

Introduction

As Christians, we believe that our real value and our ultimate identity come from God. We are loved not for what we can do, how long we live for, who we know, what we earn or what we have or have not achieved. Our identity is far richer than that.

Because of this, St. John Paul II, in *Evangelium Vitae* (promulgated in 1995, and which translates as *The Gospel of Life*) tells us that we are called to show solidarity, in particular, towards society's weakest and most vulnerable members. St. John Paul II suggests "social activity and commitment in the political field, as a way of defending and promoting the value of life in our ever more complex and pluralistic societies is now essential."

The phrase a 'consistent ethic of solidarity' has evolved from this rich teaching of the Church and from Cardinal Bernardin's (an American Cardinal) understanding and explanation of a 'consistent ethic of life'. For Cardinal Bernardin, and for Saint John Paul II, the Church's teaching on a whole range of issues such as abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, social injustice, and economic injustice all demand a consistent application of moral principles that value the sacredness of all human life. "The protection of life", said the pacifist, Eileen Egan, "is a seamless garment. You can't protect some life and not others". Put another way, the care and protection of life begins with the protection of the unborn child and continues into his/her life and into the lives of all human beings regardless of their race, religion, or sex.

So often over the last number of years, Pope Francis has re-iterated this wonderful and rich vision for the care of human life. For example, in his reaching out to refugees and migrants, and in his care for women and men trafficked into modern day slavery he demonstrates very clearly to us an understanding of life that seeks to protect the weakest and most vulnerable people in our society. In *Laudato Si*, his letter on the care of our common home he goes even further and says that we are also called to value **all** of created life.

One of the most obvious places to start looking at this 'seamless garment' is the issue of the protection of life of the unborn; perhaps the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters. However, as we explore this issue, we must also remember that this seamless garment also calls for our heartfelt engagement with a whole range of other issues like welcoming refugees and migrants, the care of our common home, the plight of the homeless, unemployment, war, euthanasia among many others.

We also begin here with the protection of the unborn in the knowledge that, as we face a referendum in Ireland on the right to life of the unborn, this is an issue that many people of faith have expressed a sincere interest in exploring. People want to know exactly what the Church teaches on this issue and why. There can be a lot of misinformation and sometimes confusion. People of faith, in particular, want to grow in a sense of what this issue says about their faith and how we are all called to grow in faith and in love. People want to be informed so that they can make the best possible decision, in faith and in love, when it comes to voting in the referendum. We remember we are here not to replace consciences but to help inform them. That is what this session called the 'Gospel of Life' hopes to do.

The Methodology

The lens through which we will be looking at this issue is not focused solely on a 'human rights' lens; although obviously the question of the rights of human beings will be explored. Instead, we will be exploring the issue through a very particular faith lens; one that challenges us to grow in an awareness of God's love for us individually and for all of humanity and all of creation. This focus needs to be returned to again and again, because it is in this sense of our identity we can come to understand the radical and revolutionary call to love at the heart of the 'Gospel of Life'. In other words, this is not just an intellectual exercise; it's an engagement that calls for the heart to be involved.

Because this is an adult faith development moment, as opposed to a straightforward lecture, discussion, prayer and reflection are at the heart of the methodology. It is through such sharing and learning together that, as adults, we are invited to grow in our faith.

To this end, the focus is on telling human stories and an open engagement through real listening to these stories. This is to connect people to the reality of other people's lives – the real lives of our *brothers and sisters* - and to assist in helping people understand the importance of compassion and action out of that compassion.

The material for the session is straightforward and accessible. It can be accessed by different people in different ways depending on their background and educational experience. It isn't prescriptive so you, the facilitator should feel free around using everything that's included in a way that makes sense for your group. There should also be a sense, that those within the group gathered who engage with the material carry a huge amount of the wisdom and opportunities for learning themselves. The facilitator's task is ultimately to open up that space in a gentle way using the material developed here.

During the session, you will lead people in prayer together and hopefully encourage people to speak gently and with compassion for one another. Participants will also be left with some ideas and some material to bring home; in terms of practical actions they can do and things they can tell others of what they perhaps have heard and experienced.

Because of this methodological approach the structure of the session is very straightforward, with an opportunity to:

- Connect
- Reflect
- Contemplate an action.

Therefore, participants are invited to connect with one another, with their own faith story and beliefs and with what the Church teaches. They are invited to reflect on all of this in prayer and in moments of silence. They are also invited to contemplate how, out of love, they might then act for the good of others.

Out of 'connecting', 'reflecting' and 'acting', the session is divided as follows:

1. Opening Prayer
2. Introduction + discussion
3. Moment 1 + discussion
4. Moment 2 + discussion
5. What next? + Discussion
6. Closing Prayer

The session should take no longer than 1 hour 30 minutes. To add to an experience of community, it is also advisable that tea/coffee be shared after each session.

Finally, and most importantly, in terms of the methodology, the session should model an experience of the 'Gospel of Life'; where all participants are valued, treated with care and compassion and offered an opportunity to work through, out of a sense of their own identity as beloved sons and daughters of God, the most Christian response to the unborn baby, who cries out for our love, care and protection.

To assist you in your parish we have supplied the following materials:

- This introduction for you the facilitator which gives the background, and explains the methodology and rationale.
- The outline of the Session that you can work with as you see fit yourself. However, you might note that the approach suggested here has been successfully trialled with a number of groups around the country and has found to be very worthwhile.
- Group guidelines that we'd ask you to seek agreement for from the group at the start of the session
- An opening and closing prayer
- A PowerPoint summarising the Church's teaching on the right to life of the unborn. Each slide is accompanied by notes for you to use to unpack the quotation being explored. While you may initially present these slides by talking through them, there should be opportunities, as suggested in the Session Outline for engagement with the group on.
- One page handouts with the quotations from this PowerPoint
- A Questions and Answers sheet for participants to take home and study
- A DVD containing with Cliona's story and Tracey's story and the children with life limiting conditions born to these women. (If you do not have facilities to show this DVD, you can use the story that is provided in summary form.
- Copies of the Irish Bishops' Conference Submission, "Two lives, one Love".

In addition, you will need:

- If you have a data projector and laptop, you will need them for this session. You will also need speakers for sound. (If you do not have a data projector and laptop please follow the instructions/suggestions in green.)
- You may need a microphone if it's a bigger group.
- You may also want to have a flip chart or sheets of paper to hand.
- Post-its might also be required.
- A sign in sheet (Optional)
- Photocopies of the group guidelines
- Copies of the Bishops Conference document, "Two Lives, One Love". This can be accessed online or you can order hard copies from the Catholic Communications Office, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare via email at info@catholicbishops.ie
- Copies of the Frequently Asked Questions pamphlet
- Photocopies of the handout 'How to get involved in this issue'.

Room Set up:

You can run this session in your parish Church but this may not be possible or even ideal. A local school, parish pastoral centre, or other venue would be more suitable. If the group is very large, set up the seats in rows according to your group's size and the room you have available to you. If it's a smaller group, chairs in a small semi-circle or two rows of a semi-circle would work best. You might want a registration sheet to capture names and email addresses of participants. If it's a big group, a registration table and some help with same will be required. Name tags might be provided if you think that that would be helpful for you as the facilitator. (Stickers would suffice for this job!).

Finally, don't forget to set up your prayer space!

As people gather identify good readers for the Opening Prayer, Closing Prayer. **If you do not have a projector/laptop, you will need to identify three or four other good readers also to lead on different sections, as indicated in your session outline sheet.**