



## Know and Use Your Voice

With the presidential debates upon us, and the election drawing closer each day, do you wonder what will determine how you'll vote and if your vote will matter? This and other questions were on the minds of those who attended the October 11<sup>th</sup> BELIEVES session entitled "Know and Use Your Voice" featuring panelists Brendan Dudley, Director of Respect Life Ministry, Archdiocese of Atlanta, and Tim Zdenkanovic, Senior Refugee Support Specialist for Catholic Charities Atlanta.

Dudley, a graduate of The Catholic University of America and the Director of Respect for Life Ministry in the Archdiocese of Atlanta, has maintained a continued emphasis in his studies and ministry on the topics of Catholic sexual ethics and medical ethics. His particular interests include the relationship between law and morality, the writings of Pope St. John Paul II about human dignity, and the importance of interreligious dialogue as a means for evangelization and cultural renewal.

When asked "why do you do what you do, and why does it matter?" Dudley had this to say.

"There is a large cultural and spiritual battle when it comes to Respect for Life," Dudley said.

Dudley's enthusiasm for Respect for Life ministry comes from his personal background. He was born four months premature, weighing less than two pounds at birth, and faced numerous struggles throughout his first year of life.

"Hearing the stories and seeing the video footage of my time in the hospital has been a constant inspiration in my efforts to help build a culture of life."



For Tim Zdenkanovic, Senior Refugee Support Specialist for Catholic Charities Atlanta, refugee resettlement has always been of interest.

"The people we serve go from profound struggle to profound success," said Zdenkanovic, who has a Master's Degree in Social Work from Georgia State University. "Among refugees there's tremendous variance in language so there's all sorts of challenges involved."

Zdenkanovic added, "What we do matters because in the United States we have a lot to give, and as Christians we are to fulfill the role and help out others to maximize their potential."

Dudley agreed saying, “At the heart, we’re trying to get people to focus on serving one another and utilizing the gifts of the Holy Spirit. When it comes to upholding human dignity, so many issues overlap and intersect – whether prison ministry, elderly, disabilities, refugees, end of life, or abortion. No one person can keep an eye on everything at once, so it takes us all.”

The remarks by Dudley and Zdenkanovic prompted a question of curiosity from CTK parishioner Steve Kelley who wanted to better understand how Catholic Charities helps refugees assimilate.

“For lots of people, especially adults, it’s hard to assimilate and learn new things,” Zdenkanovic stated. “Again, language is a big barrier.”

According to Zdenkanovic, Atlanta has been blessed to have refugee resettlement happening for 30+ years.

“There are a lot of strong communities,” he shared. “In assimilation, it’s important to respect the cultures of clients. It doesn’t mean leaving behind everything. It’s important to help them find resources available to them. A lot of our clients have lived in rural and agricultural areas, so learning how to have a waged job in an urban area is a foreign concept so helping them to navigate these systems is important. We provide services to people of all religious backgrounds.”

Another BELIEVES attendee then asked how Tim and his colleagues distinguish legal and illegal.

“We think in terms of refugees with a ‘little r’ and refugees with a ‘big R.’ Refugees with a ‘little r’ come from bad places. Refugees with a ‘big R’ are clients whom we actually end up working a lot with on documentation to show they’re a refugee.”

Michael Kirchner, CTK parishioner, then asked, “When you say someone struggles, what are some of the barriers you see they face?”

Zdenkanovic again emphasized the challenge that language presents.

“A lot is language because a lot of clients are expected to acclimate quickly,” he stated. “They work in jobs like poultry processing and manufacturing that don’t require lots of English. Those are often exhausting jobs. Coupled with language issues and emotional trauma – it’s a trifecta.”

Rick Robbins, VP at Bernstein Global Wealth Management, then shifted the questions to Dudley.

“Tim has shared working along with 4-5 other organizations serving alongside with refugees in Atlanta. What are some that you work with?” asked Robbins

Dudley shared there are many such as Sheltering Grace, Pregnancy Aid Clinic, GA Life Alliance, GA Right for Life, Catholic Relief Services, and the 40 Days for Life prayer ministry, to name a few.



With the dialogue shifting to working with other organizations, CTK parishioner Walter Kozik was curious to learn from Dudley and Zdenkanovic what the government’s role is in all this, and is it helping or hurting.

“In my line of work, government doesn’t yet step into parishes to decide if they can hold this type of seminar or that,” responded Dudley. “The trickiest part about ministry and the role of government is there are certain issues Catholics can disagree on, while there are other topics that are based on principle that no Catholic should disagree on. What are matters of principle versus matters of prudential judgment – discerning this is critical.”

As for whether the government is helping or hurting, Dudley said that there are times when the government can be helpful, such as the \$2 million grant program established this year for pregnancy clinics.

Zdenkanovic recalled a specific situation when responding to Kozik’s question about government’s role in their work.

“A little while ago we weren’t allowed to offer Medicare, Medicaid, or other resources specifically to Syrian refugees, until a Circuit Court Judge later said, ‘You can’t do that.’ When I began, I never thought a Circuit Court Judge would be influencing what I can do to serve.”

To give perspective, Dudley stated, “I try to remember at all times we’re serving and engaging with people beyond the politics. Articles or media are great – but they’re not going to change your heart, though they might change your mind.”

Eric Maust, Business Banking Relationship Manager for JP Morgan Chase, then asked, “With both issues being politically charged, what are some pointers and tips to be able to start dialogue on this?”

“Don’t pound your fist to start,” said Dudley, generating a chuckle from the audience.

He also said, “Don’t forget to tell people what seminars you go to, to start conversation.”

Zdenkanovic added, “People have arrived at what they believe somehow, so I try not to be too judgmental to start. I might say, ‘I can see why you think that. Here’s X, Y, Z, have you thought about this?’ I’m very passionate and emotionally invested in what I do. I’d say keys are being passionate, informed, and understanding.”

Before wrapping up the very interactive session, the panelists were asked one last question – how would you describe the struggles of the voice of those you represent, and if they could be heard with you right now, what would they say?

“Almost all clients want a normal peaceful life,” replied Zdenkanovic. “When we speak with clients, we hear how they had that at one time, then it was taken from them, then they’re trying to build that again from the ground up. To hear them struggle with this and voice this helps to understand their struggle. What most clients want is the ability to be normal people again. This is what I set my eyes on.”

Dudley agreed.

“Just as Tim speaks of trying to build a new life for others, my role has a focus on trying to save a life and give voice to the voiceless,” he stated. “A perfect example is what happened yesterday at 2 PM. A woman called my office by accident looking for an abortion. I realized – this is what it’s all about. I gave phone numbers to pregnancy center resources with the hope a life is saved.”

For Dudley, the question that is at the core of all that was discussed in the session is – what does it mean to help people see the inherent value in life?

“It’s all about recognizing where people are coming from. People are often coming from a position of pain and hurt, but looking for a desire for something beautiful. A lot of ways to get involved ... first is to pray.”