

This Lent, let's reflect on unity

The 40 Days of Lent that we begin this week are filled with teachable moments, those times at which we can become especially receptive to learning about or becoming aware of something important.

During Lent, these moments might occur while you are reading or listening to Sacred Scripture. They might happen during the Stations of the Cross or even as you say "No thanks" when you are offered a goody that you have given up for Lent.

I was reflecting on the power of teachable moments several weeks ago when I was thinking about what we might have as a Lenten focus for our Diocese.

For a number of years at our diocesan Pastoral Center, we had the Office of Catholic Social Mission that was responsible for promoting the social teachings of the Church and for encouraging respect for the littlest and weakest among us.

At the same time, we had a Respect Life Office that was responsible for coordinating our diocesan efforts to advocate for the dignity and sanctity of human life.

Last year, in reorganizing the Pastoral Center, I merged these two offices into the new Office of Human Life and Dignity, with Joann Welter, the long-time director of Catholic Social Mission, as its director.

At the same time, I asked Father Domenico Pinti, pastor of St. George Parish in Apache Junction, to serve as our diocesan Vicar for Life Issues.

My goal in creating the new Office of Human Life and Dignity and the new position of Vicar for Life issues was to communicate the priority that I place on our diocesan efforts to uphold the sanctity and dignity of all human life.

The decision to unite these two efforts was a teachable moment that emphasizes that to be Catholic encompasses concern for the whole range of life issues.

Many Catholics today, at times, define themselves as "pro-life advocates" or "social justice advocates" as if a "good" Catholic can only be one or the other.

Yet, Catholics faithful to Church teaching engage all issues that affect the sanctity and dignity of human life. To be Catholic is to view all life as a sacred gift from God gratuitously given, to be respected and treated with dignity.

I get frustrated when I hear Catholics say, "I am pro-life," yet they never speak of the plight of the poor or get involved in efforts to reach out to people on the margins of life, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison.

I get frustrated when I hear Catholics speak eloquently of the social teaching of the Church and who articulate the seven principles of Catholic social teaching, but who seem indifferent to or disdainful of advocacy to end abortion.

And, I really get bothered when I hear Catholics insist it is none of the Church's business to be involved in the legislative process, that the Church is wrong in opposing "personal freedoms" like abortion and that the Church is hypocritical in asking that moral and ethical criteria be used to evaluate the actions of government.

This Lent, I hope that together we will create teachable moments about our Church's teachings on the sanctity and dignity of all human life and about the role of our Church in speaking up about that sanctity and dignity.

I will be calling upon Catholics from all over our Diocese to reflect together on how we can put an end to divisions about life issues.

I hope this Lent might be a time to listen to one another and to show solidarity with one another in our efforts to protect and to enhance the sanctity and dignity of human life from conception to natural death.

In the last few years, much progress has been made at the U.S. Conference of Bishops in accomplishing a harmony between and among respect life efforts and social justice efforts.

Documents coming from the Conference now reflect a collaborative relationship between the Pro-Life Office and the Office of International Peace and Justice. Pulling in the same direction has enhanced effectiveness and the influence the Conference can exert.

Division in the household of God is unacceptable. It strikes against Christ's priestly prayer uttered before he died, "that they may be one."

I pray this Lent that we might seize the teachable moment and pray together, asking the Lord's guidance on how we can stand together and speak together on behalf of the sanctity and dignity of all human life.