

What does ‘womb to tomb’ mean to the Church?

Q: DEAR FATHER FRANCIS, I AM VERY FAMILIAR WITH THE CHURCH’S TEACHING ON ABORTION, BUT I RECENTLY HEARD THAT THE CHURCH’S PRO-LIFE STANCE EXTENDS FROM “WOMB TO TOMB.” WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

A: Dear Friends, this is one of those expressions that sounds pithy and even elegant. However, it needs a deeper exploration.

When the Church teaches that its commitment to life extends from “womb to tomb,” it is far richer than a mere slogan. It describes an entire way of seeing the world.

At the heart of this teaching is the conviction that every person is created in the image of God and held in His care through every moment of their existence.

This conviction should shape not only how we speak about life, but how we live, pray, choose and relate to one another.

I thought of this recently during an ordinary afternoon on campus. A student stopped by my office after a difficult week.

Nothing dramatic had happened, but she felt the weight of family pressures, academic expectations and a growing sense of tiredness. Her energy had faded, and she could not quite name why.

We sat in quiet conversation for a while. Then we prayed. When she left, I found myself thinking about how much of life happens in these small, hidden places. There were no headlines, no moments of triumph and no moments of crisis.

What unfolded during that short visit was simply the slow and

fragile work of being human. It is here that the Church’s vision of life takes root.

Life is not valuable only when it is dramatic. It is always valuable because it is given by God.

When we speak of protecting life in the womb, we affirm a foundational truth. Every life begins as a gift. Every life is known, loved and cherished even before a heartbeat is visible or a name is chosen.

There is a sacred mystery at work in those earliest moments, a quiet unfolding that rests entirely in God’s hands. Yet the dignity that is present in the smallest beginnings remains just as real in every stage that follows.

A child who grows into a teenager carries that same sacred worth, even when that worth is expressed through awkward growth, uncertainty or searching questions.

A parent working long hours to support a family carries it as well. So does the elderly woman who moves slowly with her walker on her way to Mass. So does the man who has lost his way, wondering if he can start again.

Dignity does not fade. It does not weaken. It is constant because it emerges from the love of God, which never changes.

A VISION OF LIFE

This broad vision of human dignity was expressed with great clarity by the former Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1928-1996), who wrote about the Seamless Garment ethic. He drew the image from the garment of Christ described in *Jn 19:23-24*, a garment woven in one piece from top to bottom.

This is the garment the soldiers did not want to tear but instead cast lots for. Cardinal Bernardin used that image to remind the Church that our defense of life must also be woven together. The protection of the unborn, the care for the poor, the dignity of the elderly, the needs of the immigrant, the sorrow of the prisoner and the struggle of the sick are all part of one fabric.

If we tear the garment at any point, it falls apart. Cardinal Bernardin's teaching invites us to see that the Church's pro-life vision is not a collection of unrelated concerns. It is a single, unified expression of God's love for every human life.

The phrase from "womb to tomb" teaches us that the value of human life does not depend on strength, utility, usefulness or public recognition. It does not rise and fall with age, health or independence.

Instead, human dignity rests on something unshakable. It comes from God. Nothing we accomplish or fail to accomplish can add to or subtract from that gift.

This means that the unborn child is sacred, but so is the person who lives with a chronic illness. The newborn who enters the world with joy is sacred, but so is the elderly parent whose memory slowly fades.

When the Church speaks about life, it speaks with the same reverence for all of these moments because it sees the same divine image in each one. The Seamless Garment helps us remember that these moments belong together, not in competition, but in unity.

A pro-life commitment, therefore, does not address a single issue but asks us instead to have a singular vision of life.

This vision includes the unborn child and its mother, who is frightened and unsure. It includes the refugee seeking safety, the prisoner who longs for redemption and the elderly person who fears being forgotten.

It includes people with disabilities who face daily challenges that others may not see. It includes the neighbor who is lonely, the friend who carries anxiety and the college student who wonders silently if anyone truly sees them.

The Church calls us to see the full picture of human dignity and to recognize that every part of it matters to God. A consistent ethic of life is not about dividing some people into categories of worthiness. It is about recognizing that God has already given every person worth.

LEARNING FROM THE GOSPELS

This vision is most fully revealed in the life of Christ. In the Gospels, we see Jesus welcoming children, healing the sick, forgiving sinners, feeding the hungry and raising the dead.

We see Him pausing to have conversations with people others avoided. We see Him noticing the small gestures of faith that others dismissed. Each time Jesus does this, He shows us the heart of God.

He reveals a love that refuses to judge people by their usefulness or success. He reveals a love that delights in their existence. This is the love that is foundational to the Church's pro-life vision.

Christ also shows us that protecting life requires presence. Before He healed or taught, He drew near to others. He entered homes, shared meals and spoke face-to-face.

The Incarnation itself is the ultimate expression of divine presence. God does not save us from a distance. God enters the fullness of human experience, from the vulnerability of birth to the poverty of the cross.

In doing so, Christ teaches us that the defense of life begins with drawing close to others. It begins with listening, noticing and offering compassion. These are not small gestures. They are acts of reverence for the mystery of another person's life.

Living this vision is often quiet work. It happens in the way we listen to someone who is grieving. It happens when we speak gently to someone who frustrates us. It happens when we support a young family or check in on an elderly neighbor who has begun to feel isolated.

These actions may seem small, but they can form the fabric of a culture that treasures and protects life. The pro-life stance of the Church is not sustained only by statements or public programs, though these are important. It is sustained by the conversion of the human heart, a conversion that opens us to see the image of God in the people who stand before us every day.

Perhaps the question for each of us is simple. Where is God inviting me to honor life today?

It may be in a classroom where a student feels invisible. It may be in a workplace where someone needs patience rather than judgment. It may be in a family kitchen where tensions run high. It may be in a hospital room where fear and hope conflict.

The Church's pro-life stance from "womb to tomb" becomes real when we let it shape the choices we make and the compassion we offer. We may not always see the fruit of these choices, but God certainly does.

Brothers and sisters, every life is a sacred story. Every life is held in the hands of God. When we choose to honor that truth, even in the smallest ways, we become witnesses to a love that never ends.

This is the heart of the Church's pro-life vision. It is the invitation that stands before us each day. God asks us to see as He sees, to cherish what He has created and to protect what He holds dear. This is what it means to be pro-life!

When we do this with humility and hope, we help build a world in which every person can discover the truth of who they are. **The truth is this: All people are loved by God and their life is a gift to the rest of us. ■**

To learn more about the value of human life and how it is defended by our faith, visit catholicnh.org/respect-life.



Father Francis McCarty, O.S.B., is a Benedictine monk and priest of Saint Anselm Abbey in Manchester. He serves as the Director of Campus Ministry at Saint Anselm College.