

For 'babies who've died'—his mission

By Pamela Zekman
and Pamela Warrick

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"You can try for 50 years to do it the nice, polite way, or you can do it next week the nasty way..."—Joseph M. Scheidler

To his foes, he is a bearded, steely eyed zealot. To his followers, he is the champion of innocents, a demigod of mercy.

Joseph M. Scheidler. Age 51. Father of six. Notre Dame University graduate. One-time journalist. Full-time pro-lifer.

He runs the national Friends for Life out of a plush suite at 180 N. Michigan. At a massive wooden desk, flanked by wreaths of plastic roses in memory of "the babies who've died," Scheidler holds court five, sometimes seven days a week.

Many of his followers hang on his every word, and

more often than not, do his will with no questions asked. (When questions do arise, they sometimes are referred to Scheidler's right-hand-man, the Rev. Charles Fiore—the priest always ready with a pardon for pro-life activists.)

A visitor is shown into Scheidler's office by a Friends for Life worker. "I don't think even President Carter has anything this nice," said the worker, who later joked about "our work for Scheidler and the Lord—I'm not sure which comes first."

Scheidler hasn't always enjoyed such unquestioning support or such comfortable surroundings.

After a stint as a reporter at the South Bend (Ind.) Tribune, Scheidler worked as a public information officer for Chicago's Department of Human Resources.

When the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973, Scheidler left the government to take what he claimed was a \$7,000 pay cut to become executive director of the Illinois Right to Life Committee.

Scheidler personally supports capital punishment: "That's not killing innocent, helpless victims. Those people are criminals."

But he is fiercely anti-abortion: "I don't want to tell my children I did nothing during the slaughter of the innocents."

No one could argue that Scheidler has done nothing in his career as a pro-lifer.



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But, some bitter members of the state Right-To-Life group think he may have done too much. At the very least, some of them say, Scheidler spent too much. He was fired by the organization early this year, and, in May, helped found Friends for Life, billed as the first national pro-life, media education organization.

Working undercover in the state Right-To-Life office at 327 S. LaSalle, Sun-Times reporter Pamela Warrick watched those Scheidler left behind struggle to unscramble long-neglected accounting records. And she heard state committee workers complain of living hand-to-mouth since Scheidler's departure.

"Well, shall we pay the rent this month or the installment on the Life-Mobile?" one state committee worker asked the volunteer bookkeeper.

Since Scheidler left, the committee's paid membership has, according to its staff, dropped from 20,000 to about 5,000.

And while the committee had more than \$96,000 in assets when Scheidler took over in 1973, the balance had plunged to only \$38,000 by the time Scheidler left the committee five years later, according to annual reports filed with the Illinois Attorney General's Office.

But Scheidler is proud of his record at the state committee. From his Friends for Life office, Scheidler boasted to Warrick, "I worked hard to buy that Life-Mobile [a traveling pro-life film studio]... I raised the money to buy it without the board's permission. I did everything without the board's permission. That's why they fired me."

Scheidler has little patience with more moderate pro-life groups. As he put it to his small band of activists, "You can try for 50 years to do it the nice, polite way, or you can do it next week the nasty way...."

"I've seen the people come and go in this movement. Some are still against abortion but they're not out there on the line. OK. But if you say you're going to be out there on the front, in the trenches, you'd better do it! Or get out!"