



Set Out in Haste:

Serving Women, Serving Life

A Statement from the Bishops of Maryland

January 2010

Mary had just accepted the call to bear the Son of God when she “set out and travelled to the hill country in haste”ⁱⁱ to the house of her cousin Elizabeth, who was also with child. The Blessed Mother “remained with her about three months”ⁱⁱⁱ to minister to the needs of her vulnerable cousin.

From the moment of Christ’s incarnation, God called his people to a faith that defies the obstacles of ordinary human circumstances. Mary’s immediate impulse to reach out to Elizabeth, particularly in the wake of her own courageous acceptance of motherhood, remains a powerful example for us.

How often does a woman face an unplanned pregnancy convinced there is little hope for a positive outcome to her circumstances? She may be rejected by her family, abandoned by the baby’s father, overwhelmed by the news she has received, unsure of where to find support, anxious about her education, career or future, or facing a combination of those forces. That is where we as a Christian people come in. Among the most powerful testimonies to the culture of life is our outreach to pregnant women in need.

This outreach can take a number of forms, but its most direct is through the work of pregnancy resource centers. In Maryland, nearly 40 of these centers together serve about 30,000 women a year. They offer emotional support, childbirth and parenting classes, adoption assistance, infant and maternity clothes, formula, diapers, and help accessing public and private assistance programs. These services are offered free of charge and out of deep love and respect for both the expectant mother and her unborn child.

We appeal to you now for your public support in defending the pregnancy centers’ compassionate outreach. Sadly, these charities are the target of a campaign by NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland and

Planned Parenthood of Maryland to discredit their good work simply because it affirms life. Pregnancy resource centers have been singled out for unwarranted regulation three times in two years, and this harassment is expected to continue.

The first bill targeting pro-life pregnancy centers was introduced in 2008 in the state legislature, and would have required them to tell clients that they are not required to provide “factually accurate information.”ⁱⁱⁱ Failing there, abortion rights groups marketed similar bills at the local level. In November the Baltimore City Council passed a bill requiring pro-life pregnancy centers to post a sign listing services they do *not* provide (abortion and contraception) or face a daily fine.^{iv} The Montgomery County Council is reviewing a regulation that requires pro-life centers to tell clients that the information provided is not intended to be medical advice and that women should see another provider before proceeding on a “course of action regarding... pregnancy.” Failure to comply would include a fine of up to \$750 per day.^v

At a time when many in the “pro-choice” movement claim to seek common ground on abortion, these proposals demonstrate a baffling and aggressive impetus in quite the opposite direction. They are particularly abhorrent because they mandate compelled speech *only for* those centers that are pro-life and *only because* they are pro-life, in complete disregard of the respected and valuable assistance pregnant women receive from them. The message these proposals send is disturbing: Failure to provide abortion or contraception, even when based on deeply-held moral beliefs, is an activity that merits regulation and, if necessary, punishment.

There is a critical need for offering alternatives to abortion. While the abortion rate declined 9 percent nationally between 2000 and 2005, the abortion rate in Maryland *rose* 8 percent in the same period. Our

state's abortion rate is now **38 percent higher** than the national rate, with more than one-in-four Maryland pregnancies ending in abortion. There were 37,590 abortions performed here in 2005 – about 103 per day.^{vi} To even consider targeting centers that help women choose life is unconscionable in light of these tragic statistics, which represent an even more tragic reality.

Those numbers, sadly, come as little surprise because our state is home to one of the most permissive abortion laws in the country, having in 1992 approved a state version of the Freedom of Choice Act. Maryland has no parental consent law, no meaningful parental notification law, no informed consent law, no mandatory waiting period, no regulation of abortion clinics as surgical facilities, and no abortion reporting requirement. What's more, about \$2.5 million of state taxpayer dollars are used on average every year to pay for Medicaid abortions and, in some cases, abortion is legal through all nine months of pregnancy.

Justice and charity are both necessary to achieve the common good and build a moral society.^{vii} For many years we have spoken out against Maryland's permissive abortion law as a violation of the justice that requires the protection of human life from conception until natural death. Now, in the proposals harassing pregnancy centers, lawmakers are considering passing legislation that curtails the right and duty of our Christian faithful to exercise charity that conforms to an authentic understanding

of the dignity of the human person. This is unacceptable.

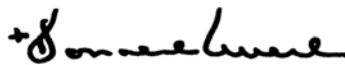
Your help is needed to stand up for pregnant women in need and for the organizations that provide them with free, compassionate, life-affirming services. Here's how you can “set out in haste” to serve pregnant women in need:

- Stay informed on proposals that target pregnancy centers, and contact lawmakers. Visit www.mdcathcon.org, and click on “Catholic Advocacy Network” to receive e-mail updates.
- Contact the respect life office in your diocese to learn how to get involved in local pro-life work:
 - Archdiocese of Baltimore: 410-547-5537
 - Archdiocese of Washington: 301-853-4555
 - Diocese of Wilmington: 302-655-9624
- Attend Catholic Lobby Night in Annapolis on Monday, February 15 and urge state lawmakers to support pregnant women and pregnancy centers. Visit www.mdcathcon.org or call 410-269-1155/301-261-1979 to register.

It can be difficult to remain hopeful when we consider these threats to human life and Christian charity. But our trust, like Mary's, remains in the Lord. We know that if we “set out in haste” to do His will, as she did, her song will also be ours: “The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is His name.”^{viii}



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Bishop of Wilmington

ⁱ Luke 1:39.

ⁱⁱ Luke 1:56.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maryland Senate Bill 690/House Bill 1146, 2008.

^{iv} Baltimore City Bill 09-0406.

^v Montgomery County Board of Health regulation proposal for “Limited-Service Pregnancy Centers,” 2009.

^{vi} The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *State Facts About Abortion: Maryland*, January 2008.

^{vii} Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Paragraph 28, 2005.

^{viii} Luke 1:49.