



## Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities

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### **STATEMENT FOR RESPECT LIFE SUNDAY Cardinal Justin F. Rigali Chairman, USCCB Committee on Pro-life Activities September 29, 2009**

Respect Life Sunday, this year celebrated on October 4<sup>th</sup> is a day set aside for Catholics in the United States to reflect with gratitude on God's priceless gift of human life. It is also an occasion to examine how well we, as a nation and individually, are living up to our obligation to protect the rights of those who, due to age, dependency, poverty or other circumstances, are at risk of their very lives.

In the current debate over health care reform, it has become evident that a number of Americans believe that the lives and health of only some people are worth safeguarding, while other classes of people are viewed as not deserving the same protection. Such an attitude is deplorable, all the more so in the context of health care. Sanctioning discrimination in the quality of care given to different groups of people has no place in medicine, and directly contravenes the ethical norms under which Catholic hospitals and health care providers operate.

Unborn children remain the persons whose lives are most at risk in America: Over one million children each year die in abortion facilities. The *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 rendered states powerless to halt this killing. Thankfully Congress and most states acted to prevent public funding of abortions (with narrowly defined exceptions). Yet despite the opposition of 67% of Americans to taxpayer-funded abortion, all current health care proposals being considered by Congress would allow or mandate abortion funding, either through premiums paid into government programs or out of federal revenues.

It bears repeating: Abortion – the direct, intentional killing of an unborn girl or boy – is not health care. Abortion robs an innocent child of his or her life, and robs mothers of their peace and happiness. For 25 years, the Project Rachel post-abortion ministry of the Catholic Church has helped women move beyond their grief and remorse after abortion, helping them find peace by accepting God's forgiveness and by forgiving themselves and others involved in the abortion decision. Abortion funding can only increase the number of dead and grieving.

Unborn children are not the only human beings disfavored under current proposals. Many people insist that undocumented persons living and working in the United States should not be allowed in any new system to purchase health-care coverage, and that poor legal immigrants be denied coverage for the first five years they are in the United States. Do immigrants forfeit their humanity at the border? How can a just society deny basic health care to those living and working among us who need medical attention? It cannot and must not.

While most Americans agree that those who cannot afford health insurance should have access to health care, some commentators have gone so far as to suggest offsetting the cost of expanded coverage by curtailing the level of care now given to elderly Americans. Other pundits have suggested that treatment decisions should be based not on the needs of the elderly patient, but on the patient's allegedly low "quality of life" or the cost-effectiveness of treatment calculated over the patient's projected lifespan. Such calculations can ignore the inherent dignity

of the person needing care, and undermine the therapeutic relationship between health professionals and their patients.

It should not be surprising that the neglect, and even the death, of some people are offered as a solution to rising health care costs. Population control advocates have long espoused aborting children in the developing world as a misguided means for reducing poverty.

Some environmentalists now claim that the most efficient way to curb global climate change is to make “family planning” more widely available in the developing world. They report that an average of 2.3 pounds per day of exhaled carbon dioxide can be eliminated from the atmosphere by eliminating one human being. As used by population control advocates, the innocuous term “family planning” includes abortifacient contraceptives, sterilization, and manual vacuum aspiration abortions.

Oregon, where health care for low-income patients is rationed by the state, has denied several patients the costly prescription drugs needed to prolong their lives, while reminding them that the assisted suicide option is conveniently offered under Oregon’s health plan.

Many scientists justify the manipulation and killing of embryonic human beings in stem cell research, based on unsubstantiated hopes of finding new cures. Yet the facts increasingly show this approach to pose risks to patients, and to women who may be exploited to provide eggs for the research.

Death is not a solution to life’s problems. Only those who are blind to the transcendent reality and meaning of human life could support killing human beings to mitigate economic, social or environmental problems.

The antidote to such myopia is to recover an appreciation for the sanctity and dignity of each unique human being. One could begin by spending a day with a young child. The average child is a wellspring of joy and giggles, capable of daring leaps of imagination, probing curiosity, and even reasoned (though sometimes self-centered) appeals for justice. Children delight in God’s creation and love their family unconditionally. God gave every human being these marvelous aptitudes, and children can help us recover and appreciate them anew.

Since the advent of widespread contraception and abortion, a cultural hostility to children has grown. They are often depicted as costly encumbrances who interfere with a carefree adult life. No fewer than six recent books are dedicated to defending the childless-by-choice lifestyle – for selfish reasons, or to counter “overpopulation,” a thoroughly discredited myth. In fact, if married couples were to have more children, Medicare and Social Security would not be hurtling toward bankruptcy. Since 1955, because of fewer children and longer life spans, the number of workers has declined relative to the number of beneficiaries, from 8.6 to only 3.1 workers paying benefits to support each beneficiary. Without substantially more young people to enter the work force as young adults, in 25 years, there will be only 2.1 workers supporting each beneficiary. Eliminating our young does not solve problems even on pragmatic grounds. It adds to them.

Children, and those who are dependent on us due to disability or age, offer us the opportunity to grow in patience, kindness, and love. They teach us that life is a shared gift, not an encumbrance. At the end of life, we will be judged on love alone. Meanwhile, in the midst of so many challenges to life, we look to “Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Timothy 1:1), who offers to all the world a share in his victory over death.