



CHAPTER 1

LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

As Catholics, we believe that each and every one of us is created in the image and likeness of God. Based on this belief, the Catholic Church asserts that all human life is sacred. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the human person provides the foundation of a moral vision of society. Upon this foundation rests all Catholic social teaching.

In our society today, we may hear of some who promote a theory of “survival of the fittest.” Some use arguments about quality of life to

support euthanasia and abortion as acts of mercy. As believers, we are called to reach out to the weak, the dying, the elderly, and the unborn with compassion. Abortion and euthanasia are not acts of mercy. Instead we believe our acts of mercy involve sharing Christ's love with those most in need.

“We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person” (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*, 4).

Elderly

For many years, our parish has enjoyed a close relationship with our local nursing home where the staff always welcomes parish volunteers of all ages.

When I was in sixth grade, our catechist loved to sing. She taught us to sing some of the residents' favorite songs. During our visits, the residents filled the cafeteria and sang with us. Afterward, we would stroll through the hallways and

share our music with those who were unable to come to the cafeteria.

Currently, our middle school youth group visits the care center on a regular schedule to play Bingo with the residents. The kids call the game, make certain the residents hear the numbers called, and distribute prizes. They also help any residents who need special assistance.

The residents look forward to spending time with the kids. After a little initial discomfort, the kids can see what a difference they make in the residents' lives. Our middle school youth enjoy Bingo at the care center so much that we have doubled our number of scheduled visits for the upcoming year!

1. **Build bird feeders and bird houses for seniors to hang in their yards. Find a church member who can teach young people how to make a bird house or feeder from a simple pattern. Explain the project to a local building supply store and request material donations.**
2. **Make homemade treats for the homebound.**

This is a great project around the holidays. Thanks to the treats you make, these people will have treats to share with their holiday visitors. Deliver them personally or give them to volunteers who visit the homebound in your community. If you choose to send the treats with other volunteers, be sure to include a card.

3. Interview long-time members of your parish and put together a booklet of their stories and recollections. Make copies of the booklet and share it with the whole community.
4. Audiotape or videotape church services. Make copies of the tapes and give them to the homebound.
5. Take seniors grocery shopping or on other errands. This is an excellent ministry for high-school youth!
6. Arrange to lead Bingo at a nursing home, senior center, or senior housing complex. Bring healthful treats or dimes for prizes. Be sure to speak loudly and clearly while calling the game. Have a few young people at each table to assist the players.

7. Arrange to visit a nursing home, senior center, or senior housing complex to play games with the residents. Games like cards, checkers, and chess provide a one-on-one opportunity to get to know the seniors.
8. Offer to assist the elderly in wrapping their Christmas gifts. Many seniors have difficulty with vision and arthritis, which can make wrapping presents difficult.
9. Arrange to help seniors with holiday make-overs. Many seniors will have family visiting over the holidays and want to look their best. Volunteer to help them with fixing hair, trimming or polishing nails, and shaving.
10. Arrange to visit a senior facility to sing to and with the people. Learn some songs from when the seniors were young; they will love to sing them!
11. Bring flowers to an elderly person. You will let them know that they are special today and you may help them remember a time when a loved one brought them flowers. Ask them to share their memory with you.
12. Plant flowers and help tend the grounds of a senior facility. Residents who were once avid gardeners take great pleasure in enjoying such gardens.

13. Read and write letters for seniors. Failing vision and finger dexterity make reading and writing difficult for some elderly. Help them keep up with their correspondence.
14. Volunteer at a senior facility to help with their e-mail service. Many facilities provide computers for seniors to use, but they do not have enough staff to teach residents and program participants how to use the computers. Help seniors keep in touch with their friends and family by helping them learn about technology.
15. Host a “senior prom.” Serve healthful treats and play music from your guests’ era. Dance with those who can, and encourage everyone to move to the music. Be sure that hosts and hostesses dress well for this special occasion.
16. Host a holiday party. Decorate, serve treats, play games, and include music to celebrate any holiday. You might even like to help the seniors make a craft.
17. Provide meals-on-wheels to seniors on days that agencies do not provide them or volunteer with your local meals-on-wheels organization.

18. Offer rides to church for seniors who do not drive or those who choose not to drive in poor weather. Your parish priest or pastoral minister can identify people who are in need of transportation.
19. Invite a senior to sit with you at church. They may long for the days when they attended church with their spouse or family. For those newly widowed, attending Mass alone can be a difficult adjustment.
20. Make prayer cards or holiday cards for seniors. Deliver them to senior facilities or ask those who visit the homebound to deliver the cards.
21. Call nursing homes, care facilities, senior day-care centers, and senior centers to find out how you can help.
22. Adopt a grandparent. Seniors make excellent companions!
23. Become a prayer partner with a senior.

Expectant Parents and New Parents

1. Organize a diaper coupon collection. Distribute the coupons to parents in your church, or donate them to a food shelf or single parents.

2. Baby-sit for new parents. Even watching a baby for a short time at home so that a new mom can relax and take a bath or nap is helpful.
3. Host a baby shower for expectant parents in your church. Play games, bring gifts, and pray with the parents.
4. Create baby layettes or care packages for new parents. Include books, diapers, blankets, onesies, and other necessities. Distribute the items to single moms, food shelves, family shelters, area churches, or Catholic Charities Adoption Services.
5. Organize people to take turns providing meals for new parents during their first week at home with a new baby. Taking care of a newborn is tiring, and a tasty homemade meal is appreciated.
6. Pray for expectant parents and their unborn baby throughout the entire pregnancy. Send cards every few weeks to let the parents know you are still praying.
7. Organize a collection for Catholic Charities Adoption Services. Collection items could include cribs, baby furniture, diapers, newborn clothing, blankets, baby formula.

8. **Organize a maternity clothes collection. Make the clothing available to expectant moms in your parish or distribute them to your local Catholic Charities office. To locate the Catholic Charities office nearest you, contact their website at www.catholiccharitiesusa.org.**

Mentally Challenged

About a dozen mentally handicapped adults live in the Northeast Residence, a group home in our community. For nearly twenty years, the Northeast Residence was housed in our vacated parish convent. A few years ago, the Northeast Residence purchased a large home nearby. The home is less institutional and better meets the needs of the residents and staff.

When the Northeast Residence changed locations, the parish Respect Life Committee very deliberately maintained our ties with the facility. During this time, our middle school youth began providing a Christmas party for the residents

with assistance from the Respect Life Committee.

The Northeast Residence staff provides us with a list of names and gift ideas. The middle schoolers each donate \$2. Then a couple of youth volunteers shop for the gifts. At the party, which is held at the facility, the Respect Life Committee serves treats and the middle schoolers distribute gifts to all the residents. And of course, we all sing Christmas carols together.

1. **Get involved with Special Olympics.** This organization utilizes both long-term and short-term volunteers. They need coaches to teach and train athletes. For the big events such as track meets, each athlete needs a host to guide them through the events of the day. Contact the Special Olympics website at www.specialolympics.org for more information.
2. **Set up a “special friends” buddy system for children in parish programs.** Mainstreaming children with special needs is the norm. However, we can further help these children

succeed if we pair them with another child who will serve as both friend and advocate.

3. Develop a relationship with a group home in your community. Visit the facility on a regular basis to play games with residents, or host parties at the facility on special occasions.
4. Find out about camps or organizations in your area that serve the mentally challenged. Contact the facilities and discover how you can help. Facilities often provide training for volunteers who are willing to donate their time. Your diocese may have an office which specializes in ministry to those with special needs. They can be a resource for local agencies in need of volunteers.
5. Raise funds to send a mentally handicapped person in your community to a summer camp.
6. Set up a “special friends” buddy system for children who choose to participate in special youth events such as downhill skiing or visiting an amusement park. Be sure that parents of children of special needs know that “special friends” are available.

Physically Challenged

Our senior high youth group has made bathrooms accessible and has built wheelchair ramps. When modifying a bathroom, we must make certain we determine the needs. Does the resident want a nonskid floor and tub? Or does a wheelchair need to pass through the doorway? Sometimes “accessible” can mean safer, not necessarily wheelchair accessible.

Building a wheelchair ramp requires precision. We need to construct a ramp according to specifications which determine the percent grade of the incline and dimensions of corners. I find that high school youth have exceptional math skills and can easily figure out a plan for a ramp.

- 1. Help with physical therapy. Those with severe physical disabilities need numerous hours of physical therapy everyday in their homes. Get involved with a team of volunteers and commit to helping with therapy sessions for an hour a week.**

2. Set up partners to host the physically challenged at church events. Be sure the hosts are aware of the location of accessible entrances and restrooms as well as any specific needs their partner may have.
3. Help those with poor vision with reading and writing. Paying bills and responding to mail can be made easier with a little assistance.
4. Offer to make phone calls for those who have difficulty hearing.
5. Make someone's home accessible. Build wheelchair ramps and install bathroom support rails.
6. If your church is not accessible to persons with disabilities, raise funds to make it accessible.

Terminally Ill

One of the largest events in our town each summer is the Relay for Life. The Relay for Life is a fundraiser for the American Cancer Society. Participants register in teams and team members find people to sponsor them. The teams commit to having at least one

member walking a high-school track all night long.

Each year, the *Relay for Life* event in our community sells about 16,000 luminaries to honor cancer survivors or memorialize persons who have died of cancer. Our middle-schoolers help prepare luminaries all year long. Throughout the year, we fold bags and stamp them “In memory of _____” or “In honor of _____.” On the day of the relay, youth groups around the area volunteer to place the bags around the track and fill them with a candle and sand.

This year, many members of our high-school youth group registered as a team and participated in the relay.

1. Visit someone who is in a hospice. Listen to their stories. Offer to read to them.
2. Become a prayer partner for someone who is terminally ill. Your pastor or pastoral minister can tell you who can benefit from your prayers.

3. Make cards for terminally ill patients with comforting messages. You might like to include Scripture quotations.
4. Participate in fund-raisers for organizations that fund research and patient costs for terminal illnesses. For information contact local offices or websites of the following agencies: American Heart Association (www.amhrt.org), American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org), Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (www.cff.org), AIDS (www.worldaidsfoundation.org), Multiple Sclerosis (www.nmss.org), etc.
5. Contact a hospice in your area to find out about volunteer opportunities.
6. Organize a specific food drive for a hospice in your area. Hospices serve quite a bit of fresh fruit and juice. Support these organizations in their care for people who are dying.

Imprisoned

Our children make seasonal cards for prison inmates. However, we have learned that we must determine from prison staff what materials we can use to make the cards,

since some craft materials are not allowed inside the prison.

Inmates do appreciate such cards from children. We receive a note a gratitude from the inmates every time!

- 1. Organize a book collection for donations to the prison library.**
- 2. Write letters and cards to inmates. Prison staff can make certain that children correspond only with inmates who are not a threat to the children.**
- 3. Make Christmas stockings for inmates.**
- 4. Spend time at a juvenile center and lead recreational activities. Juvenile center staff can help you know how to prepare.**
- 5. Organize a toiletry collection for inmates or those moving to halfway houses. Because of the expense involved, prisons and halfway houses are often unable to provide such items.**
- 6. Call your local diocesan office of prison ministry to find out how you can get involved.**