

## STATEMENT FOR RESPECT LIFE SUNDAY

**Cardinal Justin F. Rigali**

**Chairman, USCCB Committee on Pro-life Activities**

**September 30, 2008**

On October 5, 2008, Catholics across the United States will again celebrate Respect Life Sunday. Throughout the month of October, Catholic parishes and organizations will sponsor hundreds of educational conferences, prayer services, and opportunities for public witness, as well as events to raise funds for programs assisting those in need. Such initiatives are integral to the Church's ongoing effort to help build a culture in which every human life *without exception* is respected and defended.

Education and advocacy during Respect Life Month address a broad range of moral and public policy issues. Among these, the care of persons with disabilities and those nearing the end of life is an enduring concern. Some medical ethicists wrongly promote ending the lives of patients with serious physical and mental disabilities by withdrawing their food and water, even though – or in some cases precisely because -- they are *not* imminently dying. This November, the citizens of Washington State will vote on a ballot initiative to legalize doctor-assisted suicide for terminally ill patients. In neighboring Oregon, where assisted suicide is already legal, the state has refused to cover the cost of life-sustaining treatments for some patients facing terminal illness, while callously informing them that Oregon *will* pay for suicide pills. Such policies betray the ideal of America as a compassionate society honoring the inherent worth of every human being.

Embryonic stem cell research also presents grave ethical concerns. The Catholic Church strongly supports promising and ethically sound stem cell research – and strongly opposes killing week-old human embryos, or human beings at any stage, to extract their stem cells. We applaud the remarkable therapeutic successes that have been achieved using stem cells from cord blood and adult tissues. We vigorously oppose initiatives, like the one confronting Michigan voters in November, that would endorse the deliberate destruction of developing human beings for embryonic stem cell research.

Turning to abortion, we note that most Americans favor banning all abortion or permitting it only in very rare cases (danger to the mother's life or cases of rape or incest). Also encouraging is the finding of a recent Guttmacher Institute study that the U.S. abortion rate declined 26% between 1989 and 2004. The decline was steepest, 58%, among girls under 18. An important factor in this trend is that teens increasingly are choosing to remain abstinent until their late teens or early 20s. Regrettably, when they do become sexually active prior to marrying, many become pregnant and choose abortion -- the abortion rate increased among women aged 20 and older between 1974 and 2004, although the rate is now gradually declining.

Today, however, we face the threat of a federal bill that, if enacted, would obliterate virtually all the gains of the past 35 years and cause the abortion rate to skyrocket. The "Freedom of Choice

Act” (“FOCA”) has many Congressional sponsors, some of whom have pledged to act swiftly to help enact this proposed legislation when Congress reconvenes in January.

FOCA establishes abortion as a “fundamental right” throughout the nine months of pregnancy, and forbids any law or policy that could “interfere” with that right or “discriminate” against it in public funding and programs. If FOCA became law, hundreds of reasonable, widely supported, and constitutionally sound abortion regulations now in place would be invalidated. Gone would be laws providing for informed consent, and parental consent or notification in the case of minors. Laws protecting women from unsafe abortion clinics and from abortion practitioners who are not physicians would be overridden. Restrictions on partial-birth and other late-term abortions would be eliminated. FOCA would knock down laws protecting the conscience rights of nurses, doctors, and hospitals with moral objections to abortion, and force taxpayers to fund abortions throughout the United States.

We cannot allow this to happen. We cannot tolerate an even greater loss of innocent human lives. We cannot subject more women and men to the post-abortion grief and suffering that our counselors and priests encounter daily in Project Rachel programs across America.

For twenty-four years, the Catholic Church has provided free, confidential counseling to individuals seeking emotional and spiritual healing after an abortion, whether their own or a loved one’s. We look forward to the day when these counseling services are no longer needed, when every child is welcomed in life and protected in law. If FOCA is enacted, however, that day may recede into the very distant future.

In this Respect Life Month, let us rededicate ourselves to defending the basic rights of those who are weakest and most marginalized: the poor, the homeless, the innocent unborn, and the frail and elderly who need our respect and our assistance. In this and in so many ways we will truly build a culture of life.