

SOFIA: DIGNITY OF LIFE: THE SEAMLESS GARMENT
OCTOBER CURRICULUM

Opening Prayer

Opening Remarks:

Once everyone has silenced and recognized themselves as being in God’s presence, begin with the following reflection:

Today’s topic is the Dignity of Life: The Seamless Garment. For the opening prayer service, take a step back from the “controversial” and politicized topics of society today. Instead, for this prayer service, open your hearts and minds to God’s word and the love of Christ Jesus. Concentrate on this idea of life and what Scripture tells us about it. We know the right to life is the foundation of all human rights but how did that come to be? Think about that basic concept. Think about the idea of dignity—the fundamental dignity that each and every creature has to live simply because each one is made by God and in God’s image.

(After a brief pause, continue...)

And so, we come together today to listen to the Word of God, as well as one another to learn *how* we are called to act and to learn what we might do to protect all life and the dignity of all human people.

Scripture:

A Reading from the Gospel of John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

After a few minutes of silence, discuss peoples’ reactions to the passage. Was there anything that stuck out to them? What does Jesus’ presence in our world have to do with our way of living today? How does it relate to the concept of human dignity?

The “dignity of life” is a very broad topic. As a group, brainstorm “life issues.” If your supplies allow, record your discussion on poster board or a large sheet of paper. (Just war, anti-death penalty, anti-abortion, anti-poverty, anti-racism, rights of workers, fair housing, equal access to education and health care, etc.).

Closing Prayer:

(adapted from Catholic Online)

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of life you gave and continue to give to all of us. Lord and giver of all life, help us to value each person, created in love by you. In your mercy, guide and assist our efforts to put an end to the systems of this world that destroy life. Strengthen us so that we may revere, protect, and promote the dignity and value of *all* human life. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Discussion Materials

Prior to the SOFIA meeting, each participant should print out and read Cardinal Bernardin’s 1984 address entitled, “A Consistent Ethic of Life.” The document is about seven pages and can be found at <http://www.priestsforlife.org/magisterium/bernardinwade.html>.

Begin the discussion by asking people’s reaction to the speech. If the conversation is slow to begin, consider the following discussion questions:

Possible Discussion Questions:

1. Had you heard of the “Seamless Garment” approach to securing human dignity before? (Ask someone to summarize the basic idea of this concept.)
2. What were your immediate reactions to the speech? Did your opinion change by the end of the address?
3. The notion of a “Seamless Garment” actually comes from Scripture:

John 19:23 – 24 reads, “When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. ‘Let’s not tear it,’ they said to one another.”

What does this symbol from John’s Gospel mean? (Unity or oneness.) How does that relate to the seamless garment of life? (Cardinal Bernardin used the seamless garment as an image for a unified or consistent ethic of life; another interpretation suggests that the fabric of God’s Creation is desecrated when we tear it, gamble over pieces of it, or in any sense lay claims of ownership upon any part of it.)

As one might expect, the “Seamless Garment” idea has met with some opposition, even amongst Catholics themselves. A critical view of the “Ethics of Life” address can be found here: <http://www.sobran.com/columns/2005/050816.shtml>.

Further Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think of the “Seamless Garment” approach to respecting the dignity of human life?
2. What aspect of the dignity of life focus most strikes you?
3. How can we as people of faith best increase society’s respect for the dignity of life?
4. How do we decide morally what is right and wrong when humanity’s ability to create, destroy, and manipulate life is so similar to the Creator’s?

Create small groups and assign each group with one of the following quotes to think about and discuss:

- a. (*Dr. Frank Behrend, M.D., whose practice included abortions; tape-recorded speech in November 1977*)
 “Reference was made to my agreeing that abortion is taking a human life, which it is. However, let us remember that war is also legalized killing, that the pilot that dropped the atom bomb on Nagasaki and Hiroshima killed human life. He got medals for it. We bless our troops when they go into battle to kill human beings, so that the taking of human life, including the death penalty in certain states like Utah, where the man was shot, is not a strange behaviour in a society.”
- b. (*Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize Winner, 2004; press interview in December 2004*)
 “When we allow abortion, we are punishing the women—who must abort their children because their men have run away—and we are punishing the children whose lives are terminated...I want us to step back a little bit and say: Why is this woman and this child threatened? Why is this woman threatening to terminate this life? What do we need to do as a society? What are we not doing right now as a society? A part of that answer lies in this House [pointing at the Kenyan Parliament building]”
- c. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church 1930*)
 “Respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his dignity as a creature. These rights are prior to society and must be recognized by it. They are the basis of the moral legitimacy of every authority: by flouting them, or refusing to recognize them in its positive legislation, a society undermines its own moral legitimacy.”
- d. (*Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen Buddhist monk, peace activist, scholar, and poet*)
 “I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life. We cannot support any act of killing; no killing can be justified. But not to kill is not enough...If in your thinking you allow the killing to go on, you also break this precept. We must be determined not to condone killing, even in our minds.”
- e. (*Mother Teresa*)
 “Human rights are not a privilege conferred by government. They are every human being's entitlement by virtue of his humanity. The right to life does not depend, and must not be contingent, on the pleasure of anyone else, not even a parent or sovereign. ... You must weep that your own government, at present, seems blind to this truth.”
- f. (*Dr. Paul Farmer, co-founder of Partners in Health*)
 “If access to health care is considered a human right, who is considered human enough to have that right?”

Questions to consider for quotes:

1. What, if anything, in this quote resonates with you? Does anything inspire you? Surprise you? Make you emotional? Evoke your compassion? Challenge you?

2. How do you address these concerns of society in a loving way?

Taking it further:

Have your group watch the film ‘Juno’ and discuss the pro-life themes you find in it.

Other resources for further or more focused reading:

Death Penalty- Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/criminal.shtml>

Papal Encyclical on Dignity of Life- Evangelium Vitae

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html

Euthanasia- JPII: Dying with Dignity

<http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rfp/Mindling05final.pdf>

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Action

“Although laws are not the only means of protecting human life, nevertheless they do play a very important and sometimes decisive role in influencing patterns of thought and behavior.”
–Evangelium Vitae, paragraph 90

Advocate

1. Look up current Action Alerts! pertaining to the pro-life issues you listed at the beginning of the meeting. Recall, Action Alerts! can be found through the USCCB website. Another helpful website for Action Alerts is the Catholic Relief Services Action Center at http://actioncenter.crs.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ac_homepage.
2. Begin to research opportunities for advocacy and public protests on behalf of life. Depending on your group’s location and situation, brainstorm what you may be able to participate in as a group. Examples include, but are not limited to:
 - March for Life, January, Washington D.C. (and other locations)
 - The School of the Americas protest, November, Fort Benning, GA
 - Local anti-war protests
 - Vigils against the death penalty or against sweatshop labor
 - Organize your own teach-in and protest
 - Etc.
3. Engage others on your campus to think about the dignity of human life. You may choose to bring these issues to small faith communities around campus or to different clubs or groups who may currently be discussing similar topics but from a different perspective. You may also want to propose a series of lectures or events that discuss one issue pertaining to life. Because there are so many pro-life issues, we recommend selecting one topic (i.e. the human dignity of the cafeteria workers at your campus) and framing it in the context of the Seamless Garment concept.

4. As faithful citizens (September's SOFIA topic), research the impending elections with perhaps a new understanding of pro-life issues. Are these issues being talked about? Are they being framed in the context of the dignity of human life? How can you begin to raise people's consciousness about this topic? You may want to begin at a more local level of politics (candidates for State Senate, Congress, etc.).

Serve

Have your group volunteer at a women's shelter with expectant mothers, a hospital, a nursing home, or a hospice facility. Follow the action with a discussion of how life may or may not be valued at the site and how you can be a witness of Christ through your experience.

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Closing Prayer

The USCCB has created a wonderful document with short daily prayers that commemorate the lives of many saints who continue to act as powerful intercessors for the Gospel of Life. This can be found at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/liturgy/intercessorsforlife.pdf>. To begin closing prayer, read one of the reflections. You may choose to read the reflection for the date of your meeting, or you may select the date of a saint that is important to you or your group.

End with 'An Old Testament Litany for Life.' (attached)

Dignity of Life Quotes

Print, cut, and distribute one quote to each group (you may choose to not use all quotes):

(Dr. Frank Behrend, M.D., whose practice included abortions; tape-recorded speech in November 1977)

“Reference was made to my agreeing that abortion is taking a human life, which it is. However, let us remember that war is also legalized killing, that the pilot that dropped the atom bomb on Nagasaki and Hiroshima killed human life. He got medals for it. We bless our troops when they go into battle to kill human beings, so that the taking of human life, including the death penalty in certain states like Utah, where the man was shot, is not a strange behaviour in a society.”

(Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize Winner, press interview in December 2004)

“When we allow abortion, we are punishing the women—who must abort their children because their men have run away—and we are punishing the children whose lives are terminated...I want us to step back a little bit and say: Why is this woman and this child threatened? Why is this woman threatening to terminate this life? What do we need to do as a society? What are we not doing right now as a society? A part of that answer lies in this House [pointing at the Kenyan Parliament building]”

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1930)

“Respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his dignity as a creature. These rights are prior to society and must be recognized by it. They are the basis of the moral legitimacy of every authority: by flouting them, or refusing to recognize them in its positive legislation, a society undermines its own moral legitimacy.”

(Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen Buddhist monk, peace activist, scholar, and poet)

“I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life. We cannot support any act of killing; no killing can be justified. But not to kill is not enough...If in your thinking you allow the killing to go on, you also break this precept. We must be determined not to condone killing, even in our minds.”

(Mother Teresa)

“Human rights are not a privilege conferred by government. They are every human being's entitlement by virtue of his humanity. The right to life does not depend, and must not be contingent, on the pleasure of anyone else, not even a parent or sovereign. ... You must weep that your own government, at present, seems blind to this truth.”

(Dr. Paul Farmer, co-founder of Partners in Health)

“If access to health care is considered a human right, who is considered human enough to have that right?”

An Old Testament Litany for Life

Adapted from United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,
<http://www.usccb.org/prolife/liturgy/OldTestLitany.pdf>

Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy! Lord, have mercy!

Respond to each: Lord, you give us life!

You breathed life into Adam	Gn 2:7
You formed Eve from flesh	Gn 2:23
You saved Noah from the flood	Gn 8:16
You heard the cry of innocent blood	Gn 9:5-6
You spared the life of Cain	Gn 4:15
You filled Sarah's old womb	Gn: 21:2
You gave Abraham a son	Gn 21:3
You preserved the life of Jacob	Gn 32:31
You punished those who took life	Num 35:31
You place before us life and death	Deut 30:19
You restore lost life	Ruth 4:14
You nourish the aged and weak	Ruth 4:15
You delivered Saul from David	1 Sam 26:22-24
You redeemed the life of David	2 Sam 4:9
You raised the child by Elijah's cry	1 Kings 17:21-22
We are precious in your sight	2 Kings 1:13-14
You made the Syrian clean	2 Kings 5:14
You gave Job steadfast love	Job 33:4
You show us the path of life	Ps 16:11
You deliver us from the wicked	Ps 17:13
You give us length of days	Ps 21:5
You deliver us from the sword	Ps 22: 21
Stronghold of my life	Ps 27:1
You root out fear	Ps 27:1
You redeem the life of your servants	Ps 34:23
O Fountain of life	Ps 36:10
O Light of life	Ps 36:10
You know the measure of our days	Ps 39:5
You give me a priceless life	Ps 49: 8-9
Upholder of my life	Ps 54:6
You lead us in the light of life	Ps 56:14
Your love is better than life	Ps 63:4
You preserve us from the enemy	Ps 64:2
You redeem us from oppression	Ps 71:4
Your promise gives me life	Ps 119:50
Your steadfast love spares us	Ps 119:86
In justice you give us life	Ps 119:88

Christ, through whom all things were made
God of our fathers and mothers in faith
Lord of all creation.

Lord, you give us life so that we may work to build your Kingdom here on earth. We pray to continue to follow this path of life. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.