Since the Catholic Church in the United States is celebrating *Respect Life Month* this October, throughout the month our parish’s Respect Life Committee is highlighting in our communications different aspects of respecting human life from conception until natural death. The task of respecting life, and encouraging everyone to do the same, encompasses much more than what people commonly think. For example, it actually begins *before* conception by supporting and guiding couples who suffer with infertility, because the medical choices available to address this struggle have important consequences for them and for any lives that are conceived.

It continues *after* conception in ways we don’t often think about, such as helping couples who have received a poor or fatal prenatal diagnosis for their unborn children, by informing them about the authentic life-affirming options that are available to them, and by supporting them in their grief. We also care for these parents, and those who’ve suffered from miscarriage or stillbirth, by honoring the dignity of their children through proper funeral rituals and burials. For those whose children will live, we affirm life in these situations whenever we work with the numerous groups focused on people with special needs.

Of course, we work to foster a greater respect for life through the ways we typically think of: affirming the truth that human life begins at conception; advocating for laws that respect life from conception until natural death, helping those tempted to have an abortion through pregnancy resource centers and programs, and so forth. Moreover, we also do so when we work toward healing for those who have had an abortion through ministries such as Project Rachel.
Perhaps a commonly overlooked aspect of respecting human life is doing so until natural death. We can draw attention to this by educating people on Catholic teaching on end-of-life care, which includes helping people setup advance medical directives and health care proxies that conform to that teaching. Respecting human life also includes supporting those who act as caregivers for the elderly, and referring them to compassionate hospice care when the end of one’s life is drawing nearer. Furthermore, we can advocate against laws that promote and euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

Practical ways to respect human life before and after conception is available through the Archdiocese of Washington’s Affirming Life Initiative (https://adw.org/living-the-faith/marriage-family/family/affirming-life/), and information on end-of-life care is available through the National Catholic Bioethics Center (https://www.ncbcenter.org/). I hope this information may have expanded your thinking on what is included in our responsibility to respect life from conception until natural death, and may encourage you to get involved in one or more of these areas.

God bless,

Father Keith