reference that keeps a person focused on the gift of life that is central to creation. It is a compass that keeps one's devotion to the value of life from being blown off course by the winds of self-interest or the undertow of other values. As such, the consistent life ethic builds on the values affirmed by the teachings of the second Vatican Council, which state that the beginning, subject and goal of all social institutions is the human person.⁽¹⁾

3. While the consistent life ethic is very much a part of the Christian tradition, it is also found in all other major religious and moral traditions. Accordingly, just as God calls all people to holiness and a choice of life over death, so do Catholics invite all people of good will to consider the demands of Christian discipleship and share in the challenge of living up to this ethic in all aspects of their lives.

II. SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

4. As Pope John Paul II has written, God has expressed the mandate to value life since Cain first posed the question "am I my brother's keeper?" The resounding "yes" with which God answered Cain's question in the Book of Genesis has been repeated throughout the Scriptures and across the ages.⁽²⁾

5. Reverence for life is grounded in the truth that every person is created in the image and likeness of God. Thus, reverence for life was at the core of the first covenants between God and the chosen people of Israel. The accountability for life referred to in Genesis was a principal part of the demands God made of Noah following the flood (Gn 9:6). Later, in explaining the covenant of Sinai, God, through Moses, reminds Israel that "I have set before you life and death. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live. . . ." (Dt. 30:19). Later on, the wisdom literature affirms that wisdom, justice, and kindness lead one to life while evil and injustice are the road to death (Prv. 11:19, 12:28, 21:21) and that a person will be given whichever of the two he or she chooses (Sir. 15:17). The Gospel teaches with equal clarity that love is the measure of discipleship (1 Jn. 4:20-21). The disciple is to be prepared to abandon all worldly possessions (Lk. 14:33, Mk. 10:21). Indeed, in living our lives we are to follow Christ's example and do just as He has done (Jn. 13:15) even if this means assuming the burden of the cross (Lk. 14:26-27). Only such a single-minded and consistent commitment to Jesus' example fulfills the demands of discipleship, and only when we do His will can we expect the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 6:9-13). Finally, as disciples we are not to hide our faith under a bushel (Mk. 4:21-24, Lk. 8:16) but rather be a light unto the world (Mt. 5:13-16). Jesus taught us the mandate to love God and neighbor is the greatest commandment, (Mk. 12:28-34, Mt. 22:36-37, Lk. 10:26-27) greater even than faith itself (1 Cor. 13:13).

6. We would do well to pay special heed to the implications of the great commandment. For, in calling us to love our neighbor as ourselves, Jesus insists that we value the lives and needs of others no less than our own. The right to life of the unborn baby, of the ill and infirm grandparent, of the despicable criminal, of the AIDS patient, is to be affirmed and protected as though it belonged to us. In addition, the lives of the refugee from Indochina, the welfare recipient from Illinois, and the homeless in our own community each possess a dignity that matches our own. When we respond to that need, we acknowledge not only their dignity but ours as well.

7. Taken in their entirety, the scriptures make it abundantly clear that discipleship imposes considerable demands on the believer. For a life of faith, by definition, is one which embraces the entire community as well as the living God and, by intention, one which includes all in need, especially those whose vulnerability requires special care and support. Thus, discipleship means recognizing a bond between our personal lives and our public morality--a bond that is strengthened every time we practice the consistent life ethic.

III. THE NEED FOR A CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC

8. Though at the core of our values and central to our ability to participate in the gift of creation, the value of life is under attack today as it has been since Cain first disregarded the obligation to be his brother's keeper. Both the gift of life itself and the human dignity necessary for the fulfillment of the human person are challenged anew by a "culture of death." We need look no further than our own communities to see evidence of this:

- The gift of life is rejected in each of the 1.5 million abortions that take place each year in the United States, and the 13,000 that annually occur in Wisconsin.
- The gift of life is denied when doctors trained to preserve life assert that they have a right to euthanize the elderly, infirm, or other dependent patients whose lives fall some artificial test of value and meaning.
- The gift of life is demeaned when angry people hurl racial epithets at those of different colors or nationalities or who are in some other ways different than the majority.
- The gift of life is degraded by pornography and other forms of sexual exploitation that reduce human beings to objects that serve the interests of those in a more powerful position.

3. Of those listed, which do you personally consider the one that most needs to be addressed in the light of the consistent life ethic?
4. What do Jesus and the Gospels have to say about each of these issues?
5. Is the Church currently helping or confusing the debate on these issues? Can you cite examples to support your position?
6. Choose two of the aforementioned life issues and discuss what you feel called to do or to stop doing as an individual, as part of a family, as a church member, in your place of work or as a citizen?

Approaches

The Bishops say, "a life of faith, by definition, is one which embraces the entire community as well as the living God and, by intention, one which includes all in need, especially those whose vulnerability require special care and support. Thus, discipleship means recognizing a bond between our personal lives and our public morality -- a bond that is strengthened every time we practice the consistent life ethic."

The bishops encourage us both as private citizens and as members of the church to advocate for the implementation of the consistent life ethic in public policy and personal behavior. Our discipleship with Jesus imposes this responsibility upon us.

1. How should we view the bishops' teaching in light of the principle of separation of church and state?
2. What avenues do you see that you have as a private citizen for promoting the consistent life ethic?
3. Can you accept the reality of imperfect legislation as described by the bishops?
4. What would you consider inappropriate methods for carrying out a civil discourse on the issues?
5. How, if at all, will the bishops' statement change your own involvement in promoting the consistent life ethic?

THE CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The Concept

The bishops define the consistent life ethic as follows: *the consistent life ethic directs the disciple to evaluate his or her choices, be they public or private, in light of their impact on human life and dignity in all its stages and forms. This reverence for all human life and its dignity, according to the bishops, is grounded in the truth that every person is created in the image and likeness of God.*

1. If you were asked to explain this teaching of our bishops to a neighbor, what would you say?
2. What do you understand by the term *human dignity*?
3. Is this approach practical as a moral guide in your private life? Why or why not? What problems if any does it raise?
4. Is this approach practical as a moral guide to public policy? Why or why not? What problems if any does it raise?
5. From your experience does the Church currently "practice what it preaches" in regard to this teaching?

The Issues

The bishops identify several issues and areas where there is a need to apply this consistent life ethic today. These include:

- The treatment of the poor and marginalized
- Abortion
- Birth technologies
- Euthanasia and assisted suicide
- Capital punishment
- Violence - domestic, civic and international
- Pornography

1. Would you add other issues or areas to that list? Which ones?
2. Are there any in the list that you personally would be inclined to remove or at least want to further qualify, so as to allow for some exceptions? Which ones? Why?

- The gift of life is destroyed when violence and the use of force is used to solve disputes.
- The gift of life is devalued when vulnerable people, be they children or the elderly or the poor, are denied access to the support of the community and blamed for social problems that are properly laid at the feet of the entire society.
- The gift of life is diminished by whatever is opposed to life, violates the integrity of the human person, insults human dignity, or treats people as means or mere tools for some other end.

9. There is often a common element to actions or attitudes that devalue life. This element is the effort to rationalize a decision against life as something else. At times such decisions are cloaked in the rhetoric of "choice" or "dignity" or "fostering responsibility." Such rhetoric masks the true nature of the decision and its impact on the lives of the vulnerable persons affected.

10. In reality, however, we choose against life with our selfish interests at heart, not those of our neighbor. At such times we seek freedom from our responsibility to be Christ to our neighbor. Yet such freedom is an illusion. For genuine freedom is found in our willingness to accept the truth that God has revealed to us - the truth that proclaims we are indeed our brother's keeper within the embrace of a common human family.

11. The Lord who wills the salvation of all people asks from each of us a commitment to be our brother's keeper. This requires a commitment to the gift of life and the people who are stewards of that gift. This commitment in turn depends on the willingness of each disciple to reflect on the Gospel message concerning the gift of life. It also relies on a willingness to bear witness to this message through both personal behavior and social interaction with the wider public, a public made stronger by the presence of a community of disciples in its midst.

IV. THE CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC AND PERSONAL CHOICES

12. The word "disciple" means literally, "one who learns." As disciples of Christ, each of us is personally challenged to learn how to live a life in His spirit. Christian spirituality, in turn, is not to be seen as a mere attribute, but rather as a process in which we gradually discern and apply the lessons of our discipleship. In this journey the disciple is "transformed in the image of Christ for the sake of others."⁶ In this process, we pass from the servant, who does not

understand the will and purpose of God, to that of a "friend of Christ."⁽⁴⁾

13. Such a transformation is ongoing. Though never perfected in this life, the effort to become more fully Christian will make the world a better place and is vital if a consistent life ethic is to overcome a culture of death.

14. Each of us is created in the image of a triune God whose three persons interrelate in eternal love. Therefore, we cannot reflect God's image unless we too live in relationships with other people. Thus, our personal behavior has public consequences. This link between the personal and the social is grounded in the inseparable union between our inner conversion as disciples and our obligation to bring appropriate remedies to institutions and living conditions in the community.⁽⁶⁾ Every disciple, no matter how devout, must support efforts to teach, and model, and share a consistent life ethic in his or her relationships, be they in the church's parish life, the work place, or our political process.

V. A CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC AND LIFE IN THE CHURCH

15. Celebrating Life in Liturgy. The Catholic's emphasis on life must begin with the liturgy because "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows." This liturgy calls the faithful to be one in holiness. The liturgy, and especially the Eucharist, pours forth God's grace and sanctifies humans to Christ.⁽⁶⁾ The Mass is a time when the community celebrates its life in Christ and when we disciples affirm our values, offer hope to each other, and proclaim the equality of all in Christ (Gal. 3:28). As a sacrifice, the Mass confronts us with the fact that our oneness with Christ and our commitment to Gospel values involves giving of ourselves for the sake of others, especially the weak and vulnerable.

16. The Eucharist as a Celebration of Life. It is in the Eucharist that the disciple intimately encounters the Christian community in worship and celebrates the Gospel and God's promise of life in all its richness. It is in the Eucharist, which means "thanksgiving," that we say yes to the gift of life and of Christ's life-giving love. It is in the Eucharist that we celebrate, remember, and express our belief in the new covenant. The Eucharist, like life itself, is a sharing of ourselves and a celebration of Christ as self sacrifice. We share in our gratitude for that self-sacrifice. The Eucharist is also the time when we remember the somber truth that self-sacrifice includes suffering, most especially suffering for the sake of others.

17. The Eucharistic banquet symbolizes the truth that the fullness of

FOOTNOTES

1. New Catholic Encyclopedia, McGraw Hill, New York, N.Y., 1967 Volume 5, P. 570.
2. Evangelium Vitae, #19.
3. Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, S.J. "Spiritual Roots of Social Justice," Lecture, 1994.
4. Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1972.
5. Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1888.
6. Sacrosanctum Concilium, #10.
7. Callahan, Sidney "Response to Brian Hehir," Consistent Ethic of Life, Sheed & Ward, 1988 p. 240.
8. Evangelium Vitae, #59.
9. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, "A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue," Gannon Lecture, Fordham University, December 6, 1983.
10. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, "Linkage and Logic of the Abortion Debate," June 7, 1984.
11. Pope John Paul II, Crossing the Threshold of Hope, Albert A. Knopf, Inc p. 206.
12. Evangelium Vitae, #56.
13. Gaudium et Spes, #43.
14. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation," (1985), p. 7.
15. Bernardin, "A Consistent Ethic of Life:...", op. cit.
16. Evangelium Vitae, #73.
17. Evangelium Vitae, #90.

49. Affirming Life Through Civil Discourse. It is important for Catholics to apply the consistent life ethic to the methods as well as the goals of their involvement in public debate. Accordingly, our participation in civil matters must itself be civil, both in its expression of our ideas and in its treatment of those who oppose us--no matter how uncivil they may be. Loving those with whom we disagree is difficult. But, unless we love, our opposition will be an instrument of oppression rather than of conversion.

50. The two most powerful weapons we as disciples bring to any debate are the force of our arguments and our personal example and that of the institutional church in expressing them. Therefore, we must insist that our contributions to debates address the merits of the issues. Criticism, when necessary, must focus on policies and their effect on people, never on the people who believe in those policies.

51. Participation in public debates should enlighten, not enrage, challenge not chastise, discern not demonize. A disciple who models the consistent life ethic in his or her public statements will speak in ways that foster solidarity among people. A community blessed with such solidarity will possess an enduring foundation on which to ground its public witness to human life and dignity.

VII. CONCLUSION

52. As is made clear in the Gospels, much is demanded from those to whom much is given (Lk 12:48). As Catholics, we possess a rich legacy of faith and a venerable tradition of social thought that is as relevant to the needs of today as it was in the time of Isaiah, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Cardinal Newman, and Dorothy Day. As Mother Theresa has taught us by her example, this legacy of Catholic social thought must infuse our efforts to evangelize both individual and society in ways that make both more committed to the dignity of human life. Like the servant who buried his talents rather than use them to add to his master's holdings (Lk 19:20-27), we will be found unworthy if we fail to heed the call of all disciples to fully engage the modern world and offer it our vision and ethic of life.

January 1997

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland.....MilwaukeeArchdiocese
 Bishop Robert J. Banks.....Green Bay Diocese
 Bishop Raymond L. Burke.....La Crosse Diocese
 Bishop William H. Bullock.....Madison Diocese
 Bishop Raphael M. Fliss.....Superior Diocese

human existence is realized only when we invite the divine to participate in our lives. This participation in Christ as life-giving gift is symbolized at Mass, but must be a reality at all times. As disciples, we should reflect on whether we have lost this awareness in our ever more secular society. Therefore, it is imperative that liturgies, which include readings or themes on life, regularly connect the demands of a consistent life ethic to our personal choices and behavior.

18. Ongoing Education About Life. The teachings of the Church are rich in materials on the beauty and dignity of life. Catechists and educators are encouraged to present these in ways that communicate that the consistent life ethic is one way the individual Catholic models the values taught in these lessons. Specific efforts in this regard might include:

- using bulletin inserts and study guides provided by Catholic agencies and offices;
- making the consistent life ethic a subject for parish study groups;
- challenging individual parishioners to identify activities and practices that destroy or demean life and reflect upon connections between those activities and their personal values and choices;
- integrating and infusing the consistent life ethic with the curriculum in schools and religious education programs during Respect Life Month or some other appropriate season of the Church/academic year.

19. Parish and Diocesan Organizations. The successful application of a consistent life ethic to parish activities will be enhanced if existing diocesan and parish structures facilitate it. To this end, we encourage greater collaboration between all diocesan and parish agencies, especially the parish council and those Respect Life, Social Ministry, Family Life, and Education committees. All should regularly seek ways to communicate the ethic to those inside and outside the Church with whom they work and to apply it in their ministry. Other, more specific possibilities might include:

- holding periodic joint meetings of Social Ministry and Respect Life Committees;
- encouraging some parishioners to serve as members of both committees;

● a commitment by those involved in Respect Life activities and Social Ministry activities to share at least one common goal in their annual advocacy and educational activities;

● encouraging individuals, whether involved in Respect Life or Social Ministry activities, to take a broad view of pro-life issues and to take advantage of every opportunity to support each others efforts;

● a commitment by diocesan and parish educational leaders to teach the consistent life ethic as part of the Catholic social justice tradition;

● regular reference to the consistent life ethic by WCC staff, diocesan staff, and individuals when speaking out on public issues.

VI. AFFIRMING THE CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC IN SOCIETY: CONNECTING LIFE AT THE CENTER AND THE MARGINS

20. From the Gospel mandate that the Church go forth and "make disciples of all nations," (Mt. 28:19) flows the need to share the demands of that discipleship, including the consistent life ethic.

21. Although the disciple may articulate a consistent life ethic from a Catholic Christian point of view, its message and values are inherent in the natural law tradition embraced by the founders of our nation. There is no greater affirmation of the truth that life is an inalienable right than that found in the Declaration of Independence. From our nation's birth, the idea that is America has been entwined to the notion that life is sacred, that all people have an equal claim to it, and that society, acting at times through its government, has a mandate to secure the right to life. Hence, when Catholics and others embrace the value of life and exhort others to do so, we are not imposing an alien morality on our fellow citizens. Rather, we are calling them home to our most basic of national ideals.

22. For Catholics in the United States at the close of the 20th century, this presents a special challenge and opportunity. In the United States, we Catholics have matured from our status as an immigrant minority viewed as a foreign sect to a confident and full-fledged partner in the social, economic, and political mainstream of our nation's life. We now participate in public debates with vigor and with a willingness to incorporate our social justice tradition into those debates. The consistent life ethic is a special effort to "articulate and put into practice what is implicitly given in the Gospel message."⁽⁷⁾

enhance human life.

44. The Value of Coalitions. As the NCCB also observed in the Pastoral Plan, advocacy on behalf of life is neither the sole responsibility of Catholics nor limited to Catholic groups or agencies. Rather, it requires "widespread cooperation and collaboration."⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, since we live in a society that is pluralistic in both its political outlook and religious beliefs, we, as Catholics, "face the challenge of stating our case in non-religious terms which others of different faith convictions can find morally persuasive."⁽⁵⁾

45. In our pluralistic society, public policies grounded in the consistent life ethic will only be realized through coalitions -- and dialogue with others. Participation in such coalitions has enabled Catholic individuals and organizations to more effectively live out their discipleship. Participation in coalitions with those who disagree with some Catholic teachings is not a betrayal of the Church when the goals of the coalition advance the value and dignity of life. Accordingly, we encourage efforts to reach out to others and join forces with them when their issues of the moment are also our own. Not only do such coalitions help apply the consistent life ethic, they also offer a ministry of presence.

46. However, the disciple should always be discerning in his or her approach to such coalitions. This must be especially true with groups whose positions are at odds with some elements of Catholic social teaching. In such circumstances, Catholics should make appropriate efforts to encourage such groups to be more supportive of human life and dignity.

47. The Reality of Imperfect Legislation. It is also a sign of the times that a pluralistic democracy will often produce imperfect results. This situation presents the disciple with the need to make reasoned judgments about whether a specific law or proposal is acceptable if it fails to protect all life to the extent that the Gospel commands.

48. As the disciple does this, he or she must often take into account what is possible at a given moment in history. When it is not possible to completely repeal or undo a law or policy that is opposed to life, one may support proposals that limit the harm done and that reduce its negative consequences.⁽⁶⁾ If at times one must tolerate or endure a law that is incomplete in its protection of life, this must not discourage later efforts to affirm life more fully or protect it more completely. Furthermore, as disciples attempt to discern what is attainable, it is important that they not confine themselves to removing unjust laws but also to eliminating underlying causes of attacks on life, especially by ensuring proper support for families and motherhood.⁽⁷⁾

make special efforts to encourage those with influence in this area to be more respectful of human life and dignity in their work.

39. At the same time, all of us should be sobered by these trends, which reveal a lack of reverence for life and, for too many people, a loss of hope in what life can permit us to be. This despair is intimately linked to a loss of self respect in the person. Only when we lose respect for who we are and fail to appreciate what God has called us to be, do we become susceptible to destructive choices and behavior. The loss of self to drugs, sex, cynicism, abuse and other ills that destroy the inner person occurs only after a person has lost touch with God and the grace of that relationship. Thus any effort to urge the community to be more supportive of life has a spiritual aspect that links the individual disciple to the healing power of God.

40. Advocacy. The bishops of the Second Vatican Council affirmed that lay men and women have an active role to play in the whole life of the Church in the parish and at the national and international levels. This includes both penetrating the world with a Christian spirit and being witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society.⁽¹³⁾ Therefore, advocacy on behalf of human life and the quality of life, flows directly from the call each person receives to build up the Body of Christ that is our church.

41. This is why the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) specifically identified efforts to influence public policy as an important part of the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities, and why involvement in the public debates of our day remain a vital part of "witnessing Christ." A commitment to support, expand, and where appropriate, develop grass roots participation in public affairs is essential to applying a consistent life ethic to public policy.

42. Specific strategies and approaches to do this will vary. However, we stress the importance of affirming the value of life in debates on relevant issues whether they are local, statewide, national, or international. Efforts to foster involvement by individuals and parish committees in advocacy efforts, including those of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, and the dioceses are, therefore, to be encouraged. In this way, advocacy grounded in a consistent life ethic will build a greater sense of community within the Church at the same time it contributes to more just public policies.

43. Further, a consistent life ethic can do much to keep our community of faith together even when individual believers disagree over strategy and priorities. It reminds us that the Gospel was never intended to foster a competition between the faithful as to whose cause is the most important. Rather, it provides a common source from which flow many efforts to protect and

23. Catholics have "arrived" and now occupy a place at the center of American life. But this still relatively new status must never render us blind to the needs of others or deafen us to the cries of those vulnerable people at the edge of the village square. Rather, disciples must use their voices at the center of power to speak for those still at the margins of society who find their lives diminished and their dignity denied by natural and man-made threats.

24. The consistent life ethic can be invaluable in this regard. By the power of its logic and the strength of its inherent consistency, our life ethic has persuasive power across a broad range of issues.

25. The Poor and Marginalized. In Evangelium Vitae, the Pope writes forcefully about "shared responsibility for abortion" that is manifested in policies beyond the laws governing abortion. This responsibility is shared, not only by those who support laws and policies that make abortion legal and readily available, but also by "those who should have ensured but did not, effective policies in support of families, especially larger families and those with particular financial and educational needs."⁽⁸⁾

26. Thus does the Pope establish a link between our treatment of the poor and needy, especially when these include families with children, and our responsibility for the tragedy of abortion. Similarly, the debates over abortion, euthanasia, and poverty display another common element in contemporary attitudes that threaten life or human dignity. These threats tend to be directed at those who are vulnerable and dependent on others for their daily bread. A defining characteristic of rhetoric and policies that devalue life is that the need to rely on others somehow dehumanizes people and deprives them of their moral claim on the community's care and concern.

27. This is also seen in some of the harsh rhetoric and punitive attitudes expressed toward those who are economically dependent. A consistent life ethic will lead the disciple to stand against such attitudes and on the side of those made poor and dependent by a poverty of resources or spirit.

28. Abortion. Because the right to life is the most basic of all rights, and because unborn children are particularly innocent and defenseless, abortion retains a special priority among life issues. No life ethic that ignores the unborn's right to life can be called consistent. A consistent life ethic demands that the disciple grasp that the threat to life is found in many places. As Cardinal Joseph Bernardin pointed out on many occasions:

"If one contends, as we do, that the right of every unborn child should be protected from the moment of conception...then our moral, political,

and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth! As we must defend the right to life of the weakest among us, we must also be supportive of the quality of life of the powerless among us.

Consistency means we cannot have it both ways: we cannot urge a compassionate society and vigorous policies to protect the unborn and then argue that compassion and policies on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fibre of society."⁽⁹⁾

29. Our decision as disciples to apply the ethic systematically, by injecting it into issues whenever it is relevant, will strengthen the pro-life cause in general and the case against abortion in particular. Such an approach can sensitize society at large to the link between abortion and the pro-life implications of issues and policies concerning the family, the poor, the economy, the environment, and numerous other concerns. Far from diluting the efforts to protect life, a consistent life ethic gives these efforts new force.⁽¹⁰⁾

30. Birth Technologies. Another threat to life and the dignity of each person may also be found in the increasingly common practice of "genetic engineering" and other misuses of technology in an effort to assure that only desirable or perfect children are born into the world. All of us should applaud scientific advances that enable us to treat or prevent disease and defects while a child is still in the womb. We must remain vigilant, however, that such technology does not feed a desire to deny life to children who are born with disabilities or characteristics that society or the child's parents view as undesirable.

31. Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide. Euthanasia and assisted suicide are both acts that intend the death of the person and neither act is compatible with a consistent life ethic. In this sense they imply a human prerogative to appropriate for men and women that which God has reserved for God's own time and place.

32. As with abortion, advocates for euthanasia and assisted suicide exploit both natural human fears and a desire for freedom. Where the pro-abortion movement exploits a woman's fear at the prospect of raising a child, supporters of so-called "death with dignity" exploit the specter of prolonged pain and suffering. While those who justify abortion argue that the choice of an adult should prevail over the right to life of an unborn child, proponents of assisted suicide profess to be arguing for the right of persons to end their lives. However, neither use of freedom is compatible with a consistent life ethic.

33. No one is obligated to prolong life in cases of terminal illness when

the treatment is fruitless and burdensome. Nor is it wrong to accept death as the result of an illness or advanced age. However, fear of death and despair over the future never justify taking life or abandoning it. On the contrary, they present the disciple with a call to compassion and support for the dying person.

34. In this context, the appropriate response of a disciple facing the end of his or her own life or that of a loved one is mutual. Those caring for or attending to the dying person can, through a "ministry of presence," assure the disciple approaching death's door that the end will be as comfortable and free of suffering as possible, that life has value even in its weakened condition, that life has been a gift to all and that the suffering person is not a burden to be discarded. The disciple who is dying, may be called to model the acceptance of God's will in the face of our common mortality, to give a final witness to God's sovereignty over life by leaving the time and place of death to the Creator, and to show joy in anticipation of entering into eternal life.

35. Capital Punishment. The issue of the death penalty requires a different moral analysis than that of abortion, in that it generally involves persons who, unlike an unborn child, are morally culpable. As in the case of abortion, the death penalty is objectionable because it desensitizes the community to violence and by its use, sanctions violence as a response to evil when nonviolent means are sufficient.

36. As Pope John Paul II makes abundantly clear in his book, Crossing the Threshold of Hope, one is obligated to use nonviolent means against an aggressor when these are sufficient to protect life.⁽¹¹⁾ Evangelium Vitae reaffirms this by arguing that the modern penal system sufficiently protects the community from the offender thus making the moral use of the death penalty extremely rare if not practically nonexistent.⁽¹²⁾

37. In applying these teachings to the Wisconsin experience, we note that the state's founders rejected the use of capital punishment, in part due to the public's horror over a state execution. Events since that time have validated their judgment. A return to capital punishment would undermine the consistent life ethic in the lives of individual disciples and the community.

38. Violence As A Threat to Life. Any disciple committed to a consistent life ethic should be alarmed at increasing violence in our society. Such violence is found everywhere, in relationships between nations, in our communities and even in the home. Once almost exclusively a tragedy of adult behavior, violent behavior is now more common among our young people. Those with special influence over the content of our popular culture, especially in the mass media, bear a special measure of responsibility for these developments. Disciples should