

Laity in Baltimore and beyond taking their rightful place in pro-life work, ministry

WASHINGTON — Building a culture of life is not solely the work of bishops and ordained clergy. Laypeople take the lead in diocesan and parish settings, and in independent organizations, to make the case for life.

Johanna Coughlin is one such example, but far from the only example. In her eighth year of working for the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Respect Life Office, she took over as director last year when her predecessor retired.

To Coughlin, it seems to her "I've always been in pro-life ministry." Growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, where her mother was involved with the local Birthright chapter, "we had several young moms stay with us," she said. When Coughlin was in middle school, she recalled, "one of the moms invited my mom and me to witness the birth of her son."

"I thought I might be drawn to this type of a ministry, maybe as a volunteer, but not as a profession," she told Catholic News Service. That changed, though. "Initially, I thought I'd be a lobbyist. I was a lobbyist for National Right to Life (Committee) for a very short time," Coughlin said, but "after getting a family of my own I started working for the archdiocese."

She said the Baltimore Archdiocese has been greatly helpful to her, letting her work part time, and also work from home, as her family has grown to five children, ages 9, 7, 5, 3 and 1. Coughlin's mother lives with the family and helps out with the children, she added.

There are “so many good and faithful people in our parishes who do the real work, motivating parishioners to come down for the March (for Life),” Coughlin said. This year’s march in Washington is set for Jan. 19.

“You know it’s a call when you can step back from those moments and those conversations and say you can keep going,” she added. “I’m inspired by all the people around me. I tell them all the time, ‘You are the guys doing the good work ... making sure these things happen.’ I’m inspired looking that these folks — especially the ones who have been doing it for so long.”

Thomas O’Neill, head of the Respect Life Office in the Diocese of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, had life issues added to his portfolio six months ago, he told CNS. “This first year is getting a sense of where we’re at,” O’Neill said. “I’m going down (for the march), witnessing everything, taking notes.”

O’Neill has been involved in pro-life efforts since 2008, when he started working in the Family Life Office of the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia. He was active in family life and men’s ministries while there, but he also loved speaking — often at lobby days at the state Capitol in Richmond with lawmakers representing districts in the diocese who were not pro-life. “It is,” O’Neill said, “the pre-eminent rights issue of our day.”

In Harrisburg, he wants to double the turnout for next year’s March for Life. As he was being interviewed by CNS, the diocese sent a news release outlining local respect life efforts: 30 parishes holding holy hours for life, and 13 parishes sponsoring buses to Washington for the march.

“Most of the impetus for the March for Life comes from the parishes. The parishes organize their own buses. We centralize that information and promote it, giving people around the diocese an idea of where they can go. We almost have two months

dedicated to respect life,” O’Neill noted, with Respect Life Month in October, while “January ends up being a de facto second month for respect life.”

O’Neill’s former boss in Arlington, Therese Bempohl, has served in various capacities in the pro-life effort for over two decades. In the mid-1990s, she worked for the U.S. bishops in spreading the news about natural family planning. She also taught morality at a Catholic high school in the Washington suburbs and did campus ministry before taking a job with the Arlington Diocese 12 years ago. Within a month of her hiring, she became acting director of the diocesan family life office. Last year, she was named executive director of the multipronged Marriage, Family and Respect Life Office.

What keeps her in this ministry, she said, is “just my desire to spread the good news, spread the Gospel.”

“Just knowing Jesus Christ has changed my life, right? And having the church as a vehicle, with all the sacraments,” she continued. “I think it’s a natural thing for me to say, ‘C’mon everybody, you’ve got to get to know the Lord, the church is still a voice in the wilderness, calling us to straighten our path to the Lord. We’re going to heaven, eventually, and the church is the straightest way to get there.’ I believe that 100 percent.”

For Bempohl, it was her work at the high school and college that sealed the deal for her.

“I saw so many women who had abortions in college or in high school — as young as 16. One came up to me: ‘It was devastating. It was devastating.’ You see the look on their face. ‘He forgives, he forgives.’ ‘I can’t forgive myself.’ ‘Yes, he will, all you have to do is turn to him and you’re forgiven,’” she said, recalling their conversation.

“It’s really kind of powerful, being able to be a catalyst. It’s just a privileged position

when someone's so broken and so wounded, to be able to say, 'Let me show you the way,'" Bempohl said. She recalled one woman who came on a post-abortion retreat. "She can't even look up. At the end of her post-abortion healing, she's like a new person," she said. "She's free. And that really is the message of freedom. You're free. You're not chained by sin."

Bempohl, though, continues to worry about the culture. "Human sexuality is the action God chose to bring human beings into this world, and it's treated as an extracurricular activity," she said. "And until we get to say that there's something sacred here, something profound here, I don't know if we can change the culture."

That "dark night of the soul" feeling is not uncommon to those in pro-life ministry. "I think all of us have" felt it, said Kristan Hawkins, founder of Students for Life. She likened it to "trying to swim to the top of the pool and people are trying to dump more water on you." She said faith gets one through those rough spots.

Hawkins — no longer a student herself; she founded Students for Life in 2006, a year or so after her college days ended — is busy in the run-up to the March for Life, as are most people engaged in pro-life ministry. Her organization's national conference takes place the day after the march. "We distribute thousands and thousands of signs" for the march itself, she told CNS. Then she flies to San Francisco for the annual Walk for Life West Coast in that city, followed by another conference.

She got her start in pro-life activity at age 15, when she said yes to a request from a friend at her church to volunteer that summer at a pregnancy resources center. After that experience, Hawkins said, "it got put on my heart that I needed to do more."

She started a pro-life group at her high school in West Virginia and at her college.

Hawkins said she couldn't find a pro-life faculty member to sponsor the group, but a professor who was not pro-life sponsored the club; he "didn't agree, but he thought we should have the right to form a pro-life group on campus." She said she got known as "the pro-life girl" at school.

These days, "my husband is a great source of support. I can go home at the end of the day and talk about things," Hawkins said. "My oldest child was born with cystic fibrosis. I have four children, and two were born with CF. In a way, it's been a huge help in my professional life — keeping things prioritized, keeping things balanced."

Hawkins added, "We struggle with burnout in the pro-life movement — a lot of people in the pro-life movement. We want to do better and we want to win it. God has put this on my heart. This is something I was specifically called to do, and I want to see it through."

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