

While Rome Burns...

The Catholic Review

“No one has to have an abortion. To all of those in crisis pregnancies, I pledge our support and our financial help. Come to the Catholic Church. Let us walk with you through your time of trouble. Let us help you affirm life. Let us help you find a new life with your child, or let us help you place that child in a loving home. But please, I beg you: let us help you affirm life. Abortion need not be an ‘answer’ in this Archdiocese.” These were my words two years ago at my Mass of Installation—words which ring as true now as they did that October day in 2007.

Since that day, there have been two attempts by lawmakers in this Archdiocese—no doubt succumbing to the political pressure brought to bear by the powerful pro-abortion lobby, including Planned Parenthood and NARAL—to pass onerous laws that would harass and even possibly eliminate the very life-affirming services on which so many women in crisis pregnancies depend.

The latest such attack, offered under the thinly-veiled guise of “protection” for women, is sponsored by Baltimore City Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. Instead of focusing on the poverty, violence and homelessness that has had a death grip on Baltimore and its citizens for years, the City Council has made it a priority to force all four of its pregnancy centers—centers the City’s own Social Services departments refer women to—to post signs that state the services they do not provide, namely abortion and contraception. As introduced, the bill imposes a criminal fine of \$500/day for failing to post such a sign. Seemingly benign on its face, the bill unnecessarily targets only prolife pregnancy resource centers and promises to be a model and jumping-off point for a national effort to attack pregnancy resource centers. What other private, charitable organizations or even public businesses are required to post services that they do not provide? It mirrors similar legislation introduced at the state level in 2008 which failed to pass. In both cases the proposed laws target pregnancy centers because of their prolife mission and do not require abortion clinics to make similar disclosures.

What do these pregnancy resource centers do that could possibly explain such unwarranted scrutiny by our City Council? Among the free help they offer are pregnancy tests, sonograms, maternity and baby clothes, confidential counseling, and parenting classes. Assisting these centers in their good work are the people of the Gabriel Network, which supplements the invaluable life-affirming resources provided by pregnancy resource centers by connecting women in need with “angel friends.” These volunteers stay with women in crisis throughout their pregnancies and beyond, helping them find housing, taking them to prenatal appointments, assisting them in obtaining scholarships to finish school, and helping them find the resources they need for themselves and their children. In fact, I have heard stories of “angel friends” still in contact and friendship with their former clients 10 years later. These pregnancy resource centers and angel friends do the work of the Good Samaritan, the work necessary to building a culture of life, and the work required of us to accompany our commitment as a pro-life Church.

Sadly, the discriminatory bill targeting these pro-life pregnancy centers—scheduled for a vote by the Council’s five-member committee, four of whom are Catholics—may threaten these centers’ ability to provide the competent, compassionate, and free care they so lovingly provide. Not surprisingly to those who have encountered the Christ-like love shared with clients at these centers, not a single real client who had visited a pregnancy center in Baltimore City testified at the hearing last week in favor of the bill, though there was a pregnancy center client who testified against it.

That woman, named Ebony, had already been to an abortion clinic- where she was told it would be cheaper for her to have an abortion than carry her pregnancy to term-when she heard about pregnancy centers while listening to a Christian radio station. She testified that she went to that center thinking she had no other option but to have an abortion. She told Council members how she was told by volunteers at the center that they could not help her have an abortion, but that they could help her if she wanted to carry her baby to term. She received a sonogram at that center and could not believe that the sound she heard was that of her baby, the baby she was thinking of aborting. She chose to have her baby and her now-three-year-old named Ethan was with his mother at the hearing. Perhaps tellingly, not one Council member asked Ebony a question at the hearing.

Those who work in this important ministry see not only an increase in attacks from those who scorn our commitment to life, but an increase in challenges to the women that they serve. One of the greatest of these challenges is inadequate or inappropriate housing. Not surprisingly, in the current economic climate housing requests at Gabriel Network have increased by 15%. These women facing homelessness or its practical equivalent also face isolation, something no woman, and certainly no pregnant woman, should feel. Gabriel Network and its angel friends fill this need and bring women in crisis and their babies the care and compassion they deserve.

The Gabriel Network has responded with enthusiasm to face this growing challenge of pregnant women facing homelessness. Due in large part to their currently running Campaign for Pregnant Women Facing Homelessness, as of January 25th with the opening of their newest home at St. Benedict's, Gabriel Network's maternity home capacity will double. A lynchpin of this effort was the joining of Sparrow House as a new part of the Gabriel Network and moving it to a new location in Baltimore City, an area of great need. Gabriel Network proudly stands by its mission statement that "nothing is impossible with God."

I challenge you to join in this important ministry in service of life and encourage you to join me at the Blessing and Dedication of Sparrow House on November 15th at 2:30 at 2636 Wilkens Ave., Baltimore, MD 21223. Share your time, talent, and treasure with your local pregnancy resource center or the Gabriel Network. For more information, please visit www.archbalt.org/respect-life/support-for-crisis-pregnancy.cfm.

I also encourage you to contact members of the Baltimore City Council and urge them not to harass pregnancy centers and to vote 'no' to Council Bill 09-0406. Visit www.mdcatcon.org for information on how to contact the Council.