



TEACHING THE CULTURE OF LIFE:

Gosnell: The Trial of America's Biggest Serial Killer

A Culture of Life Studies movie discussion guide

Note to educators

This film is rated PG-13 for mature thematic content, including emotionally charged scenes and unsettling descriptions. This is a tough movie to watch, as the reality of abortion really hits home. We recommend that teenagers follow a viewing of the film with a discussion led by an adult. Also, be aware that many young people have been affected by abortion in a very personal way and will need to be handled with compassion as they come to terms with the harsh reality of abortion—a reality that some of them have never faced.

We'd like to thank the following people for helping us to ensure that this discussion guide offers you and your students accurate and thought-provoking information:

- Ann McElhinney, producer and cowriter of the movie *Gosnell: The Trial of America's Biggest Serial Killer*. To learn more about the movie, visit gosnellmovie.com.
- Cheryl Sullenger, senior vice president of Operation Rescue. To learn more about Operation Rescue, visit operationrescue.org.

STORY SUMMARY

Gosnell: The Trial of America's Biggest Serial Killer tells the story of the trial and investigation of Kermit Gosnell, a late-term abortionist whose crimes were covered up for over 30 years.

During what seems to be a routine drug bust, Detective James Wood (known as Woody in the rest of the film) learns that someone from a clinic run by abortionist Kermit Gosnell is selling blank scripts, which are then used to illegally obtain narcotics. Woody and his team request the necessary warrants, and the local police and the DEA arrive at the office of Dr. Kermit Gosnell to find deplorable conditions. They find medical waste and trash on the floors, cats and cat feces littered throughout, and filthy conditions on every floor of the three-floor house that serves as an office. In addition, they see patients waiting and being attended to by untrained professionals. Young staff members wander around, seemingly indifferent to the conditions. A young woman lies in distress in one of the rooms. Dr. Gosnell is not yet there.

As Woody and his partner search the premises, they are appalled to find jars of tiny baby feet stacked in a cupboard. The fridge is full of aborted babies wrapped in plastic. Some babies are even found in old milk cartons.



*Gosnell: The Trial of
America's Biggest Serial
Killer* (2018)

GENRE: Crime, Drama

STARRING: Dean Cain,
Sarah Jane Morris, Earl
Billings

DIRECTED BY: Nick Searcy

RECOMMENDED AGE:
high school and up

RATED: PG-13 for mature
thematic content



When Dr. Gosnell finally comes in, he does not seem upset or troubled that the police are there. Instead, he goes to feed his turtles. He talks pleasantly with the officers and acts as if he has no idea why they are there or what they could possibly want with him. Eventually, a staff member tells him that he is needed, so he goes to take care of a woman—presumably to abort her baby. He returns covered in blood, removes one of his gloves, and, without washing, proceeds to eat lunch while the officers stare in disgust.

As they delve into the horrific practices at Gosnell’s clinic, the investigators find that a woman named Karnamaya Mongar died from an overdose of anesthesia in the clinic when she went for an abortion. They also find that Gosnell has been performing late-term abortions. In the state of Pennsylvania, abortions cannot be done after a fetal age of 24 weeks. He is accused of killing babies much older than that. In fact, he even joked about how one of the babies was so big that he could have walked him to the bus stop. Gosnell admits to killing the babies by snipping the spinal cord on the back of their necks. He claims he is helping women and doesn’t see anything wrong with murdering a baby.

After the officers collect all of the evidence, Woody shows everything to prosecuting attorney Lexy McGuire—a beautiful young mother of five. They speak about the deplorable conditions, about the babies, and about the woman who died in his care. Lexy is rightly disgusted and vows to put Gosnell behind bars.

Throughout the movie, Molly Mullaney, an investigative blogger, finds tidbits of information that she passes along to the detectives. Though seemingly pro-abortion, she says later that she cannot ignore the facts, and she feels that it’s her responsibility to bring the truth to light. She helps the detectives find crucial pieces of information about Gosnell that help build the case against him. Gosnell is eventually arrested and charged with the murder of Karnamaya Mongar and several preborn babies who were victims of abortion.

During the trial, the defense presents Gosnell as a helpful old man who may have bent the rules and who had problems with a waste disposal company. His attorney states that Gosnell has helped countless women in the 30 years he’s had his clinic. We also hear the testimony of what a “normal” abortion clinic is like. The well-dressed female abortion doctor talks about how she kills babies. She claims she never performed any late-term abortions or snipped a baby’s neck.

It seems the defense may be swaying the jury until one brave woman, Betty Goodwin, steps forward and offers some damning evidence. As a teen, she used to work at the clinic with Gosnell and took a picture of a baby he killed. She gives the prosecution the picture as evidence in the case.

The culmination of the trial—and the movie—comes when the prosecuting attorney is allowed to show this picture to the jury. Though the movie does not show the actual picture, the looks on the jurors’ faces tell the audience all they need to know. They find Gosnell guilty on three counts of murder for the deaths of three preborn babies and the involuntary manslaughter of Karnamaya Mongar. He is sentenced to life in prison without parole.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use the following questions and suggested answers to engage students in a conversation about the movie. Let students share their thoughts and feelings with you and help guide them to the proper answer. It can be tempting to just read the questions and answers, but in order to help your students see the full truth, you need to really know and understand what they are thinking and why they are thinking it.

1. Why did Molly Mullaney help in the prosecution of Dr. Gosnell?

As a blogger, Molly was just on the hunt for another good story she could uncover. Though seemingly pro-abortion, she cannot ignore the facts, and she feels that it’s her responsibility to bring the truth to light. She helps the detectives find crucial pieces of information about Gosnell that help build the case against him. She also tweets about the media blackout, drawing attention to the fact that the press at large was trying to ignore the case.



2. Why do you think the prosecution asked another abortionist to testify?

We spoke to Gosnell expert Cheryl Sullenger about this. She told us:

The fact that another abortionist had to be called to testify is an important one. Legally, in order to show that Gosnell's practices fell below standards of patient care, someone in his same field had to testify why those practices were substandard or dangerous. Without that "expert" testimony on issues of sanitation, the practice of "snipping," and the total lack of meeting any kind of medical standards, the prosecution could not have received the convictions and it is possible that Gosnell may have gone free.

3. What was the difference between Kermit Gosnell and the woman abortionist who took the stand during the trial in the movie?

It would be easy to write Kermit Gosnell off as just being a crazed person, as opposed to a typical abortionist. After all, the woman who took the stand in the movie looked and even acted differently than Gosnell. She was well dressed, well spoken, and appeared kind, maybe displaying a twinge of uneasiness as she described what happens in "her" clinic. But was she really different? Is any abortionist anywhere really different from Kermit Gosnell? If we look past the dirty conditions, the cats all over the building, and the baby bodies in the refrigerator, what happened in Gosnell's clinic is absolutely no different than what happens [over 2,400 times every day](#) in this country. A baby's life is carelessly taken. A mother's life is forever altered. Whether the clinic conditions in which a baby's life is taken are appealing or ugly, the reality of the act does not change.

Scared women go into clinics across this nation, some of them hoping someone will talk them out of the worst decision they will ever make. And across the nation they are met with anything but truth and compassion. So the correct answer to this question is NOTHING is different. They both kill babies. They both make money from it. They both destroy women, men, and families. Perhaps the only real difference is that the evil growing inside of Gosnell was and is more obvious than the evil in many abortionists.

4. Why do you think people were concerned about the turtles in Gosnell's office?

The scene with the turtles shows the contrast between the value shown to animals and the value shown to human beings. They value rare animals but choose to ignore the human beings whose bodies are stored in the refrigerator and the body parts stored in cabinets.

5. What do you think the image of Baby A looked like and why didn't the movie show him?

Abortion images are disturbing and sickening, especially when we realize that the kind of horror we see in images, like that of Baby A, is perfectly legal in our country. The image shows both the humanity of the preborn baby and the horrific reality of abortion.

We spoke with producer Ann McElhinney about this. She stated:

We agonized over whether to show a picture of Baby Boy A. We are very happy we made the right decision. We want the movie to be accessible to everyone, and the PG-13 rating would not have happened if we had included a picture. The picture of Baby Boy A is everywhere on the Internet and people can choose to look at his picture. No one should be forced or tricked into seeing him.

It wasn't necessary to show the image. Just seeing the reaction of the jury and the attitude of Gosnell and the other abortionists in the film is enough to remind us that abortion is evil.

6. Why do you think that the media didn't cover the trial at the beginning?

Normally, when a criminal is tried for several murders, the media would pack the courtroom. Because the trial involved an abortionist, the mainstream media tried to ignore the case, even at the cost of hiding the truth of Gosnell's crimes from the public.



7. What can we learn from the courage of Betty Goodwin, who gave the picture of Baby A to the officers?

It only takes one person to make a difference. If Betty had not come forward with the image, Gosnell may not have been convicted of his crimes. It took courage for Betty to speak the truth. Thanks to her courage, Gosnell was convicted, countless lives were saved, and some were forced to see abortion in a way they'd never seen before.

8. Why do you think none of Gosnell's employees spoke out about the horrific conditions there?

We spoke to Gosnell expert Cheryl Sullenger about this. She stated:

They were untrained and many were undereducated. In Gosnell's clinic in real life, there was one woman who worked there who had dropped out of school in the sixth grade! The women working in the clinic didn't actually understand enough to know how bad things really were from a medical and legal standpoint. They also took Gosnell's word that this was just how things were done. He was the doctor and, therefore, the authority.

Also think about this: The first time you experience horrific conditions, you are stunned. But when you see those same disgusting things day in and day out, you become desensitized to them. Gosnell's employees were most likely desensitized to what was going on around them. This should be a good reminder to us to not stand silently by while sins of any form take place, lest we become desensitized ourselves.

9. Why do you think women kept going to Gosnell for help? Why wouldn't they leave when they saw the condition of his clinic?

Women who seek abortions are scared. Many feel unloved and uncared for by anyone, so they may not feel they deserve to be treated well. Dr. Gosnell's clinic was also in an impoverished area. He preyed on poor women in desperate situations. Once in the clinic, they may not have had the moral courage to even question what was going on. They likely weren't asked how they felt about what they were about to do. They certainly weren't counseled, and, as we saw in the movie, some were harshly treated so they may have felt hopeless and backed into a corner.

10. What is the difference between the late-term abortions performed by Kermit Gosnell in the movie and abortions performed in the first or second trimesters?

Other than the stage of development of the baby human being, nothing is different. Every single abortion ends a human being's life. And that person, whose life was cut short, leaves a wound in his/her family, in society, and in our culture.

Who you are today is the same person you will be when you are 90 and the same person you were the moment God breathed life into you during your creation. Many things about you change throughout the course of your life based on your age, experiences, and other factors, but you always have been, and always will be, you. So whether one's life is deliberately ended a few weeks after he is created or years after he is born, it is still wrong. It is still murder.

11. How is it that Gosnell could be reported many times to the Health Department and no investigation ensued?

We asked expert Cheryl Sullenger the answer to this question. She stated:

There was a political climate in the Health Department that encouraged them to turn a blind eye to abortion clinic complaints. They were encouraged from "higher up" to disregard all complaints. It was something addressed in the Grand Jury Report. The politics of the governor on down required them to protect abortion businesses even if it meant that they shirked their duty to protect the public.

CHANGE STARTS WITH YOU

Read aloud to students.

It's easy to get caught in the trap of thinking that you couldn't possibly make a difference in this culture. *I'm too young. I don't even drive yet. I don't have a job so I can't donate money. I'm afraid of losing friends. What if people laugh at me? What if I get stumped by a question I can't answer?*

The truth is, YOU can make a difference. Not only *can* you, but you *must*. We cannot sit silently by and watch what happens around us. God can use all of us, without exception.

Think about this: What if every pro-life person took a stand in order to undo some of the damage wrought by the culture of death? Even if your commitment to saving lives only motivated one person to change his beliefs, you would still make an impact on your community and in the world. Saint John Paul II reminds us that each person has the duty to build a culture of life and to enrich society:

In a word, we can say that the cultural change which we are calling for demands from everyone the courage to adopt a new lifestyle, consisting in making practical choices—at the personal, family, social and international level—on the basis of a correct scale of values: the primacy of being over having, of the person over things. This renewed lifestyle involves a passing from indifference to concern for others, from rejection to acceptance of them. Other people are not rivals from whom we must defend ourselves, but brothers and sisters to be supported. They are to be loved for their own sakes, and they enrich us by their very presence. **In this mobilization for a new culture of life no one must feel excluded: everyone has an important role to play.**

— *Evangelium Vitae*, 98 (emphasis added)

We can't wait for other people to start making a difference in the world. Nor can we feel that we are insignificant in the important task of building a culture of life. Just think what could happen if every person in this room took a stand in defense of the human person. Think about how many lives we could save if each of us took a bold stand for life.

ACTIVITY: SPIRITUAL ADOPTION

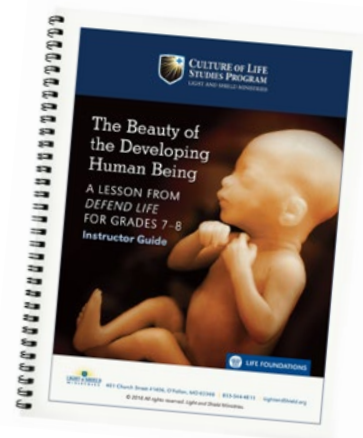
Read aloud to students.

Preborn babies are people like you and me. They deserve respect and dignity—even the ones who don't get the chance to live because their lives are taken prematurely by abortion. Think about Baby A in the movie. That little boy was someone's son, someone's grandson, maybe even someone's brother. Like so many thousands of babies every day, his little life was cut short and he didn't even get a name.

[Spiritually adopt](#) a baby in danger of abortion. Give the baby a name and commit to following him or her throughout all nine months of life before birth. Take the time to really learn your facts about how a preborn baby develops. It will help you as you evangelize others and give you tools to support your pro-life stance.

Note to educators

For specific activities that deal with the development of preborn children, consider investing in [Defend Life: The Beauty of the Developing Human Being](#), which explores the science of the earliest moments of a person's life and gives students a firm foundation regarding the fact that every human being's life must be protected from creation until death.



ACTIVITY: WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Divide the class into teams of 3–4 students. Ask them to write a plan of action to help bring an end to abortion and build a culture of life. Students at home can create their plan either orally or in the form of an essay and discuss their plan with their instructor.

As we saw in movie, one person can accomplish a lot either in the name of good or evil. Kermit Gosnell killed thousands of babies. Authorities believed he actually murdered hundreds of babies born alive by snipping their necks, but they only had enough evidence to convict him of murdering three of them. With every abortion he changed the course of history. No one knows who those little babies might have been or how they may have impacted the world. His story is a powerful reminder that it only takes one person to change the culture—for good or for bad. As students, what can you do to change the culture for good?

In this activity, you and your teammates will brainstorm an action plan for what you can do to fight against the culture of death. Although there are many threats to the dignity of human life—including eugenics, euthanasia, contraception, and others—for this activity, we will focus on abortion.

NOTE: Each team should set three levels of goals in order to build a culture of life in society. These will be goals for society in general, goals for the surrounding community, and personal goals. For example:

Society

- Abolish abortion.
- Promote the sanctity and dignity of preborn babies.
- Care for the weak, the marginalized, and those with disabilities.

Community

- Help promote events that affirm life, such as 40 Days for Life.
- Join or start a pro-life club in your school or youth group.

Personal

- Pray every day for an end to abortion.
- Commit to volunteering in the community one day per month.
- Learn about protecting the preborn.
- Commit to evangelizing on your social media platforms.

Specific ideas and activities to get you started:

Volunteering

- Volunteer at a local pregnancy resource center.
- Organize a fundraiser or a diaper drive for a pregnancy center.
- Offer to babysit for a single mom.
- Invite a pro-life speaker to come to your church or school or plan a [pro-life movie night](#).

Evangelizing

- Participate in National Pro-Life T-Shirt Day and evangelize to others. Find out more at lifedefender.org/npltday.
- Attend a March for Life, either locally or in DC.
- Participate in the CLSP pro-life essay contest. See prolifeessay.com for details.
- Start a pro-life club at your school or parish. Learn how at cultureoflifestudies.com/starting-a-pro-life-club.
- Construct a Cemetery of the Innocents display. Read more at studentsforlife.org/cemetery-of-the-innocents.



- Write a letter to the editor of a local or online newspaper in response to articles that support the culture of death.
- Participate in National Pro-Life Chalk Day and organize a group to write pro-life messages or educational statements around your school campus or public streets around abortion clinics. Find out more at nationalprolifechalkday.com.
- Participate in National Pro-Life Cupcake Day. Read more at cupcakesforlife.com.
- Leave pro-life flyers in public places. Here are some great ones:
 - ➔ studentsforlife.storenvy.com
 - ➔ survivors.la/prolifestore
- Wear pro-life gear, such as buttons, stickers, or wristbands, to spark conversations about abortion and other pro-life topics. You can find some awesome ones at culture-of-life-studies.myshopify.com/collections/merchandise.
- Create memes that honor life and share them on social media.

Praying

- Pray daily for an end to abortion and the culture of death.
- Pray outside an abortion clinic with your family.
- Participate in 40 Days for Life. Learn more at 40daysforlife.com.

Learning

- Attend pro-life trainings and talks in your area.
- Learn to sidewalk counsel.
- Stay connected with pro-life news sites and learn about current issues.
- Understand the laws in the United States that honor or dishonor the dignity of the human person.



If you enjoyed this discussion guide, please visit cultureoflifestudies.com for more positive, engaging, pro-life resources for students and educators.

The Culture of Life Studies Program provides PreK–12 Catholic, pro-life home and classroom materials, resources, and trainings to educators, schools, and dioceses equipping them to help younger generations bring an end to abortion and other threats against human beings, preserve the sanctity of marriage, and restore the kingdom of heaven on earth.

