

Respect Life Month

“Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics”

"It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop." --Pope John Paul II, The Gospel of Life

IV. Living the Gospel of Life: The Virtues We Need

Bringing a respect for human dignity to practical politics can be a daunting task. There is such a wide spectrum of issues involving the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity. Good people frequently disagree on which problems to address, which policies to adopt and how best to apply them. But for citizens and elected officials alike, the basic principle is simple: *We must begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing, of any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled or desperate that life may seem.* In other words, the choice of certain ways of acting is *always and radically incompatible* with the love of God and the dignity of the human person created in His image. Direct abortion is *never* a morally tolerable option. It is *always* a grave act of violence against a woman and her unborn child. This is so even when a woman does not see the truth because of the pressures she may be subjected to, often by the child's father, her parents or friends. Similarly, euthanasia and assisted suicide are *never* acceptable acts of mercy. They *always* gravely exploit the suffering and desperate, extinguishing life in the name of the "quality of life" itself. This same teaching against direct killing of the innocent condemns all direct attacks on innocent civilians in time of war.

As we stressed in our 1995 statement *Political Responsibility*: "The application of Gospel values to real situations is an essential work of the Christian community." Adopting a consistent ethic of life, the Catholic Church promotes a broad spectrum of issues "seeking to protect human life and promote human dignity from the inception of life to its final moment."⁹ Opposition to abortion and euthanasia does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care. Therefore, Catholics should eagerly involve themselves as advocates for the weak and marginalized in all these areas. Catholic public officials are obliged to address each of these issues as they seek to build consistent policies which promote respect for the human person at all stages of life. *But being 'right' in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life.* Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the 'rightness' of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community.

No public official, especially one claiming to be a faithful and serious Catholic, can responsibly advocate for or actively support direct attacks on innocent human life.

If we understand the human person as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" -- the living house of God -- then these latter issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. *All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house's foundation.* These directly and immediately violate the human person's most fundamental right -- the right to life. Neglect of these

Only tireless promotion of the truth about the human person can infuse democracy with the right values.

issues is the equivalent of building our house on sand. Such attacks cannot help but lull the social conscience in ways ultimately destructive of other human rights. As Pope John Paul II reminds us, the command never to kill establishes a minimum which we must respect and from which we must start out "in order to say 'yes' over and over again, a 'yes' which will gradually embrace the *entire horizon of the good*" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 75).

Since the entry of Catholics into the U.S. political mainstream, believers have struggled to balance their faith with the perceived demands of democratic pluralism. As a result, some Catholic elected officials have adopted the argument that, while they personally oppose evils like abortion, they cannot force their religious views onto the wider society. This is seriously mistaken on several key counts. First, regarding abortion, the point when human life begins is not a religious belief but a scientific fact -- a fact on which there is clear agreement even among leading abortion advocates. Second, the sanctity of human life is not merely Catholic doctrine but part of humanity's global ethical heritage, and our nation's founding principle. Finally, democracy is not served by silence. Most Americans would recognize the contradiction in the statement, "While I am personally opposed to slavery or racism or sexism I cannot force my personal view on the rest of society." *Real pluralism depends on people of conviction struggling vigorously to advance their beliefs by every ethical and legal means at their disposal.*

The Gospel of Life must be proclaimed, and human life defended, in all places and all times. The arena for moral responsibility includes not only the halls of government, but the voting booth as well. Laws that permit abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide are profoundly unjust, and we should work peacefully and tirelessly to oppose and change them. Because they are unjust they cannot bind citizens in conscience, be supported, acquiesced in, or recognized as valid. Our nation cannot countenance the continued existence in our society of such fundamental violations of human rights.

We urge our fellow citizens to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or mere self-interest.

