The Consistent Ethic of Life
Putting Morality and Spirituality into Practice

Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J.

The moral vision of the consistent ethic of life calls for conversion on both sides of the political spectrum. After examining the meaning and sources for this ethic, the author calls readers to a deeper awareness of how cultural prejudices and assumptions may have more to do with our political choices than the Gospel.

Life in our church and world reveals the urgent need for pastoral ministers to embody and express the consistent ethic of life. The consistent ethic of life offers us a profound perspective on living the good and holy life. This moral framework, proclaimed by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and now a centerpiece of the moral teachings of the U.S. bishops, challenges all of us to choose life in a wide variety of issues from abortion to war, often crossing the boundaries of liberal and conservative positions and raising questions about our deepest values.

Few, if any of us, escape this challenge. As a result, some aspects of this ethic may initially be upsetting in different ways for different people. Openness and patience, then, will be important and may lead to a serious examination of conscience. This article will first summarize the roots and meaning of the consistent ethic of life. Using the U.S. bishops’ 2003 statement on political responsibility, Faithful Citizenship, as guidance, it will then look at the challenge that the consistent ethic of life offers to our morality and spirituality. Finally, for examples it will consider two political realities that impact pastoral practices: the war in Iraq and the 2004 presidential election.

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The Consistent Ethic of Life

The consistent ethic of life is a moral vision that holds together many different issues and so offers direction for action in our personal and communal lives. The late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin articulated this perspective in the early 1980s and it has become a focus of the American Catholic bishops’ moral teaching. Pope John Paul II affirmed similar themes in his 1995 encyclical The Gospel of Life. These sources help us to answer three basic questions: (1) What is the consistent ethic of life? (2) Where does it come from? (3) What does it mean for our everyday lives?

Meaning and Purpose

What is the consistent ethic of life? It is a comprehensive ethical system that links together many different issues by focusing attention on the basic value of life. In his attempts to defend life, Cardinal Bernardin first joined the topics of abortion and nuclear war. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Cardinal Bernardin worked on two major committees of the U.S. bishops’ conference, one dealing with abortion, the other with war and nuclear arms. In meeting on these two issues, he found committed people concerned about one but not the other. Some of those who worked hard against abortion seemed open to the possibility of using nuclear arms in war, while some who worked against war were open to the practice of abortion. Puzzled by this inconsistency toward God’s gift of life, Cardinal Bernardin began working to bring the two groups together, emphasizing the linkage between the life issues.

He quickly expanded his understanding of the consistent ethic to include many other life issues. In the first of a series of talks, Cardinal Bernardin stated: “The spectrum of life cuts across the issues of genetics, abortion, capital punishment, modern warfare, and the care of the terminally ill” (Bernardin, 7). The cardinal also acknowledged that issues are distinct and different; capital punishment, for example, is not the same as abortion. Nevertheless, the issues are linked; the valuing and defense of life is central to both issues. Bernardin wrote: “When human life is considered ‘cheap’ or easily expendable in one area, eventually nothing is held as sacred and all lives are in jeopardy” (89).

Along with his consistent linking of distinct life issues, Cardinal Bernardin acknowledged that no individual or group can pursue all issues. Still, while concentrating on one issue, the individual or group must not be seen “as insensitive to or even opposed to other moral claims on the overall spectrum of life” (15). The consistent ethic of life rules out contradictory moral positions about the unique value of human life. It would be contradictory, for example, to be against abortion but for capital punishment, or to work against poverty but support assisted suicide.
The linkage of all life issues is, of course, the very heart of the consistent ethic of life. This linkage challenges us to move beyond the contradictions we may find in our own convictions about morality. Often these convictions seem to cluster around “conservative” or “liberal” viewpoints, as in the above examples. But the consistent ethic of life cuts across such divisions, calling us to respect the life in the womb, the life of a criminal, the life on welfare, the life of our enemy, the life of the dying. This moral vision, then, offers a challenging and comprehensive framework for responding to the ethical dilemmas of our time.

Sources

Where does the consistent ethic of life come from? Recent sources include the addresses and articles of Cardinal Bernardin, the teachings of the American Catholic bishops, and John Paul II’s encyclical *The Gospel of Life.* The ultimate source, however, is the Bible, especially the life and teaching of Jesus.

Cardinal Bernardin’s letters and talks have been collected in various books, including *Consistent Ethic of Life.* His emphasis has been continued in the teachings of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The conference has issued many documents over the years on specific topics and summarizes these teachings every presidential election in a statement on political responsibility.

Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *The Gospel of Life* is another bold and prophetic defense of life. Although it does not use the phrase, *The Gospel of Life* strongly affirms the consistent ethic of life. John Paul describes what is going on in our world today as a monumental abuse of life through drugs, war and arms, abortion, euthanasia, destruction of the environment, and unjust distribution of resources. This abuse is often caused and supported by the economic, social, and political structures of the nations. Thus the late Pope speaks of a “structure of sin” and a “culture of death” and a “conspiracy against life” (*Gospel of Life*, 12).

The Pope also proclaims the Christian understanding of the value of life. Created in God’s image, brought to abundant life in Jesus, called to everlasting life, every human being is sacred and social; every human being is a sign of God’s love. In much more detail than Cardinal Bernardin’s addresses, the Pope provides the foundation for building a culture of life by weaving together biblical texts that clearly proclaim human dignity.

The consistent ethic of life is ultimately rooted in Jesus, in whom the meaning and value of life are definitively proclaimed and fully given. Who is this Jesus? We have to be careful not to create Jesus in our own image. Rooted in his loving relationship with God, Jesus proclaimed God’s surprising reign. This is the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount who proclaims as blessed not the leaders of society but the meek and the mourning, the poor and the pure, the persecuted and the peacemaker (Matt 5:1-12). This is the Jesus who praises not power but reconciliation in the story about the forgiving father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). This is the Jesus of faithful ministry, of suffering and death, of new life (Mark
14:3–16:8). This is the Jesus who says, “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Who Jesus is and what Jesus means by abundant life, then, are surely different from what the consumerism and individualism of our culture tell us about life.

Application

What does the consistent ethic of life mean for our everyday lives? First, it encourages us to hold together a great variety of issues with a consistent focus on the value of life. Second, it challenges us to reflect on the basic values and convictions that give direction to our lives, that is, our spirituality. Third, it leads us to express our commitment to life in our personal lives and in civil debate and public policy, that is, our morality. We will consider each of these characteristics in turn.

First, a consistent ethic includes all life issues from the very beginning of life to its end. An excellent example of how the life ethic holds together many distinct issues is the U.S. bishops’ statement “Political Responsibility.” This statement from the U.S. Catholic Conference Administrative Board has provided direction concerning many issues, including abortion, racism, the economy, AIDS, housing, the global trade in arms, welfare reform, immigration, and refugees.

Several examples from the 1995 statement can give the spirit of this consistent ethic of life. The bishops oppose the use of the death penalty, judging that the practice further undermines respect for life in our society and stating that it has been discriminatory against the poor and racial minorities. The bishops also express special concern for the problem of racism, calling it a radical evil that divides the human family. Furthermore, dealing with poverty, the bishops claim, is a moral imperative of the highest priority, for poverty threatens life. On the domestic scene there is a need for more jobs with adequate pay and decent working conditions; at the international level the areas of trade, aid, and investment must be reevaluated in terms of their impact on the poor.

Capital punishment, racism, poverty—certainly these are very different issues, with different causes and different solutions (many of which may be very complex). Still, underneath all these differences is life and, for us, the challenge of respecting the lives of all people.

Second, the consistent ethic of life also leads us beyond specific issues to the depth of our convictions about the meaning of life. A careful and prayerful study of the statements on political responsibility and faithful citizenship (and the
more detailed teachings they summarize) allows us to appreciate not only the expansiveness of the seamless garment of the consistent ethic of life, but also its profound challenge to our most important attitudes and values.

Emphasizing the consistent ethic of life and recognizing its countercultural directions, the bishops state in “Faithful Citizenship”: “A Catholic moral framework does not easily fit the ideologies of ‘right’ or ‘left,’ nor the platforms of any party. Our values are often not ‘politically correct.’ Believers are called to be a community of conscience within the larger society and to test public life by the values of Scripture and the principles of Catholic social teaching” (324). It is not sufficient to be pro-life on some issues; we must be pro-life on all issues, no matter what our political party or business or union or talk shows or advertising or family may say. These are powerful forces that significantly shape our convictions and spirituality. They often lead to the contradictions that separate us from a consistent ethic of life. Politics, media, money, and class—and not our faith—may well be the real source of some of our values.

Third, Cardinal Bernardin, the conference of bishops, and John Paul II have necessarily discussed the relationship between moral vision and political policies. Indeed, the consistent ethic of life was developed to help shape public policy. Political policies and economic structures provide means to create a societal environment that promotes the flourishing of human life. As Cardinal Bernardin stated, “If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus, then our moral, political and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker. Such a quality of life posture translates into specific political and economic positions on tax policy, employment generation, welfare policy, nutrition and feeding programs, and health care” (“Consistent Ethic,” 8, 9).

For more than one hundred years, popes and bishops have addressed issues of politics and economics in their social teachings. Key themes from this tradition include human dignity, solidarity, justice, and the common good. Church teachings emphasize that faithfulness to the Gospel leads not only to individual acts of charity but also to actions involving the institutions and structures of society, the economy, and politics. Clearly, religion and politics must mix in our lives!

Pastoral ministers face the challenge, first, of developing educational opportunities to help others really understand the consistent ethic of life and then, of
embracing this ethic consistently in the other programs they offer—in homilies, in direct-service projects, and in all their attempts to influence public policy.

**Faithful Citizenship**

Before every presidential election the U.S. bishops summarize the social teachings of the church to offer guidance for the election. The most recent statement was entitled “Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility” (*Origins*, 2003). The statement highlights some key concerns of our country and church, poses ten questions about human dignity and the common good, discusses the relationship between faith and politics, summarizes major themes of Catholic social teaching, and addresses four areas of national and global concern.

“Faithful Citizenship” still deserves careful reading, prayerful reflection, serious discussion and action. In addition to a long list of public policy issues, it also directs our attention back to the fundamental question: Will we receive the statement as a reminder that the Gospel is the basis of our political choices, or will we read “Faithful Citizenship” through the lens of our political party or some other value? The bishops frequently imply this question, urging us “to see beyond party politics” and affirming that faithful citizenship “begins with moral principles not party platforms” (325). “Faithful citizenship calls Catholics to see civic and political responsibilities through the eyes of faith and to bring our moral convictions to public life” (323).

To express it more directly: What really forms the basis of our political choices? Perhaps it is our longstanding commitment to a particular political party. Perhaps it is our race or gender or economic class. Perhaps it is simply the most convincing TV commercial. Perhaps, as the bishops urge us, it is the Gospel. As disciples of Jesus, we want the Good News to be the very center of our lives, enlightening all our choices. Sober realism leads us to acknowledge, however, that some of the other influences often carry more weight. For example, rather than follow Jesus’ example of nonviolence, we turn to violence to solve our conflicts. As “Faithful Citizenship” states, our nation turns to “abortion to deal with difficult pregnancies; the death penalty to combat crime; euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of age, illness, and disability; and war to address international disputes” (324). Politics in general and the recent election in particular, then, stand as excellent test cases for integrating our morality and spirituality, especially in light of the consistent ethic of life.
“Faithful Citizenship” reaffirms the bishops’ emphasis on a consistent moral framework for addressing all political, economic, and social issues. This call for consistency, along with the highlighting of so many issues, is particularly challenging. No one issue is sufficient to determine a political choice, and no one party is consistently pro-life. What is a voter to do? The bishops acknowledge the dilemma. They write: “At this time some Catholics may feel politically homeless sensing that no political party and too few candidates share a consistent concern for human life and dignity” (323). Still, they go on to urge people to vote with an informed conscience and to get involved, reminding us that participation in the political process is a moral obligation.

**Two Examples for Reflection and Prayer**

If we are honest as we consider the consistent ethic of life, many of us probably would have to acknowledge some contradictions in our own convictions. Where do they come from? The thought of the great twentieth-century theologian Karl Rahner, S.J., may help answer this question. In his *Theological Investigations* (XVIII), Rahner points to what he calls “global prescientific convictions,” that is, unexamined assumptions, mostly cultural in character, that shape our moral perceptions and analyses (74–85). These prejudgments mold our moral imaginations and our perceptions of basic values, sometimes making it difficult to live Gospel values. We receive so many messages that contradict the Gospel—powerful messages from advertising, political parties, TV and film, newspapers, business, even our families. Our understanding of the meaning of life and our reactions to events in our world often are rooted in these competing messages rather than in the Scriptures.

Two examples express the dilemmas faced by pastoral ministers. The first is a woman in her forties, a wife and mother, a high-school teacher and the coordinator of her parish’s social action ministries. In an unpublished paper about her experiences in her parish concerning the war in Iraq, she recalls what church leaders were teaching during the time the United States was preparing its preemptive war against Iraq. She quotes a November, 2002 “Statement on Iraq” from the U.S. Bishops: “Based on the facts that are known to us, we continue to find it difficult to justify the resort to war against Iraq. . . . we fear that the resort to war . . . would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for overriding the strong presumption against the use of military force” (*Origins*, 407).

Furthermore, she is aware that in his January, 2003 address to the Diplomatic Corps, Pope John Paul II said: “War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity.” Solutions in the Middle East “will never be imposed by recourse to terrorism or armed conflict, as if military victories could be the solution.” The Pope never rejected the theory of just war, as is indicated in *The Gospel of Life*
(see no. 55). However, especially in the final years of his pontificate, John Paul II’s gradual move toward limited use of just war theory was not unlike his move toward limited use of capital punishment: as a possibility in theory, but rarely warranted in practice. Still, polls showed that U.S. Catholics were in favor of a unilateral assault on Iraq by a margin of two to one.

This woman then goes on to describe several events. “After the associate pastor gave an eloquent sermon on Right-to-Life Sunday January 19, 2003, exhorting the parishioners to become politically active in opposition to abortion, I wrote him a note asking if he didn’t think the same principles should be stated from the pulpit in opposition to the proposed U.S. invasion of Iraq in order to present a consistent ethic of life. He failed to reply to me.”

The story continues months later. After the Pope again expressed his unequivocal opposition to the invasion of Iraq, this woman asked the associate pastor why none of the parish priests talked about the Pope’s stand in a homily, if the Pope considered it “unequivocal.” She writes: “I received an answer at the last Mass that I heard him celebrate before he left [for studies in Rome]. In a homily whose theme was the integration of faith into life, he said that he grew up with a very politically conservative bent. He stated that when the Pope and bishops were promulgating their opposition to the U.S. war against Iraq, he struggled with their position a lot.”

She also describes an encounter with her pastor. Immediately after the war began, he asked her for suggestions for prayers that could be put on a bulletin insert so that parishioners could pray at home. Among those she recommended was one from the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. This prayer included the line, “We pray for our enemies and those who oppose us.” The pastor said that this prayer could not be included because it would be too controversial in the parish.

Where did these contradictions come from? Did family or politics or economics actually ground the spirituality of the two priests? Was a conservative political bent more important than following the Pope’s guidance? Were Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount—“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you”—too controversial for the parish? What about us? Is our political party or class or gender more influential than the Gospel and the consistent ethic of life? Are prejudgments and assumptions at work in us, too?
The second example is the 2004 presidential election. Now that this divisive election is history, perhaps it is time for an examination of conscience, both as individual citizens and as pastoral ministers. First, as we look back on our actions, did we prayerfully reflect on our reactions to political events? Did the Gospel or a particular political party shape our fundamental values and commitments? Were there unexamined convictions influencing our judgments? In our various ministries, did we encourage others to wrestle with these questions?

Then, did we carefully read “Faithful Citizenship”? Did we discuss the issues with families and friends and parish and community members? What kind of programs did we arrange and promote? Did they focus on the many concerns of “Faithful Citizenship”? What did we emphasize and why?

Finally, did we vote? This decision may not have been as simple as it seems. The choice is usually not very clear, for the platforms and policies of all the political parties at times contradict the consistent ethic of life. Did we struggle with the fact that both of the major candidates were pro-life and anti-life? Did we help others also become aware of this insight?

Throughout this examination of conscience, it would be helpful to keep in mind the haunting question of Scripture scholar Walter Wink in his *Engaging the Powers*: “How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves?” (3).

**Conclusion**

The Catholic tradition’s emphasis on solidarity with the whole human family, on special concern for the poor and vulnerable, on economic justice and the common good often distinguishes Catholic principles from the lived values in our culture and from elements of the platforms of both major political parties. Today, world events and church teachings direct our attention to life itself as the very center of our concern. The consistent ethic of life provides both a solid foundation and a powerful challenge to live as faithful disciples and involved citizens. It calls into question all views that contradict the message and meaning of Jesus. The issues are urgent; the challenge is great. In our programs and in our very persons, pastoral ministers have a unique opportunity to respond with imagination to help create a culture of life.

**References**


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