

# Parish Respect Life Committee

The **Parish Respect Life Committee**, led by the **Parish Respect Life Coordinator (Coordinator)**, is a vital part of Respect Life Apostolate's success in serving the community. Not only do committees and coordinators provide resources to their parish on life issues, they also actively evangelize their fellow parishioners on life issues and support the pastor and priests in making life issues visible at the parish level.

Here are some resources available for Parish Committees and Coordinators to encourage a Culture of Life:

## Getting Started

### Responsibilities of the Parish Respect Life Coordinator

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The Coordinator serves the parish and is assisted by the Archdiocesan Respect Life Apostolate. The Coordinator organizes and implements the efforts of the USCCB Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities at his local parish in consultation with the Pastor of that parish. The Pastoral Plan specifically focuses on the issues of abortion, infanticide and euthanasia and the Coordinator must understand and accept the Church's teaching on these issues.

In Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *CARITAS IN VERITATE* (Charity in Truth), the Holy Father addresses many issues that can be applied to the development of the Culture of Life. Truth is necessary to encourage a greater respect for human life. To faithfully and successfully work in the respect life movement, parish coordinators, pastors and all others must represent the Truth with conviction and love.

Benedict XVI communicates that the respect for life "cannot in any way be detached" from the development of people spiritually and intellectually. "When a society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man's true good" (§ 28). Therefore, parish coordinators in accordance with the intentions of the pastor, must coordinate events and teach the faith with a pastoral (with Christ the Good Shepherd as their model) conviction and always speak the truth lovingly, even when it is difficult to do so.

### Working with the Pastor

- Establish with your pastor his expectations of your role and how best to work with him.
- Identify the needs/dynamics of the parish and the pastor's level of involvement.
- Cultivate goodwill, trust, and friendship.
- Listen to his evaluation of the pro-life needs of the parish.
- Ask him to speak before a parish gathering or organization on a pro-life issue.
- Each week, Priests for Life provides an email service to clergy (subscribe at [clergy@priestsforlife.org](mailto:clergy@priestsforlife.org)) containing general intercessions, a one-paragraph bulletin insert and suggestions for drawing pro-life themes out of the Sunday readings for the homily.
- The Respect Life Apostolate shares the Word of Life intercession and bulletin announcement series from the USCCB with all parish priests, deacons and secretaries to further prayers for life at the parish as part of the liturgy.
- Offer your services to successfully carry out programs and activities.

### Overall Duties

Read and become familiar with the USCCB *Pastoral Plan for Pro Life Activities*. This provides the background behind the Church's teaching on the sanctity of human life and provides a blueprint for implementing the Pastoral Plan. As representatives of the Bishops on pro-life issues, we follow the leadership of the Bishops' Pro Life Secretariat in Washington, D.C., particularly regarding public policy matters related to these life issues.

Organize a parish committee to help with planning and implementing the specific pro-life programs and/or projects. The size and formality of this committee depends largely upon the size of the parish. Some coordinators (particularly in small parishes) may find it unnecessary to establish a formal committee. However, every parish should at least have a group of volunteers available to help implement programs/projects as needed. To ensure that the pro-life committee represents a sample of the parish populace, it is strongly encouraged to invite young adults and driven adolescents to be representatives for that age group. They can also facilitate with some of the immediate communication that is often required in working with action alerts and email notifications from the Respect Life Apostolate.

Meet regularly (preferably monthly) with the other coordinator(s) (if applicable) to plan an activity for the following month(s). Try to initiate some effort (no matter how small) at least once a month. Review and evaluate these goals periodically. [See appendix for sample goal development forms]

Review with your pastor any pro-life activities, programs or events that will be advertised or carried out at the parish before they take place.

Implement specific projects or requests sent from the Respect Life Apostolate.

Serve as a liaison between the parish and the Respect Life Apostolate, forwarding any information or concerns of the parish or pastor.

The Coordinator is at the service of the pastor. Upon resignation, the Coordinator should inform the pastor of his/her decision and, if possible, assist the pastor in choosing a new Coordinator who will then notify the Respect Life Apostolate of the new appointment.

The Coordinator serves in a voluntary manner. All activities must be subsidized in a manner agreed upon by the pastor.

The Coordinator may be involved in other pro-life organizations and promote other pro-life events on the parish level, provided the pastor is informed and consents when those events are not under the sponsorship of the Bishops' Pastoral Plan.

## Role of the Parish Respect Life Committee

The Parish Respect Life Committee helps parishioners understand the issues and the importance of meeting the needs of those who are most vulnerable—especially mothers and their unborn children, and those who are seriously ill or dying and their families. Its membership should include adults and young adults as well as input from the youth, members of organizations that represent persons with disabilities, persons of minority cultures, and those responsible for education and pastoral care.

The coordinator of the parish committee is **appointed by the pastor** and recruits volunteers to help meet the needs the committee serves.

The parish committee relies on the archdiocesan Respect Life Apostolate for information and guidance. The committee should play a vital role in parish life and enjoy the strong support of priests and key personnel. Its efforts can often coordinate and overlap with other parish programs -- bible studies or youth groups, for example, which focus upon pro-life passages and catechesis found in Catholic Tradition.

The objectives of the parish respect life committee are to coordinate and promote parish participation in the annual Respect Life Program from the USCCB/RLA as well as specific intentions of the pastor or parish community. This should be done through:

- Fostering awareness of the need to restore legal protection to the lives of unborn children and to safeguard in law the lives all including of those who are chronically ill, disabled, or dying (Education).
- Informing parishioners of upcoming important legislation; and, at the direction of the diocesan pro-life director, organize letter-writing, postcard campaigns, or similar appropriate activities (Public Policy).
- Avenues for communication may be in the use of telephone trees, postcard campaigns, fax and e-mail systems, letter-writing programs in the parish, etc.
- Sponsor programs of prayer in the parish to pray for mothers and their unborn children, those who are disabled or dying, prisoners on death row and those they have harmed (Spirituality).
- Support comprehensive maternity support services, as well as post-abortion counseling and reconciliation programs (Pastoral Care).

It should be noted that these activities do not constitute partisan politics. Rather, the Church is nurturing every Catholic's ability to exercise citizenship faithfully by being well informed on issues, recognizing the right to vote as a privilege and a civic responsibility in service of furthering the Gospel and a greater respect for life.

#### **Much has been accomplished:**

- Abortions steadily declined in the 1990s. More Americans identified themselves as pro-life; those who called themselves "pro-choice" declined; polls show Americans are far more opposed to abortion than our laws reflect.
- The pro-life movement continues to be one of the largest and most effective grassroots movements in the nation.
- The moral argument concerning the humanity of the unborn has advanced; even most who support legalized abortion now acknowledge that it destroys a human life.
- Care for women and men suffering because of abortion or in need of assistance during pregnancy is available across the country, aiding countless thousands annually.
- Most state legislatures have enacted measures to restrict and reduce abortions.
- Assisted suicide initiatives have been defeated in many states with some laws specifically banning the practice.
- Medical societies, hospice groups, and other organizations have worked with Catholic health professionals to provide the best care to those who are terminally ill and to oppose euthanasia and assisted suicide.
- Yet the federal law on abortion has changed very little. Roe v. Wade continues to render impossible the most fundamental protection for human beings from the moment of conception: the right to life.
- The abortion decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court must be reversed. For it is impossible, as our Holy Father reminds us, to further the common good "without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop" (The Gospel of Life, no. 101).
- Through peaceful activism, education, prayer, and service, Catholics must witness to God's truth and embody our Lord's command to love one another as he loves us while rebuilding a "culture of life."
- May the "people of life" constantly grow in number and may a new culture of love and solidarity develop for the true good of the whole of human society. – Pope John Paul II, The Gospel of Life, no. 101 (Pope Paul V 1995)

## **Instituting a Committee**

### **Cultivating Respect Life Movement**

A strong respect life organization is one in which inspiration and action pass as freely from bottom up (ie, one parishioner's/student's suggestion) as they do from top down (the pastor's/principal's directive).

The impetus for beginning a respect life committee (or reviving a dormant one) arises from the collective passion and compassion of parishioners, parish council members, resident priests and deacons, the pastor and ultimately from the desire of the Holy Spirit form the faithful in the Church.

### **How to Activate or Reactivate a Respect Life Committee**

If you're starting from scratch, or just rejuvenating a tired effort, **bulletins, newsletters, parish/school websites, pulpit announcements, and School PA announcements** are your best friends! Use them to build up momentum and excitement for members (placing ads or updates weekly for four weeks or every-other-week for eight weeks).

Schedule a short open house for prospective members. Don't call it a meeting. No commitment yet! Use this kick-off event to solicit an interest survey from participants. Find out their strengths, interests, professional skills, etc...

### How to Run a Meeting

- Coordinate meetings to fall at the beginning of the planning window for major annual events. (Example: Meet in September to begin laying out plans for January 23 activities. Summer or early fall are good times to plan for October's Respect Life Month needs.)
- Secure location to accommodate group. Or for parishes, rotating in members' homes can be a comfortable alternative, as well as a fellowship builder.
- Invite your pastor, associates, chaplains, deacons, etc. to attend, offer opening and closing prayer.
- Encourage principals and other teachers to support the school group.
- Use phone tree & bulletin announcements to promote gathering. Communicate the specific goal(s) of your meeting – and be sure your objective necessitates an in-person meeting. (People are busy. If you can accomplish your goal via phone, email or bulletin news, then do so.)
- *Include an ending time so people will know their maximum time commitment.*
- Ask members to RSVP in advance, but also encourage "walk-ins" and new prospective members to attend.
- Officers and committee chairs should, in advance, create and then stick to the agenda of topics. Indicate a suggested amount of time devoted to each topic so that if need be a moderator can defer lengthier discussions until after adjournment.
- If all topics do not pertain to all members, promote staggered attendance options. (Example: "We won't discuss the upcoming XYZ event until 8:00, so be sure to join by that time to get all the news ...")
- Ask the committee secretary or another member to record notes from the meeting. (Student officer job descriptions are in the appendix)
- Handouts are a great way to supplement the content of the meeting. Use them to convey statistics, promote upcoming events, provide a recap of recent pro-life activity, etc. However, do NOT use meeting time to "go over" in detail what's in the handout – that's why you handed it out! Your participants are capable readers. Just point out a few highlights and move on.
- Serve refreshments whenever possible, even if it's just lemonade and chips or cookies. Members can alternate bringing snack and drink if budget does not cover this. (Also, no need to withhold refreshments until the meeting ends.)
- Request *in advance* if you want someone to address a particular topic. Don't ask on the spot when they're much more likely to miss an important point because of nervousness.
- If it's obvious the meeting is going to run long, the moderator should interrupt and make a concluding statement a few minutes prior to the scheduled ending time. (1) Assure participants leaving that any pertinent information will be conveyed to them. (2) Allow an open forum for any necessary news or announcements to be interjected before returning to the prior discussion.

## RLA Parish Coordinator Binder

Also available is a comprehensive document entitled **Archdiocesan Respect Life Coordinator Handbook (last update Summer 2016)**. It contains relevant materials to assist respect life parish coordinators in their efforts. We invite coordinators and parish priests to contact the RLA at [prolife@archstl.org](mailto:prolife@archstl.org) or 314-792-7555 for a complimentary electronic or printed copy.