Our pro-life work must begin with each of us

ON AUG. 22 THE RESPECT LIFE Commission for the Diocese of Salina hosted our annual Respect Life Conference. Diocesan directors Jaclyn and Eric Brown put together an excellent group of speakers, and the information shared was thought-provoking, insightful and significant.

The lead speaker, Stephen Wagner of Justice For All, focused on how we can better engage those with whom we disagree about life issues, especially abortion. Instead of caustic shouting matches that inevitably fail to move hearts or change minds, we were actually led through practical exercises in how we can share the truth about the inherent dignity of human life in a way that is respectful and worthy of our Christian vocation, and at the same time prophetic.

We were reminded that all of us who recognize the image of God in every human being must take part in the public discussion. Without being abrasive or condemning, each of us must use our voice to speak up — in our friendships, our families, and our communities — to give a loving and thoughtful witness to human life.

As I drove home from the conference I reflected upon the fact that most of us need a day like that now and then to be reminded of how crucial this issue is. Indeed, one of our speakers noted that most Americans really are not pro-abortion. Rather, most Americans are actually ambivalent about abortion. Most Americans don't want to think about it, and the pro-abortion movement

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in the U.S. has been exceptionally clever in keeping it out of sight and out of mind. The less people think about it the more socially acceptable — if not ignored — it becomes.

IF I COULD USE A SAD ANALOGY, it's as though abortion has become our culture's "dirty family secret." We all know about it, we don't talk about it, and while we regret it, we would prefer that no one bring it up in public or in any way make us look at it. In so doing, abortion becomes culturally and quietly all the more acceptable, while the inherent dignity of life deteriorates in life issues across the board.

But the stakes are simply too high. One abortion is too many; but over a million abortions a year is an almost unfathomable holocaust. And while abortion has a central role in the pro-life arena, as noted earlier, the issues actually extend well beyond the death of an infant and the damage resulting for the child's mother flowing from abortion. The dignity of life is increasingly eroded in many areas of our culture. In "The Gospel of Life" (18) we read, "Today, when human rights are proudly proclaimed and the value of life itself given public affirmation, the most basic of all human rights, 'the very right to life,' is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the more significant moments of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death."

Related to this, the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities points out "a policy and practice that result in well over a million

deaths from abortions each year cannot but diminish respect for life in other areas."

Having degraded the inherent value of human life through abortion, we are now seeing life degraded in the elderly and terminally ill; immigrants are viewed more as a "problem to be dealt with" than human beings; and international refugees — fleeing starvation and death — are equally dismissed.

Again, we who participated in the annual conference were reminded that the starting point to turn the tide in our culture involves each of us using our voice to speak the truth. Abortion needs to come out of the shadows. When made clear by us, the facts related to abortion will themselves move people to the truth. Ambivalence can be moved to zeal and activity. Lives will be saved and life will triumph. But it must begin with each of us.

LEFT: Bishop Weisenburger and Deacon Chad Stramel practice skills taught by Justice for All. RIGHT: Jaclyn and Eric Brown (at left and right) with Justice for All representatives Stephen Wagner, Tammy Cook and Rebecca Haschke.