

Evangelizing at the Grassroots Level

Parish Pro-life Committees Are Spreading the Message of God's Plan for Life and Love

Parishes are ideal places to educate and inspire. Parishes are also places where pastoral needs are met, and individuals, thru prayer, are called to action to go forth to promote and defend life.

Many parishes have active pro-life committees, working in cooperation with the pastor to enable and encourage appropriate responses to the anti-life influences which challenge Catholic principles at their very core. Over and over again, we can see the effectiveness of a small group of people encouraged and enabled by the pastor.

An example of such a dynamic parish pro-life committee is the one at Milwaukee's Sacred Heart (Croatian) Parish. Headed by parishioner Jacque Rulf, the committee has been active for a number of years, always supported by the Franciscan Friars who serve the parish. The committee was started under the previous pastor, Fr. Paul Maslach, O.F.M., and for the last two years operates under the new pastor, Fr. Ivan Strmecki, O.F.M.

To give an idea of some activities this year at Sacred Heart, parishioners were encouraged to participate in the spring and fall "40 Days for Life" prayer campaigns in front of a Milwaukee abortion site. On a number of occasions, Fr. Ivan joined his parishioners there to lead them in prayer. Thanks be to God, lives were saved during the time they were present.

Just recently, the committee organized a student pro-life art contest, with parishioners voting on the children's art work. It is a great way to sensitize and involve young people. Parents, too, get involved by discussing pro-life topics with their children as they decide on a theme and an approach to their artwork.

Every spring during Lent, the committee offers the chance for parishioners to take home a "baby-bottle" in which to put their loose change and extra dollars as donations for a local pregnancy help center. Then again, through the Christmas "Gifts for Baby Jesus" program, people bring gifts of money, diapers, baby clothes, etc. to help poor mothers in need. What a great practical way to help.

Fr. Ivan's desire to reach out to those hurting after abortion led him to place the poster of a powerful post-abortion image in the church hallway. The image is a photo of a sculpture showing a mother suffering after abortion, but finding the Love and Mercy of God, and being forgiven by God and the child she aborted (See: www.4life4family.org/sculpture). The poster directs people to seek help and healing from Project Rachel.

Efforts to educate the entire parish on the wonder and beauty of life before birth is an ongoing effort which takes many forms. A few years ago, the parish displayed large educational posters on the development of the intra-uterine child, starting with month one of pregnancy and each month changing the poster to match the current development of the child. Just this month, Fr. Ivan with members of the pro-life committee offered for sale the "Before You Were Born" books, a tremendous resource for parents to help them transmit the message of God's Love to their child.

Other pro-life committee activities included participation in the Rosary Prayer Service in October with Bishop Hying at Holy Cross Cemetery – Children's Section; inviting pro-life speakers to address the parish;

participating every year in Life Chain; having a Mothers' Day Rose Sale to raise funds, etc. And individual committee members are involved in other parish efforts such as the food pantry program.

A pro-life bulletin board at Sacred Heart Parish is regularly updated by the committee and covers pro-life news and activities. It is an effective way to educate and motivate parishioners to get involved in pro-life activities, including encouraging them to contact public officials to promote public policies to protect life from conception to natural death.

Parish pro-life committees are part of a national plan, the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (<http://www.usccb.org/about/pro-life-activities/pastoral-plan-prolife-activities.cfm>) whose Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities has resources for parishes and diocesan efforts. (See <http://www.usccb.org/about/pro-life-activities/index.cfm>) Many dioceses have offices to implement the national plan locally, including by encouraging and helping local parish pro-life committees.

Within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, the lay organization "Catholics 4 Life", as well the archdiocese's Nazareth Project, offer guidance and assistance to local parish committees.

According to committee chair Jacque Rulf, "If there is not an active pro-life committee in your parish, approach your pastor to discuss the possibility of starting one. You don't need to begin doing a whole bunch of activities, just start doing one or two; do what you can. **Above all, base all you do in prayer.**"

Active pro-life committees are essential to the mission of the Church to spread the Gospel of Life. Just a few motivated individuals can do great things to assist other parishioners to be better informed and more motivated to pray and work to promote the culture of life in concrete ways.

But most essential is the support and involvement of the pastor. A pastor who has vision, and a Spirit-filled heart, not only encourages the committee and participates in parish pro-life activities, he embodies the pro-life message through the core of his priestly ministry. Let us give thanks for our priests who exhibit this leadership, and pray for and encourage others, so all parishes will soon have dynamic efforts to defend and promote Life.

Parish pro-life committees are a key part of the Church's response to the challenge of Pope John Paul II:

"We will stand up and proclaim that no one ever has the authority to destroy unborn life."

(Washington, D.C., Oct. 7, 1979)

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