

Seamless garment of life

Midweek Musings

Brother Patrick



The Catholic Church professes a “consistent ethic of life” because we believe that every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. Every person is sacred and loved unconditionally by the God who is creator of heaven and Earth and Master of the universe. No matter who we are. No matter where we are from. No matter what we have done in this life. We are all God’s children.

In 1971, Eileen Egan (1912-2000), first likened this consistent ethic of life to the “seamless garment” that Jesus wore but was not torn by his tormentors (John 19:23). She believed that every person is a precious thread in the seamless garment of life. She said: “My life has had a single strain: to see Jesus in every human being, to realize that each one is inviolable and sacred in the eyes of God, and then to translate that into everything I do.”

During the Second World War, Eileen Egan cared for Polish immigrants who fled Nazi Germany. During the Cold War, she vouched for refugees from China, Korea, Pakistan, Palestine, and Vietnam. With the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., she marched for civil rights in Selma, Alabama. With

Dorothy Day, she picketed with migrant workers in Bakersfield, California. With Mother Teresa, she traveled across continents to speak for the people that the world too often forgets.

By raising her prophetic voice for human life and human dignity, Eileen Egan called upon leaders and pastors to stand for peace, justice, kindness, and generosity. She said: “Instead of feeding the hungry, we destroy the fields that produce the food. Instead of clothing the naked, we bomb factories that produce clothing. Instead of giving drink to the thirsty, we bomb reservoirs. In war, the enemy is dehumanized and is no longer seen as a child of God. As Christians, we must penetrate the disguise and see Jesus in the enemy. Then, we would not kill and destroy.”

Eileen Egan believed that every suffering person is God’s beloved child. The old, the poor, the sick, and the disabled are not burdens, but brothers and sisters. The migrant, the immigrant, and the refugee are not pawns on a political chess board, but friends and neighbors. Cardinal Joseph Bernadin (1928-1996), who later championed the seamless garment of life, once said: “When human life is considered ‘cheap’ or easily expendable in one area, then eventually nothing is held sacred and all lives are in jeopardy.” In other words, indifference to any life is indifference to every life.

As believers and citizens,

we are called by God to love our neighbor, welcome the stranger, console the crestfallen, and care for those less fortunate than ourselves. Before we vote, we can pray with these challenging questions: Do we believe in the sanctity of life? Do we believe in defending the lives of the most vulnerable? Do we believe that losing a life through neglect, apathy, poverty, or punishment is unjust? If we answer “yes” and vote accordingly, then we help to preserve the seamless garment of life.

Late in life, Eileen Egan was mugged and seriously injured. Rather than seek prosecution of her assailant, she forgave him and kept in touch with him. Unlike Eileen Egan, most of us will not win peace prizes, walk with saints, befriend the famous, or have their scattered thoughts published in the newspaper. But all of us can do something to promote peace and protect human life in its every form, flower, and folly. All of us can raise our voices, cast our votes, and share our resources in ways that defend life. By doing so, we embrace God’s core message, which Eileen Egan once famously called a word of “indiscriminate love.”

Brother Patrick Garvey is an associate minister and diocesan hermit in the Catholic Community of Gloucester & Rockport. He can be reached at brpatrick@ccgrronline.com. Midweek Musings rotates among Cape Ann faith leaders.