

Religion Page Column

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A Consistent Ethic of Life

by Dean Feldmeyer

One of my favorite pastors and teachers of all time was the late Roman Catholic Cardinal Joseph Barnadin.

More than anyone else, it was he who influenced my thinking about not just abortion but all life and death issues which Christians must face. He called us to what he called a “Consistent Ethic of Life.”

It is not enough, he said, to tout the sacred value of life when talking about abortion and then forget about it when talking about war, capital punishment, care of the terminally ill, genetics, and how we treat the poor.

If life is sacred in one area then it must be sacred in every area. One life cannot be “less sacred” than another. It is not enough to be pro-life on one thing; we must be pro-life in everything.

Cardinal Bernadin used the metaphor of a “seamless garment.” This, he said, is how the Christian ethic of life is constructed. It is a whole. There are no gaps or weaknesses.

We may disagree on the practical applications of this ethic. We may argue about how this ethic is to be lived out in the day to day world, but we all agree on the basic premise that all life is sacred.

I, for instance, believe that abortion is a tragedy and that we should work fervently to reduce the number of abortions in this country. But the lives of the unborn children are not the only lives that have value, here. The lives of the mothers and the doctors who treat them are valueable as well.

So I do not agree that we should use violence, intimidation, and the threat of prison to force these women to bring their pregnancies to term. I believe, instead, that we should be offering them alternatives and love and help and support. And I do not think that is contrary to a consistent ethic of life.

I believe that a consistent ethic of life requires us to actually live the commandment of Jesus to love our enemies and not shoot, bomb or torture them, even if that means that we will suffer for our choice.

I believe that a consistent ethic of life calls us to love people who aren't like us -- people who have different color skin than ours, and people who have a different sexual orientation than ours, and people who belong to different political parties than we do.

I believe that a consistent ethic of life calls us to care about not just the length of a person's life but the depth and quality of it as well. I believe that we are called to heal those who are sick or injured, and feed those who are hungry, and educate those who uneducated, even if it means that we have to do with less.

I believe that to do anything else is to be inconsistent in our Christian ethic.

Jesus had a word for inconsistency.

He called it hypocrisy.

And he considered it one of the worst sins of all.

Thanks to Cardinal Bernadin for calling us out of our hypocrisy to a consistent ethic of life.