In November of this year we will commemorate the tenth anniversary of the death of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. Among the elements of his legacy that he was particularly concerned to have continued by scholars was his work on the consistent ethic of life. Because this was such an important part of his contribution to the intellectual life of the church in the United States, one may use this tenth anniversary year as an appropriate time to ask how the consistent ethic of life has fared in the years since the Cardinal's death.

Most Catholics have at least a general idea of what the consistent ethic of life is about. They know that somehow it deals with the linking of a variety of ethical issues, from abortion and euthanasia on one end of the spectrum to capital punishment and war on the other. Although they know that there is a linkage, they are often less clear regarding how such issues may be linked or, even more importantly, why such issues should be linked. So it might be helpful to say something about Cardinal Bernardin's own analysis before we look at the current state of the consistent ethic of life.

The initial development of the consistent ethic came at a critical time for Cardinal Bernardin. He had already completed his work as chair of the bishops’ committee that had drafted the pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace* and had also just recently been elected chair of the Conference’s Committee for Pro-Life Activities. He used the 1983 Gannon Lecture at Fordham University as a forum in which to launch a moral analysis regarding the relationship of a range of ethical issues, some usually characterized as “life” issues and others usually characterized as “justice” issues. Bernardin noted that the consistent ethic was developed to “defend the right to life of the weakest among us” and to be “visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us” (Bernardin, vol. 2, 88). Rather than being two sets of issues that never intersect (or, even worse, that compete for attention), the Cardinal main-
tained that they actually need to be interrelated in a consistent ethical analysis. As he stated in this first lecture, he would spend the rest of his life articulating "(1) the need for a consistent ethic of life, (2) the attitude necessary to sustain it, and (3) the principles needed to shape it" (Bernardin, vol. 2, 85).

One may now ask whether there is any evidence that the consistent ethic of life is still influential ten years after the Cardinal's death. On the one hand there seems to have been very little explicit work in its development in the past few years. On the other hand, if one of the goals of the Cardinal was to demonstrate the relation between life issues and justice issues, one can look for Bernardin’s influence by asking whether recent authors have in fact joined these issues together. One can demonstrate this latter point. William Byron, for example, has recently articulated ten principles of Catholic social thought. Although he never uses the name of Bernardin, he lists among these not only principles of justice such as association, subsidiarity, and the preferential protection for the poor and vulnerable, but also particular mention of the principle of respect for human life. In Byron’s analysis life issues and justice issues are indeed related. Furthermore, toward the end of his article Byron uses these principles to make a case for linkage among such issues as war, peace, affirmative action, the economy, abortion, and euthanasia (Byron, 285). This is precisely the linkage articulated earlier by Cardinal Bernardin. Similarly, Thomas Massaro lists nine key themes of Catholic social teaching (Massaro, 115–65). Again these themes combine both those issues traditionally understood as justice issues and those traditionally seen as life issues. In his discussion of at least some of the themes Massaro relies explicitly on Cardinal Bernardin’s formulation of the consistent ethic of life (Massaro, 116).

One can also see at least an implicit dependence on the consistent ethic of life in recent documents coming from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Two particular documents, one explicitly dealing with life issues and the other explicitly dealing with justice issues, call for a consistent ethical analysis of these issues. In their 2001 “Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities” the bishops self-consciously refer to the consistent ethic. Although they do not quote Cardinal Bernardin himself, they begin the document by pointing out that “[a] wide spectrum of issues touches on the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity” (USCCB, 2001, 1). Later the document explicitly links the issue of abortion with that of capital punishment (USCCB, 2001, 5). Similarly, in September of 2003 the executive committee of the USCCB approved the document “Faithful Citizenship.” Similarly to what was done in the document on pro-life activities, the bishops acknowledge that Catholic teaching demands a consistent ethic: “As Catholics, we are not free to abandon unborn children . . . to turn our backs on immigrants . . . to create and then destroy human lives in a quest for medical advances or profit, to turn away from poor women and children because they lack economic or political power, or to ignore sick people because they have no insurance. . . . Catholic teaching requires us to speak up for the voiceless and to act in accord with universal moral values” (USCCB, 2003, 4). The bishops thus continue to articulate Cardinal Bernardin’s consistent ethic of life, though they never mention his name.

Although one can speak of similarities of language between the consistent ethic of life and current social teaching both by our bishops’ conference and by social ethicists, one must also admit that there has not been much theological analysis of the
consistent ethic itself in recent years. There are a few exceptions. In April 2000, for example, James Kelly and Christopher Kudlac referred to Cardinal Bernardin when they asked: “Have Catholics in general and pro-lifers in particular been listening to this message from their church’s hierarchy [opposing capital punishment as part of the church’s pro-life witness]?” The authors concede that this teaching has not been part of the formation of the consciences of Catholics. Nevertheless they conclude that “there are at least some empirical grounds to think that were a consistent ethic of life to receive more attention in the churches and elsewhere, the connection between opposing abortion and the death penalty would contribute to the sense of human solidarity that all authentically progressive movements require for their incremental growth” (Kelly and Kudlac, 8).

Thus, according to these authors, the consistent ethic still ought to have a place in contemporary Catholic teaching.

Ironically, a recent defense of the consistent ethic of life comes from a group that seemed cool to the Cardinal’s enterprise during his life, and that is the organized pro-life groups within the church. Frank Pavone, the national director of Priests for Life, has written a short article in which he explores what he calls the myths and the reality of Cardinal Bernardin’s ethical analysis. He notes that “to articulate effectively the Christian response to a wide range of menacing threats to human life, [Cardinal Bernardin] realized it was necessary to highlight the interconnection of the many and varied efforts to defend human life” (Pavone, 14). He concludes, “consistency is not optional. If our positions flow primarily from political commitments, strange gaps of inconsistency begin to appear. But if our positions flow from our commitment to the Gospel, we will be consistent—and the day of victory for life, justice, and peace will be hastened” (Pavone, 15).

Finally, an important attempt to move the consistent ethic forward comes from Michael Place, who at the time was president of the Catholic Health Association, in an essay in the Association’s journal, Health Progress. Place analyzes the characteristic traits of current trends in health care: fragmentation, individualism, and a market-driven healthcare system. He then suggests that the consistent ethic of life can be seen as an antidote to each of these characteristics of the contemporary healthcare situation. Place concludes that “when we view healthcare reform through the lens of the consistent ethic of life, we are left with . . . a healthcare system that recognizes the need for limits, that acknowledges the inevitability of decline and death, that treats healthcare as a service, that upholds the dignity of every person, and that promotes the health care of our whole society” (Place, 55).

Perhaps this tenth anniversary year of the Cardinal’s death will be a time of renewed interest in the consistent ethic of life. There are some signs that this may already be the case. In this very issue of New Theology Review, for instance, Kenneth Overberg gives his analysis of the consistent ethic. Later this year the Bernardin Center of the Catholic Theological Union will publish a volume containing ten critical essays on the same theme. Scholars must continue to analyze Cardinal Bernardin’s work in this area. The consistent ethic of life is too important to relegate so soon to the history shelf.

References


---

**SURVEY — Please Respond**

The Editorial Board and the Publisher of the *New Theology Review* need your help!

To continue to serve our readers in the most useful and relevant way possible, we are considering some changes in the format and style of our journal. We are conducting a short electronic survey to gather data for our decisions, and we would appreciate a few moments of your valuable time.

**Please go to** www.litpress.org/journals/ntr_survey.html **to find the survey.**

Thank you for your support!