

“Nationwide Initiative of Prayer, Service and Witness to Life”
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There are many different reactions and predictions as to how courts and legislatures may treat abortion in the future. But whatever judges and lawmakers may do, our pastoral response must continue to focus on the needs of women facing unexpected or challenging pregnancies.

Brothers, place yourself in the shoes of a mom in a difficult pregnancy:

Jessica (her name is changed) made a last ditch call for help from a bus in Washington DC. She was pregnant and homeless, and she was using the bus for a place to keep warm. Jessica had just scheduled an abortion because she didn't want to have her child on the streets in winter.

The challenges can be immense for women in difficult pregnancies, especially women in poverty. According to 2014 statistics from abortion providers, women who chose abortion were poor, young, and unmarried: 75% were low income, 60% were in their 20's, and 86% were unmarried. Imagine the difficulties that these women faced?

We know that pregnant women in need come from all cultures and backgrounds. Of those who turned to abortion: 39% were white, 28% were black, 25% were Hispanic, and 6% were Asian or a Pacific Islander.

Many of the women who turned to abortion reported a religious affiliation: 24% were Catholic, 17% were mainline Protestant, 13% were evangelical Protestant, and 8% identified with some other religion. Pregnant mothers in need are at the peripheries, both outside our parishes, and inside our parishes. But in desperation, they are turning to other places for help.

Our abortion-healing ministries, most often called Project Rachel, remind us of the tragic results for those who have experienced abortion, such as intense grief, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and broken relationships. Our Hope After Abortion national website now averages 93,000 unique visits a month.

Women facing challenging pregnancies should see the Church as a place where they can find help, especially with its myriad of social services and organizations dedicated to meeting the needs of people in crisis. But do we have an accurate picture of what is available, and how we communicate it?

The Pro-Life Committee began to ask: “How can we assess the pastoral and practical assistance that we currently provide to pregnant moms and families in need? How effective are we in

communicating such help to women in difficult pregnancies? What is uniquely the Church's role?" So, we turned to you for your help and experience.

This past summer, I invited diocesan bishops to consider completing a "Preliminary Survey on Diocesan Pregnancy Help Resources" so that we might begin to compile a picture of existing resources. I also invited the leaders of many of our wonderful Catholic charitable, service, educational and membership organizations to complete a similar preliminary survey of resources that they offer. I was greatly moved by the many programs that assist pregnant and parenting mothers in need.

I wish I had time to show you all of the responses, from the vast Catholic Charities networks of services, to diocesan-sponsored programs, to the unique and creative efforts of individual parishes. The survey results continue to arrive, and the findings have been encouraging. If you have not yet sent yours in, please do so.

But for some highlights, we know that: more than 500,000 pregnant women are helped each year through a network of more than 2,700 pregnancy help centers, where many of our people volunteer. Well over 150,000 low-income mothers deliver their babies at our Catholic Hospitals each year. Many tens of thousands of pregnant and parenting moms are helped each year through our Catholic Charities programs and help agencies. These are very encouraging numbers. Yet we also see that there are significant gaps.

The surveys also noted that we bishops tend to expect that pregnancy help resources are well communicated at the local level to those in need, specifically through our parishes. But is this an accurate assumption? What are we doing as bishops to help our parishes communicate pregnancy help resources so that people in the parishes are sharing the Church's resources and opportunities with the community?

As we began to gather your input, we recognized an upcoming and appropriate opportunity in which to process the findings and explore ways to improve our help to pregnant moms in need at the local level. March 25, 2020 is the 25th Anniversary of *Evangelium vitae*, the Gospel of Life. In that landmark encyclical, Pope St. John Paul II challenges us:

With great openness and courage, we need to question how widespread is the culture of life today among individual Christians, families, groups and communities in our Dioceses. With equal clarity and determination we must identify the steps we are called to take in order to serve life in all its truth. (EV 95)

He challenges us to assess our efforts in assisting pregnant moms in need and to improve our responses, where needed, especially at the local level. In short, to truly accompany each pregnant woman in need.

Pregnant and parenting moms in need are in our parishes, and our neighborhoods. While many pregnancy help resources are appropriately coordinated at the diocesan or regional level, moms in need are best reached at the local level. We have well over 17,000 parishes in the US. Each parish is best able to identify the local pregnancy help resources that are currently available and to identify

potential gaps that need to be addressed. The parish community is uniquely positioned to encourage a collaboration of resources at the local level and to increase awareness of help available to mothers and families in need.

As Pope Francis reminds us, our parishes need to be “islands of mercy in the midst of a sea of indifference.” Everyone in the parish community should know where to refer a pregnant woman in need. How can we help our parishes do this?

The 25th anniversary year of *Evangelium vitae* gives us a wonderful opportunity to assess, expand, and communicate resources to pregnant moms and families in need. We are inviting *you* to invite *your parishes* to join a nationwide effort from March 25, 2020 to March 25, 2021 entitled: “Walking with Moms in Need: A Year of Service.”

For this Year of Service, the Pro-Life Committee is developing educational, pastoral, and action-oriented resources for parish use, such as:

- Tools for documenting an inventory of local resources for pregnant mothers in need.
- Ideas for improving parish responses.
- Prayers for building a culture of life and a civilization of love.
- Reflections on the teachings of *Evangelium vitae*, *Evangelii gaudium*, and *Laudato si’*.

These resources will include homily helps, suggested prayers, bulletin inserts, pulpit announcements, parish-based activities, and communications and outreach suggestions. All of these will be posted on our website (in English and Spanish) with a suggested timeline for the Year of Service.

All of the resources are being developed so that they can be easily shared from us bishops, to our pastors. The intention is ease of use at the parish level, along with suggestions for pastors on how to delegate efforts in this Year of Service to parishioner volunteers.

Early feedback from stakeholders tells us that a parish focus on help for pregnant and parenting moms in need can be a unifying message. It can initiate or improve upon the collaboration of those who work on social justice and pro-life efforts. It can also move the conversation from what sometimes seems like a partisan divide into pastoral unity.

We have also heard from many of our diocesan directors that our parish leaders are looking for tangible and practical ways to positively engage. Our people in the pews naturally feel compelled by their faith in Jesus Christ to reach out to their sisters and brothers facing difficult situations. Pope Francis has repeatedly challenged us to go to margins and bring hope and help to those in need. It’s what Catholics do. It’s what Jesus expects us to do.

Pope Francis gives us a wake-up call. He says:

It is not “progressive” to try to resolve problems by eliminating a human life. On the other hand, it is also true that we have done little to adequately accompany women in very difficult situations, where abortion appears as a quick solution to their profound anguish,

especially when the life developing within them is the result of rape or a situation of extreme poverty. Who can remain unmoved before such painful situations? (*EG* 214)

My brothers, let us be moved by a vision that any pregnant and parenting mother in need will know they can turn to the local parish for real help.

Pope St. John Paul II reminds us that prayer must be the foundation of such an effort:

Through special initiatives and in daily prayer, may an impassioned plea rise to God, the Creator and lover of life, from every Christian community, from every group and association, from every family and from the heart of every believer. (*EV* 100)

To encourage parish prayer, we will make available prayer cards entitled: “A Prayer for Pregnant Mothers.” Allow me to close with this prayer:

O Blessed Mother, you received the good news of the incarnation of Christ, your Son, with faith and trust.

Grant your protection to all pregnant mothers facing difficulties.

Guide us as we strive to make our parish communities places of welcome and assistance for mothers in need.

Help us become instruments of God’s love and compassion.

Mary, Mother of the Church, graciously help us build a culture of life and a civilization of love, together with all people of good will, to the praise and glory of God, the Creator and lover of life. Amen.

Thank you for all of the data that you have been sending us, and thank you for allowing me to share this exciting initiative with you. And let me please finish the rest of that story that I shared at the beginning:

Jessica, homeless and pregnant, called from a bus and reached a church-based ministry that provided free housing, case management, and the support of caring volunteers. With this help, Jessica's natural drive could shine through. She found a job with benefits near the Home and was promoted three times before her son was born. She established new, healthy life habits, and was blessed with her very own car from the generosity of a local Catholic parishioner. Jessica and her son are now thriving in their own apartment and are confidently building a new life together.

By walking with moms in need, we can help many more brave women like Jessica.

I am happy to answer any questions. Whatever guidance you might care to offer will certainly help the resources that are in development.