

The Pro-Life Mother's Day Newspaper Page Sponsored by St. Mary's in Polo, Illinois

by Larry Plachno

For Mother's Day 2008, St. Mary's parish in Polo, Illinois sponsored a Pro-Life Mother's Day newspaper page. The results were both favorable and impressive. It brought our parish closer together with a unified purpose, it helped expand and emphasize the Pro-Life movement within our parish, and it brought forth favorable comments from those who saw the page.

Since being appointed the Parish Respect Life Coordinator (PRLC) at St. Mary's, I have thought about doing a Pro-Life newspaper ad. I was impressed by some of the other PRLCs at Deanery Meetings who proudly displayed their Pro-Life newspaper pages. But, since we were a tiny parish, I had the impression that this kind of Pro-Life activity was reserved for the big churches, and the costs and support required were beyond us. To some extent I felt like the little kid riding his tricycle on the sidewalk admiring those huge 18-wheeler trucks that came down the road.

St. Mary's parish is small in comparison to many others. Our community has a total population of only 2,500 and we have about 160 families as members only because a few neighboring towns do not have their own Catholic Church. Expectedly, being this small, those of us active in the parish tend to wear several hats. In my own case, in addition to being PRLC and getting copies of *Life Matters* and other Pro-Life items to parishioners, I also serve as Webmaster for our church Web site, a member of the finance committee, and am responsible for booklets such as First Communion, Confirmation and Reconciliation.

What probably made the difference in our situation was that I had received several compliments and words of encouragement from fellow parishioners in recent months. Some were thankful for *Life Matters* and other Pro-Life material distributed with our Church Bulletin. One person suggested that my work had encouraged her daughter to adopt a baby. Hence, when a neighboring parish ran a Pro-Life page on the anniversary of Roe vs. Wade in January, I took it as a challenge to do the same.

For anyone who is interested, here is a step-by-step guide on what we did and how we did it.

Newspaper Prices and Requirements

One of the major reasons why I had never moved ahead with a Pro-Life newspaper page was my impression that the cost was beyond the capabilities of a small parish. However, I invested the time to phone the local newspapers to ask questions about rates and requirements. While the daily newspapers in the larger communities had relatively high advertising rates, I discovered that our local weekly community

newspapers not only had more economical rates but in addition, offered special rates for religious and non-profit organizations.

Much to my delight, I discovered that St. Mary's could run a full-page newspaper page in four weekly community newspapers for a very reasonable price. In addition to appearing in our own community, the same page would also appear in two neighboring communities where some of our parishioners reside, plus a nearby fourth community. The relatively economical pricing gave me tremendous encouragement and prompted me to accept this challenge and new project.

Publication Dates

The next question I faced was in picking a publication date. Many parishes time their Pro-Life pages to appear on the anniversary of Roe vs. Wade, January 22. Perhaps the next most popular date is Mother's Day because of the obvious connection between Motherhood and Pro-Life. Other possible dates could include Father's Day, Grandparent's Day, Thanksgiving Day and other anniversaries and commemorations. While Christmas Day might have some merit, there is too much going on at that time of year that might dilute a Pro-Life message.

Patricia Bainbridge at the Rockford Diocese Respect Life Office pointed out to me that the Pro-Life message could and probably should vary with the date. A Pro-Life message scheduled for publication on the anniversary of Roe vs. Wade would tend to be more to the point and perhaps more "fire and brimstone." However, a Pro-Life message tied in with Mother's Day should be softer and a tribute to life and Motherhood.

My decision was to aim for the week prior to Mother's Day. One reason was that since we were already at the start of February, this would give me three months to organize and complete the project. A second reason was that Mother's Day would involve a "soft" Pro-Life message that would encourage more people to put their names on the page.

Permission from the Pastor

Once I had a basic game plan, the obvious next step was to get permission from our pastor. I wrote a formal letter to Father John Hanrahan on February 8 outlining what I wanted to do, how I wanted to do it, and requested his permission and approval. His reply was both gratifying and supportive: "You know, you did not need to ask."

I should mention that Father John is a delight to work with in regard to Pro-Life projects. He has never said "No" to any Pro-Life undertaking I have suggested. If I am willing to put in the time and effort, he is willing to approve the project and lend his support. When I offered to get the St. Michael prayer cards to end abortion, he immediately approved, put the cards in the pews, and says the prayer after every Mass. In our parish, we reformat the monthly *Life Matters* on legal size paper folded in half to match our regular Church Bulletins. This usually gives me the back page to expound on

local or additional Pro-Life issues and concerns. He also asks me to write up a report on our PRLC Deanery Meetings so he knows what is going on in regard to Pro-Life issues and concerns.

Armed with his official approval, I immediately got to work on developing the actual page.

In-House vs. Newspaper

The first question you need to decide is whether you can or want to put the page together yourself or have the newspaper do it for you.

In almost all cases, the newspaper will design the ad for you if you do not want to do it yourself. You simply have to hand them a sketch, typewritten copy, photos, or other illustrations and they will create the page for you. Bear in mind that they are very experienced because they do this every day. They are not only professionals at it but they also have the proper computer equipment, software and support. Unless you have someone on your team who has some real experience in this area, I recommend that you let the newspaper put your ad together for you.

While putting the ad together yourself gives you more control, a poor quality ad will detract from your Pro-Life message. If you want to put the ad together yourself, make sure you know the difference between RGB, CMYK and Greyscale and the difference between 72 dpi and 300 dpi. Do you have a professional graphics pagination program you can work with like QuarkXpress or InDesign? Can you provide the newspaper with a suitable file; probably a press-optimized PDF file?

In our situation, I made the decision to assemble the page myself. The basis for this decision was that I had spent more than three decades in the publishing business and had complete access to the proper computers, software and equipment as well as access to professional publishing staff who could help if necessary.

Designing the Ad

I now had a blank page 11 inches wide and 20 inches high. What should I put into it?

My thoughts were that the obvious starting point was to come up with the basic message we were trying to get across. Initially, I had planned to write the wording myself after looking at what other parishes had done. I already had been given copies of three Pro-Life ads sponsored by other churches. I asked Patricia Bainbridge from the Pro-Life Office for suggestions and she provided me with the names of organizations and Web sites that might help or give me ideas.

In looking around, I found a sample letter-size message on the Life Issues Institute Web site. It nicely combined a tribute to Motherhood with a Pro-Life message.

The only problem was that it was copyrighted, although permission for use was granted if no changes were made. It was ideal for what I wanted, and I knew that I could not do much better with the wording, so I decided to use it without making changes. This filled two-thirds of the top half of the page.

Should I center the message at the top of our page and leave white space on both sides? My decision was to slide the message to the left and put some stock photos to the right to dress up the page. I soon found stock photos in my collection of a mother and baby, a baby crawling, and a young girl with a smile, and used them to fill up this white space.

I might digress for a moment and suggest that if you do booklets, brochures or Web pages for your parish, it helps a great deal to have non-copyrighted clip art and stock photos immediately available to help illustrate and add interest to your printed items or Web pages. I have about a half dozen CDs with religious clip art and an equal number with holiday clip art and stock photos. These can be purchased at computer stores or on-line. I have even purchased Catholic clip art CDs on e-Bay.

With the addition of the three photos on the right, I had effectively filled up the top part of our page. I now moved to the lower half of the page. This was easier to deal with since I immediately allocated the left two-thirds of the bottom half of the page to an area for the names of our parishioners who would sign up to support Motherhood and Pro-Life. The right side of the lower half of the page was used to mention Gianna's House Pregnancy Resource Center.

Opened in late 2007 in Rock Falls, Gianna's House has been very successful. They now have a regular director and are working towards getting their own ultrasound machine. Giving them one-sixth of our page was an easy decision. In addition to an invitation to help those in need, this area included their hours of operation, their address, and their phone number.

Getting Input

In the publishing business, there is a rule that you never proof your own work. Now that most of the page had been designed, except for the names to be added, it was time to seek reviews and suggestions from others. Copies of the ad were given to my wife Nancy, Patricia Bainbridge from the Respect Life Office, and Diane Melton and Nina Mardauss from Gianna's House.

I received two suggestions. Both my wife Nancy and Patricia Bainbridge did not like the wording "unwanted child or pre-born." As a result, this was changed to "untimely pregnancy." The people from Gianna's House also asked whether we could use their logo in the page. They sent this to me via e-mail and it was inserted at the top of the section on Gianna's House.

Dealing With Problems

Expect to have problems along the way. Are problems just a coincidence, or is some force trying to discourage you from going through with this project?

In our situation, we ran into a minor problem when our advertising contact at the newspaper failed to return e-mails. I finally decided to phone the newspaper office and then discovered that the advertising sales person assigned to us was no longer with the newspaper company. Fortunately, they assigned us to a new advertising representative who was very attentive and easy to work with. Unfortunately, since I had designed the Pro-Life page, the newspapers decided to change their page size. This required nearly an extra hour of work on my part to restructure the ad to the new page size which was narrower but higher.

Presentation to Parishioners

The cost of printing the Pro-Life page was never a concern. Because the cost was so reasonable, I was willing to take the cost out of my pocket or have my company pay for it. Father John insisted that the parish would pay for the page out of regular church funds. As it turned out, neither of us had to worry about the cost.

My biggest concern was in getting parishioners to sign up to put their names on the bottom of our Pro-Life page. To the best of my knowledge, St. Mary's had never done anything like this in the past so it was a new experience. I had heard from other PRLCs that many parishioners refrained from submitting their names: because they did not have strong feelings against abortion, because they were afraid of getting their names in public, or because of other reasons. As a result, we had four major concerns: 1) Timing, 2) Showing the page to parishioners to make them more comfortable about signing up to include their name, 3) Endorsement and support by Father John, and 4) The actual material given to parishioners. Let me take each of these items in turn.

1. Timing – Several different factors were involved with the timing. With Mother's Day on May 11, 2008, it became obvious that since the local newspapers came out in mid-week, our page would have to run on or around May 8. In turn, this dictated that our completed page with names had to be at the newspaper office no later than Friday, May 2. Hence, our deadline for accepting any last-minute name submissions would be Sunday, April 27. This, then dictated that we would schedule parishioners to submit their names over the weekends of April 19-20 and 26-27.

Since Father John was planning to be out of town towards the end of May, this prompted us to try to get things started as early as possible. Officially, the Pro-Life Mother's Day project got started in mid-March when it was mentioned on the back page of *Life Matters*, distributed with the regular Church Bulletins.

2. Samples of the Page – I felt that parishioners would be more likely to submit their names for inclusion on the page if they had an opportunity to see and read the page.

Since we were using a “soft” message rather than “fire and brimstone,” I reasoned that we would get more names if our parishioners knew this.

Unfortunately, we did not have a computer printer large enough to print a full newspaper page. Hence, I drafted my wife and sister-in-law to take a PDF version of the page to Staples in Sterling to get a few full size copies printed. These “proof” copies were then placed in the back of church so parishioners could see the actual ad and wording full size.

3. Pastor Support – As always, Father John came through with strong support. On the weekend of April 5-6, Father John announced our Pro-Life Mother’s Day page from the front of church at all of the Masses. He held up a proof of the page and explained about what we were going to do. He also encouraged all members of the parish to participate.

4. Our Materials Distributed to Parishioners – Our materials were distributed to parishioners on the weekend of April 12-13 as an insert to our regular weekly Church Bulletin. They included three different items:

a) Our primary document was the April issue of *Life Matters* that as usual had been reformatted to a half-legal page size booklet to coincide with our regular Church Bulletin. The back page included information on our forthcoming Pro-Life page, mentioned the proof copies in the back of church, and covered the other two enclosures.

b) Enclosed was a small envelope that the stores call a 6-3/4 size envelope. A label had been affixed to each envelope reading: “Mother’s Day Pro-Life Ad. Please write names legibly on the envelope and place in collection basket.”

Both Father John and I made a big deal out of the fact that while a \$5 donation was suggested, we were much more interested in names than in donations. This got to be a joke around the parish since you never hear “we don’t want your money.” This may have backfired on us since we received more money than we expected.

c) The third item enclosed was a bookmark with the famous Henry Hyde quotation suggesting that supporters of the Pro-Life movement may well be rewarded at the time of their final judgment. This required a lot of extra work since the bookmarks were printed and trimmed by hand. However, past experience in sales strongly suggested that giving something away was a good way to get response from someone. Moreover, the Pro-Life message on the bookmarks would also have a positive effect.

Parish Response

Parishioners were given two weekends to return the envelopes with their names with or without a donation enclosed. These were the weekends of April 19-20 and April 26-27. Much to our surprise, donations the first weekend alone substantially exceeded our

cost for printing the Pro-Life page. By the end of the second weekend, donations more than doubled our cost for printing the page.

With Father John out of town for a few days, the work on getting me the envelopes was left to our parish volunteer staff. Fortunately, since most of us easily kept in touch via e-mail, this was not a problem and I had the envelopes with the names in my hands by the afternoon of Sunday, April 27.

Apparently a few people forgot the envelopes because additional names dribbled in a day or two after the official deadline via e-mail. Counting each family member individually, we ended up with nearly 80 names. Considering the tiny size of our parish and the fact that this was a first-time undertaking, I felt that this was a respectable number.

In spite of all of our efforts, there were a few names that did not get added to the page because they arrived late. Our official cut off date for names was Sunday, April 27. Since I was able to e-mail the file for the page to the newspaper, and it was due on Friday, May 2, I elected to hold off sending the page in until Wednesday, April 30. Even then, a few names arrived after the page was already at the printer. In the future, we need to do a better job of getting the names in on time.

I found myself very busy that week as April turned to May. In addition to finalizing the Pro-Life page with the names and getting it to the newspapers, I was also trying to get photographs of our First Holy Communicants so I could finalize, print and bind our First Holy Communion booklets for the coming weekend. I need to talk with someone upstairs about doing a better job of scheduling.

Results

Although I would have liked to have seen more names on our Pro-Life page, I will admit that everything went well and that our first Pro-Life Newspaper Page project was an obvious success. It brought our parish closer together with a mutual project. It also was a major positive influence in bringing the Pro-Life message to our parishioners over the several weeks from the start to the end of this project. Unexpectedly, it also generated some extra revenue for our parish.

The newspaper people were very kind to us. Our Pro-Life page appeared on page five of our local paper; a very desirable “right hand page up front” for maximum exposure. The newspaper people also printed a photo of our First Communion class, that I had supplied, in that same issue.

I was gratified to hear from several members of our parish who made positive comments after seeing our Pro-Life page in print. After the ad was published and in print, I heard from other parishioners who mentioned that they were sorry that they had not submitted their names to go on the page.

I can also say that our Pro-Life page did what it was intended to do. It brought forth comments and questions from people in our communities who were not members of our parish. Some who were pro-choice seemed shaken to find people in their community who were strongly Pro-Life. Those who were Pro-Life were gratified to find support for their position from others in our community. I also heard that putting the Gianna's House information into our Pro-Life page was helpful to some people who did not know it had recently opened.

While the Pro-Life Newspaper Page project may have been a little work, it does appear that we accomplished more than what we expected. I am sure we will do something similar again in the future.

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