

Passing On the Torch

Summer 2012

Theo Stearns Retires from the Office of CUL President

In the spring of 1973, a young woman of very small means sat in a doctor's office in California. Her pregnancy was affected by an RH-negative blood condition, and after several amniocenteses, she was advised to get an abortion for health reasons. She refused to do so.

Clearly, the culture of death was already firmly entrenched. As in this woman's case, young and vulnerable people were and are often viewed as potential victims to be preyed upon by those with an anti-life agenda. However, God, in His infinite goodness, finds ways to bring good out of situations that appear to be immersed in evil.

The woman who sat in the doctor's office was Theo Stearns. This experience became the first step for Theo and a group of young friends to convert to the Catholic faith and found Catholics United for Life with the permission of Bishop Mark Hurley of the Santa Rosa Diocese.

Catholics United for Life members had been involved in meetings, speaking, protests at courthouses and even being arrested in abortion center sit-ins. A growing sense that the pro-life movement had to be different brought them to the conclusion that a compassionate, honest and direct approach to the horror of abortion was a compelling necessity. Young people are full of zeal and the "here and now"; somehow merely registering people to vote didn't address the reality that babies were dying right down the street.

Coming uncomfortably close to the abortion debate, CUL set aside their signs and their "protest presence" to simply make a personal appeal to the mothers right at the abortuaries. Theo coined the term "Sidewalk Counseling" and CUL refined its practice. No one knew what day abortion would end; however, one could go directly to an abortion center every day, save babies and give those babies that died the dignity of some recognition.

It is difficult now to comprehend how visionary and unpopular this behavior was at the time. Walking up to real people to discuss their personal decisions about abortion was radically uncomfortable both for the abortion industry and for some national pro-life

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♦ Theo Stearns being arrested in a sit-in at an abortion mill in the early 1980s.

Catholics United for Life has a new website! Visit us often to read more about our history and to view current news, updates on our conferences and activities, and much more. Over time we hope this website will offer opportunities for pro-life Catholics to network with each other and work together on building a Culture of Life.



www.catholicsunitedforlife.org



◆ Training photos taken to illustrate Sidewalk Counseling. Theo presents information and the photos of aborted babies that were taken in Dallas in 1985.

Dear Friends,
 Being part of the great movement to save the lives of the helpless and to restore the truth about human life in our culture is a tremendous gift from God for each of us. God invites all of us to respond wholeheartedly to the present culture — we don't just "retire" from defending life. Pro-life parents and grandparents, pro-life people in their workplaces, those who are elderly, ill or even dying — all of us together must offer daily prayers and sacrifices. Let us pray for each other that no matter where we are in our lives, we can be a light for life. My dearest friend, Sr. Mary Prisca, now 96 years old, is my inspiration. On Saturdays she inspires all us "young" people by being prayerfully present, sitting in her chair, on the sidewalk at the abortuary in Louisville. She gives the babies the dignity of her loving presence. God grant me, and each of you, the gift of such fidelity and the humility to accept doing what we are able to do at each present moment.
 Thank you for all you do to defend life and for your support of EUL.

Theo Stearns, T.D.P.

advocates. Abortionists hired lawyers to slap the new movement with one injunction after another. Theo was falsely accused of jumping across the windshields of cars and physically impeding people's right of way. At the same time, workshops on "direct action," including Sidewalk Counseling, were even banned from many pro-life events.

Nevertheless, individual pro-lifers embraced the practice wholeheartedly. The enthusiasm and willingness to sacrifice on the part of a grassroots movement reformed the face of the pro-life presence in our nation. Saving babies made sense. People began to Sidewalk Counsel as fast as CUL training groups could be sent out, and Sidewalk Counseling took on an identity and a life much bigger than any individual or organization. Over the years, thousands of babies have been saved from cruel deaths.

God picks the most unlikely, the poor, the convert, the one who is unsure. Eventually Theo became president of this pro-life organization and worked for many years to spread its message and its methods. Catholics United for Life owes a great debt to the vision and contributions that Theo Stearns has given over the years, and hopefully will continue to provide. However, now 72 years old, a busy grandmother of 35 and great-grandmother of 5, Theo has chosen to step down from the office of president of Catholics United for Life. It is quite certain that Theo will not disappear from the pro-life scene, but hopefully she will have a bit more time for grandchildren, reading philosophy books, gardening—oh, and a bit of bird-watching, too.



◆ Theo with her son, Dr. Zeb Stearns, and some of her "Ragin' Cajun" grandchildren. Dr. Stearns has worked presenting life issues and medical ethics to youth at Ignite Your Torch and works in his area to promote true medical ethics.

Growing Up Pro-life

In May of this year, the board of Catholics United for Life elected a new president, Tamara Cesare. In this interview Tamara speaks of her rich pro-life experience and her hopes for the future of CUL.

Mrs. Cesare, I'd like to introduce you to our readers as the past president's daughter. What was it like growing up as the daughter of Theo Stearns?

My young life was immersed in pro-life work. I was born on the edge of the abortion debate and grew up with the fight to end abortion as a reality for most of my life. Our pro-life beliefs were woven into the fabric of our everyday lives, our friendships and activities, including reciting the rosary outside of the hospital (before there were free-standing abortion centers) every week, with a stop at the new A&W for root beer on the way home. I began Sidewalk Counseling at 14 years of age and always cherished the times we would stop by to see friends we had made because we had convinced them not to get abortions. In order to fulfill our promises, my older sister and I actually took care of a baby girl who was saved, a five-year project for us. There wasn't much that we did that didn't have to do with pro-life activities.

What was it like to Sidewalk Counsel at such a young age?

It was an uncomfortable thing for a teenager to stand in a perfectly normal-looking place, a respectable medical complex, and approach complete strangers about their personal choices. It was frightening at times, as people could be very aggressive. I walked alongside a self-proclaimed devil worshiper who chewed up rosaries, spitting the beads at us, and said he ate the aborted babies. The abortionist hired him to "escort" women into the building. Angry boyfriends threatened that they would tear me apart, even though I was just a little girl. More than anything, though, it was a burden to know the truth about real life and the babies who were dying, to always carry a sadness from a loss of childlike innocence that wants to believe we live in a wonderful world that loves and protects children.



◆ *Eight-year-old Tamara Stearns holding a sign in front of the local hospital where she and others prayed the rosary weekly in 1974.*

In order to fulfill our promises, my older sister and I actually took care of a baby girl who was saved, a five-year project for us.



◆ *Marta certainly enjoyed her chance to live life. She was an energetic and always happy baby who loved to dance and play with other children.*



◆ Tamara Stearns on a Texas Christian television show in 1985.

We were often discouraged from calling ourselves Catholic, and Sidewalk Counseling was considered radical direct action in the early days. As a teen, I had to struggle against the fear of being different and not being accepted, but as we know, teenagers are rebels at heart. So I had my chance to be countercultural, rebellious, and even radical in some people's eyes. Young people are bursting with the desire to make a statement, to make a difference, and I had that chance. I also had to believe that my faith and my convictions were more important than what people thought of me. The presence of youth at events like the March for Life shows that the youth today have those same strong desires and beliefs that they too can make a difference.

If you had to sum it up in a paragraph, what would you say Sidewalk Counseling brought to your life?

Sidewalk Counseling came with a grace that brought everything that is good into my life. Even the really harsh truths set you free. I was given the grace to understand very early on that I could easily have been one of those young girls walking into an abortion center. I wasn't so different that I couldn't be the victim of a culture gone wild with self-importance; I wasn't so different that in someone else's circumstances I couldn't be the perpetrator in one of these harmless-looking buildings with palm trees swaying in the breeze on the front lawn. Pro-

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◆ Youth Crusaders in the early 1980s with babies saved from abortion.

life work ripped the mask of allurements off sins that lead women to the ultimate despair that abortion is. What is it that kids say today—"Keep it real"? My life was very real.

Were you involved in any other activities besides personally Sidewalk Counseling?

Starting at about 16, I joined a team of people who trained Sidewalk Counselors and traveled through 36 different states teaching it to everyone and anyone who would listen. It was on one of these trips that our group retrieved some babies out of a garbage can. I had taken up the hobby of photography to photograph the babies who were saved so that we could raise money to help the constant stream of women that we took care of. At 17, I found myself photographing the bloody, battered remains of babies who had died from D&E and D&C abortions. They weren't the full-sized saline babies that are so shocking, but their tiny size made the impact even more severe. There were only hints of humanity left, a little arm or foot in the brutal remains, and the thought of what they had suffered when they were so small was horrible.

We teenagers called ourselves Youth Crusaders and started a national newsletter. We spoke around the country and even had a string of very small national youth conferences. Promoting the Angelic Warfare Confraternity became very dear to our hearts. We wanted to assure that this Dominican confraternity,



◆ Youth Crusaders Joe Stearns, Blaze Barton and Tamara Stearns participate in a special program on youth with Mother Angelica in 1985.

Pro-life work ripped the mask of allurements off sins that lead women to the ultimate despair that abortion is.



◆ People found it difficult to envision actually approaching people on the street at first. In the mid 1980s Mark and Tamara participated with other Youth Crusaders in training people in Sidewalk Counseling via skits.



◆ Mark Cesare, Tamara's husband, being arrested at a Planned Parenthood abortion center in 1979 right after they had met.



◆ James Cesare, a third generation pro-life worker. James enjoyed telling friends that his father had been arrested and put in jail... but it was OK because he had been with a priest.

which promoted sexual morality and channeled grace to its members for that end, would not die away; now it has made a great comeback. Recently, the Dominican Fathers have begun to promote it again, which we are thrilled about.

Catholics United for Life started out with Sidewalk Counseling as a new idea. It is a huge part of the pro-life movement now. Is Catholics United for Life still relevant today?

I believe it is. CUL holds a unique place in the history of the pro-life movement, but it also carved out that place with the timeless message that isn't its own, but that of the Catholic Church. The early work of CUL created a foundation and a springboard for so many issues. For

example, Planned Parenthood's extreme origins and beliefs that CUL wrote about years ago are very relevant today. The pro-life movement will not succeed as an organization but only as a movement that must grow from a very grassroots base, grow from personal sacrifice, personal witness and lifestyle. CUL is relevant because it has always been more of a movement than an organization.

You said that pro-life work brought everything that is good into your life. Elaborate on that.

I met my husband at a meeting about doing a sit-in at a central California abortion mill. We have been blessed with a very happy marriage of 27 years, and with 8 children and 4 grandchildren to date.

Early in my marriage, I had great difficulty carrying a pregnancy to term and, due to the advice of doctors, was uncertain whether I should have more than two children. I wondered whether my work shouldn't shift to teaching Natural Family Planning. Then I was sent the special grace of meeting Mother Teresa. She said only one thing while I was with her, and it wasn't even directed at me. Still it was the message I needed. "Have a big family. That is the best way to stop abortion," she said—so I did. It wasn't that hard to resolve my medical issues with the right doctors.

I owe a great debt to the pro-life movement due to the graces I received to be true to my faith. The image of courageous little old ladies in the bitter cold holding rosaries in their knotty, arthritic fingers stays with me always. It was a humbling experience to grow up amid the sacrifices that were made and the clear lines of honest truth about the lies the culture feeds its youth. The faith of so many individuals who strive to build a culture of life in the midst of such darkness continues to be inspiring.

I also received my degree in middle school education and have taught 6th, 7th and 8th grade in the public school system, which brought a wealth of insights. However, my greatest “job,” as Mother Teresa reminded me, is still being a wife and a mother to my children.

What vision do you have for the future of CUL?

My greatest hope is that we can spread the message that being pro-life is basically a movement towards Christ. While organizations are essential to educate and inform, to motivate and keep the issues within sight, the work that must be done is in the heart of each person. Just as one can praise God wherever he or she is, one can create a culture of life starting with his or her own life situation. I want Catholics United for Life to be a venue for young people to make an impact with their idealistic messages. I hope that through CUL people will see the growth of the movement and be inspired by the presence and work of others whom they may not know personally.

Mostly though, I look for Catholics United for Life to be a beacon of light—not our own light, but the light and wisdom of the teachings of the Catholic Church. I hope that this light will shine through the darkness and fog that causes so many to be lost in false ideals, false compassion and false peace.



◆ 1990s—A second generation of Youth Crusaders at the March for Life.

MISSION STATEMENT:

CATHOLICS UNITED FOR LIFE'S main objective is to support the Catholic Church in its mission to restore the moral principles of the natural law and Divine Revelation, focusing in a special way on the right to life for all human persons and on the integral part that sexual morality plays in life issues. Catholics United for Life strives to be a presence of life in a culture of death, to educate the culture on the realities of the day and to provide its members with a voice and an avenue to impact the culture around them.



◆ Theo Stearns presents Bl. Pope John Paul II with pictures of babies saved by abortion (1983).



◆ Tamara Cesare with Sarah, a volunteer at the Ignite Your Torch Catholic Youth Conference in 2006.

From the **DESK**

Becoming the president is, in many ways, like coming home for me. I am very glad to have the opportunity to work hand in hand with so many other wonderful people in work that is designed to serve the Lord. However, I do not approach this work without some fear and trembling. When one works for the Lord, one must always keep in mind that it is the work of the Lord and not one's own. Please pray for me, that I will be a worthy servant in the field.

Mrs. Tamara Cesare, OP
President