

**EXPLAINING AND COMMUNICATING CLEARLY
THE CHURCH'S PRO-LIFE POSITIONS:
ONE EDUCATIONAL GOAL OF THE N.C.C. CENTER
FOR CATHOLIC STUDIES**

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It is always a great honor to address a gathering of Catholics devoted to the pro-life cause. It has been my experience that Catholic pro-lifers represent the core of the serious Catholic community, a core that is as altruistic, hard-working, and authentically spiritual as is conceivable given a human nature impaired by the reality of original sin.

My talk tonight has three purposes. First, I would like to say a few words about the history, purpose, and activities of the Nassau Community College Center for Catholic Studies which I founded in 2000 and have since directed. Secondly, I would like to make the case that one central educational goal of the Center is to provide a forum to the community, both inside and outside of the College, that explains and clearly communicates the Catholic pro-life position on all the stages of the individual's life cycle (i.e., from the moment of conception through to natural death). Finally, I would like to suggest the special importance of such a forum existing in an American public institution of higher education.

The N.C.C. Center for Catholic Studies: Some Background

Several facts about the Center should be immediately pointed out. The first is that its activities are scholarly and academic and are not to be confused with the religious activities of a campus ministry or of catechetical instruction. The purpose of the Center is to serve as a forum to present, discuss, and debate the various intellectual, moral, cultural, and social policy contributions of the Catholic heritage to academia, the public square, and the promotion of the common good within civilization at large.

The purpose of the Center has attempted to be realized through its various activities. They have included conferences, lectures, debates, student club hour talks, over 100 recorded interviews on the "Catholic Alternative" radio show on WHPC 90.3 F.M., non-credit Continuing

Education Courses, the awarding of student scholarships to graduating N.C.C. students who intend to pursue coursework in Catholic Studies at some recognized four-year institution of higher education, and other miscellaneous endeavors such as serving as a clearinghouse of information and advice for individual citizens and local, state, and national Catholic groups. The Center is presently attempting to create its first credit-bearing course at the College, an Introduction to Catholic Studies course.

A second fact of importance is that the Center has raised its own funds to pay for its speakers and for the food and drink it regularly provides at its functions at Nassau Community College. From October of 2000 to March of 2009, the Center has received from the supporting community just short of \$85,000 in donations, most of which has been spent to fund its various activities to date.

A third notable characteristic of the Center has been its track record of working cooperatively with many other organizations that are either Catholic or consistent with the Church on specific issues. Included among other such organizations are the Society of Catholic Social Scientists; University Faculty for Life; the Knights of Columbus; the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights; the American Family Association; Ave Maria University; St. John's University School of Law; the Saint Vincent de Paul Society; the C.S. Lewis Society; the Joint Parish Respect Life Committee based in Queens, New York; the Sisters of Life based in the Bronx, New York; Kellenberg Memorial High School and Chaminade High School in Long Island, New York; and with the various agencies which are part and parcel of the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

Communicating the Catholic Pro-Life Position

Many of the conferences and lectures convened or co-sponsored by the Center for Catholic Studies contain a significant pro-life component. Two examples are paramount. The first was the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, convened on October 26–27, 2007, which was held at the St. John's University School of Law and co-sponsored by the N.C.C. Center for Catholic Studies. It attracted close to 500 participants. Many of the 71 panels at the two-day conference were devoted specifically to some pro-life theme.

A second example is the two major conferences that were held under the umbrella category, "Catholic social thought, social science, and social policy," that systematically linked these three levels of

analysis to many areas of social existence that were convened at Nassau Community College on consecutive years, more specifically, on 4/28-29/2003 and 6/11-12/2004. These two conferences contained, respectively, 54 and 27 presentations, many of which either directly or indirectly touched on the Church's pro-life philosophy and program. The successful execution of these programs held at the College aided considerably in the publication of the magisterial encyclopedia project, the *Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy*, Scarecrow Press, 2007, www.scarecrowpress.com. The encyclopedia co-editors were Michael L. Coulter, Stephen M. Krason, Richard S. Myers, and Joseph A. Varacalli with one, Richard S. Myers of the Ave Maria School of Law, presently serving as the national President of University Faculty for Life.

One of the Center's early events was the honoring of the legacy of the late Bishop James T. McHugh (12/7/01) in which Richard Doerflinger, a key pro-life advocate and member of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, spoke of the many ways by which Bishop McHugh furthered the cause of life. The protection of human life from the moment of conception through natural death was a major part of the presentation—"The Obligations of the Catholic Politician"—that Denis Dillon, former and long-time District Attorney of Nassau County, made at the Center on October 28, 2006. One of the more famous talks given at the Center for Catholic Studies was offered by Professor W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia Sociology Department on April 22, 2005. He spoke about an article that he had just published in *Touchstone Magazine*—and one destined to be cited again and again by scholars, Church professionals, and educated lay people alike—titled "The Facts of Life and Marriage: Social Science and the Vindication of Christian Moral Teaching."

In many other cases, the pro-life component was the defining characteristic of the event. A great example of this was the "Catholic Promotion of the Culture of Life" conference consisting of four major speakers and headlined by Mother Mary Agnes Donovan, S.V., Ph.D. of the Bronx-based Sisters of Life who spoke on the history and purpose of her religious order. The other major speakers were Bill Devlin who spoke on the "Founding and History of the Annual March for Life in Washington, D.C."; Alex LaPerchia, a Queens, N.Y.-based playwright, who spoke on "Blessed Margaret Costello and the Church's Commitment to the Disabled," and Dr. Jane Gilroy who spoke on "The 1976 Democratic Pro-Life Presidential Campaign of Ellen McCormack" (10/13/04).

On June 19, 2006, The Center also brought in Robert George, Esq., the McCormick Chair of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, to speak on the activities of “The President’s Council on Bio-Ethics” to which he was appointed by President George W. Bush. Another great local Long Island pro-life talent, Rick Hinshaw, has frequently participated in the pro-life offerings of the Center for Catholic Studies. For instance, on November 7, 2003, Rick spoke on the topic of “The Prudential Application of Catholic Social Thought” in which he made clear the Church’s position about her fundamental and non-negotiable commitment to innocent human life. Rick was also the plenary speaker at a conference held at Nassau Community College titled “Communicating the Truth about the Perils and Prospects of the Contemporary Biotech Revolution” on June 21, 2006 which also involved such experts as Dr. Jane Gilroy and Dr. Debra Hanna of Molloy College and Monsignor Robert J. Batule, now a professor at Immaculate Conception Seminary.

Another major pro-life milestone in the history of the Center was the dynamic lecture given by Dr. Alveda King, the niece of Martin Luther King, in which the argument was advanced that the pro-life and civil rights movements are inextricably intertwined. This conference was co-sponsored by the N.C.C. Respect Life Group founded by Nassau Community College librarian, Florence Scarinci. Another prominent faculty member from the Biology Department of the College, Dr. Maureen Daddona, gave a series of talks on “stem cell research” during the Spring 2002 semester.

On Saturday, May 30, 2009, the Nassau Community College Center for Catholic Studies will convene, in conjunction with many other pro-life organizations (e.g., the N.C.C. Respect Life Group, the N.C.C. Newman Club, the Long Island Chapter of University Faculty for Life, the Joint Parish Respect Life Committee of Queens, N.Y.), a major conference. Titled “Youth and the Future of the Pro-Life Movement,” it is scheduled to include at least twenty short talks given by high school and college students on topics that span the spectrum of pro-life concerns across the life cycle. Each student’s presentation will be guided in its preparation by a “mentor” coming from the ranks of the professoriate or that of Catholic pro-life organizational leadership. The mentors will also serve the role as brief “discussants” for the student preparations. The hope here is to provide a forum that will not only educate those members of the community who attend the conference regarding the Church’s pro-life positions but will also foster the formation of future educators on the life issues from an authentically Catholic perspective.

It is important to point out that another major way that the Center for Catholic Studies has educated the public on the Catholic perspective on pro-life issues is through its radio program, the “Catholic Alternative” on WHPC 90.3 F.M. The radio program has “put into the can” well over 100 recorded shows, some (but not all) of which reflect the lectures given at the college to real live audiences. Many of the radio interviews dealt directly with pro-life activities. Typical of the latter radio shows include the following titles: “Project Rachel” with Maureen Russell; “The Respect Life Office of the Diocese of Rockville Centre” with Mary W. Bossart; “Stem Cell Research” with Dr. Maureen Daddona; “The Birth Control Controversy” with Monsignor George P. Graham, Ph.D.; “The Deeply Troubling Case of Terry Schiavo” with Rick Hinshaw; “The Nassau Community College Respect Life Group” with Florence Scarinci; “Helping Politicians Promote the Culture of Life” with Dr. Jane Gilroy; “Feminists for Life” with Jill Murman Payne; “Democrats for Life” with John Payne; “The History Behind the Formation of the March for Life” with Bill Devlin; “Attending the March for Life” with Florence Scarinci; “Applying Catholic Social Teaching: Non-Negotiable versus Prudential Applications” with Rick Hinshaw; “The Foundations of Catholic Social Teachings and the Right to Life” with Adrian Calderone, Esq.; “Blessed Margaret Costello: Saint for the Disabled” with Alex and Phyllis LaPerchia; “Critiquing New York State Legislation from a Catholic Perspective” with Mary Arden Smith; and “University Faculty for Life” with Dr. Jane Gilroy. Suffice it to say that many other radio interviews contained an important pro-life segment.

A Voice in the Public Square

The activities outlined in this talk should be viewed as useful, whatever location they emanated from, whether a parish hall, a Catholic organization like the Knights of Columbus, or from a private residence. But it is fair to point out the potentially revolutionary nature of having a Center for Catholic Studies operate out of a public institution of higher education. This is because public higher education represents a privileged part of the American public square, that social location that, rightly or wrongly, holds a disproportionate influence in carving out what passes for “official” reality in any society as defined by its secular cultural gatekeepers. Please understand me: I am quite aware that Nassau Community College holds nothing close to the same peg on the prestige ladder of American higher education as does, say, a University of California at Berkeley or a Michigan State, or a Penn State, or a

Rutgers University. Nonetheless, from the antagonistic perspective of the secularists who dominate public higher education, a religious, traditional, conservative, or pro-life position is not supposed to be allowed to operate from what they define as their own “sacred space.” Make no mistake about it: the zealous secularists on campus are not happy with the existence of the Center representing as it does, at the very minimum, a “symbolic affront” to the cultural sensibilities of the hard Left. And the smart ones understand that the threat that the Nassau Community College Center for Catholic Studies represents is not merely symbolic; that indeed, the very existence of the Center might actually inspire some hitherto “holed up” Catholic pro-lifer in some more prestigious university or college to actually attempt to start a Center for Catholic Studies at their own institution. In the final analysis, that is the Center’s most important promise: to set a precedent that may spread throughout higher education in the U.S. and especially in those locations that are centrally important in academic life.

Joseph A. Varacalli, Ph.D., is a State University of New York Distinguished Service Professor and Director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Nassau Community College-S.U.N.Y. Anyone interested in making a tax-deductible donation to further assist the N.C.C. Center for Catholic Studies in its mission to represent the Catholic intellectual, moral, and social policy traditions in public higher education can write a check made out to: “Center for Catholic Studies: Nassau Foundation” and send it to: Vice-President Joseph Buckheit, Nassau Foundation, Nassau Community College, 1 Education Drive, Garden City, New York, 11530. The Nassau Foundation will send you a letter acknowledging your donation for your tax records. No donation is too small.