

Catholic Review Column: Choosing Life

Hundreds of thousands of people were expected in Washington, D.C., this week for the annual March for Life, held each year on the anniversary of the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision. Among those scheduled to participate in the March for Life were hundreds of parishioners and students from our own archdiocese. Bishop Denis J. Madden and I were also to attend.

How perfectly this year's March theme, "Every Life is a Gift," captures the spirit of so many who will be in Washington to affirm life. It is also a welcome reminder that God is the author of all human life and we have a duty to promote and defend all human life, from natural conception until the final hour of God's choosing.

One way our local church is working to promote life is through support of pro-life pregnancy centers here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Approximately two dozen centers provide support to about 15,000 expectant mothers in crisis pregnancies and their unborn babies each year. The centers provide prenatal counseling as well as basic necessities such as diapers, formula and gently used baby clothes, cribs and other items. The centers rely on donations - including those that come via support from the Archbishop's Annual Appeal - and are staffed by volunteers.

In addition to providing expectant mothers with counseling and items for the baby, some of the centers have ultrasound machines that allow women a "window into the womb" through which they can see the growing miracle inside them. Thanks to the leadership and support of the Knights of Columbus, which has donated more than 500 ultrasound machines worth more than \$26 million to pregnancy centers around the country including right here in our archdiocese, more and more women are

choosing life after seeing and hearing their unborn babies.

“Pregnancy centers routinely report that a very large percentage of women who are considering abortion choose life after witnessing their baby’s physical activity during an ultrasound scan,” according to *Columbia*, a publication of the Knights of Columbus. “A 25-year-old woman came in who wanted an abortion,” Nancy Shaffer, director of North Jefferson Women’s Center in Fultondale, Ala., told *Columbia*. “She was hard and would not make eye contact. But during the ultrasound she saw and heard her baby’s heartbeat. She burst into tears, going from hard to broken, and decided for life.”

The impact of the ultrasound machines in these pregnancy centers is not just anecdotal. San Antonio’s Life Choices Medical Clinic saved eight babies in 2011, the year before it received an ultrasound machine from the local Knights of Columbus council. The following year, the clinic saved 453 babies and the year after that 703.

While we rejoice in a woman’s decision to embrace the gift of life, we are also there to comfort, pray and mourn with those women who do not. Programs such as Project Rachel, which seeks to provide healing for those affected by abortion, including mothers, fathers and grandparents, is an outward expression of God’s mercy and healing and an invaluable source of strength for those scarred by abortion. The church also provides support to those who are suffering from miscarriage, as well as parents who have received an adverse prenatal diagnosis.

Of course, the church also stands ready to support people at the other end of life’s spectrum, those preparing for death - either their own or that of a loved one - due to a terminal illness, advanced age or some other serious condition. As a Christian family, it is our privilege and duty to care for the dying by offering them love, comfort and the spiritual support available through prayer, the sacraments and our faith in eternal life.

Recently, a Maryland legislator indicated his intention to introduce legislation that would permit people with a terminal illness to take their own life with the aid of a doctor.

The Catholic Church in Maryland will be adding its voice to this public discussion and I would be especially grateful to Catholic medical professionals to share their unique perspective. Anyone willing to assist in this effort may contact Mary Ellen Russell at the Maryland Catholic Conference by calling 410-269-1155.

Information about the church's teaching on end-of- life care, including information about advance directives, living wills, and the Catholic Declaration for Health Care Decision Making, can be found at www.mdcathcon.org.