

The Sanctity of Human Life from Conception to Natural Death

Presented by Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila, Bishop of Fargo,
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Thank you for the invitation to address you this evening on The Sanctity of Human Life from Conception to Natural Death in the Loyola Alive Seamless Garment series on the multiple concerns surrounding human life. I have been asked to speak for about 30 minutes and then respond to questions for the same amount of time; therefore, I will only be able to provide you with broad strokes on this important multi-faceted topic.

I want to make brief comments on the seamless garment image. It was used by Cardinal Bernardin in talks he presented in 1983 and '84 and later by others. Taken from the Gospels, the image refers to the seamless garment of Christ which at his crucifixion, because of its uniqueness, was not divided (Jn 19:23-24). The image attempts to show that there is a common thread that runs through all the human life issues.

I want to give a word of caution when using the image of the seamless garment. In the past it sometimes led to a misunderstanding of the life issues. The misunderstanding was to place all the life issues on an equal level, failing to note that certain life issues concern intrinsic evils which must always be opposed while others do not. For example, while there can be varying solutions for how to best accomplish a good regarding questions of health care, migration, and welfare, there can be no debate about the admissibility of actions such as abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, or genocide. Innocent human life must be protected from conception through natural death, and such acts are therefore always evil and never morally acceptable. Cardinal Bernardin was insistent on a consistent ethic of life that clearly distinguished between the intentional taking of innocent human life and multiple other life issues associated with capital punishment, war, health care, the homeless, the hungry, the migrant, etc.

The best place for us to find the clear teaching of the Church on human life today is in the 1997 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) and the 1995 encyclical by our late Holy Father John

Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (EV), The Gospel of Life. John Paul II began his encyclical with these words, “The Gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus’ message...to be preached with dauntless fidelity to the people of every age and culture” (EV 1). He calls every Catholic to be faithful to the message of Jesus Christ on human life. Furthermore, he notes that we live in times in which there is a great cultural war between a culture of death and a culture of life. As Catholics we must have the courage to proclaim the culture of life for the common good of society. This is a duty and responsibility of every Catholic.

In the remainder of my talk I wish to address, first, the common thread which runs through all life issues. I will then raise some of the human life issues and speak to the difference between those which are intrinsic evils to be always opposed and those which are not. I will then comment on the culture of death and cite four aspects among many that help to form it. In closing I will make suggestions to you on how to promote a culture of life.

The Common Thread

As Catholics we believe in the dignity of human life. In the book of Genesis we hear how the Creator has created the human being in his image and likeness, male and female, he created them (Gn 1: 26 ss). God blessed the first couple and gave them a command to be fruitful and multiply. They are given the power to share in God’s creation through their sexual intimacy. Life is a gift freely bestowed by the Creator, a good that is to be received. Of all creatures that God has created, only human beings share in his image and likeness and are given the ability to know, receive and return the love of God. The dignity of human life is determined by God and thus is always to be protected.

The CCC (2258) teaches: "Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being." This is the common thread which runs through all of the life issues.

The right to life is the essential right for every other human right. Pope Benedict XVI on September 7, 2007, reminded the authorities and diplomatic corps of Austria that “the fundamental human right, the presupposition of every other human right, is the right to life itself. This is true of life from the moment of conception to its natural end. Abortion, consequently, cannot be a human right – it is the very opposite.”

Our American Declaration of Independence acknowledged that truth when it stated: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Here we have a clear recognition of the right to life which comes from the Creator. The dignity of the human person is bestowed by God from the moment of his or her conception, and not by the government, state or another person. The dignity of the human person is inherent, a part of the nature of every person, from the beginning of his or her life at conception.

The dignity of the human person is further expressed in the Ten Commandments, and most especially in the Fifth Commandment, “Thou shall not kill.” Respect for all human beings is enshrined in this commandment. In the words of the CCC 2268: “The fifth commandment forbids direct and intentional killing as gravely sinful. The murderer and those who cooperate voluntarily in murder commit a sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance.”

A Key Distinction in Human Life Issues

The Catholic Church in her teaching has always distinguished between the intentional taking of innocent human life, an intrinsic evil, and those cases in which, for the sake of self-defense or the protection of the common good, the taking of life is not murder. There are only two situations in which the regrettable taking of human life is not necessarily murder: the cases of an unjust aggressor and a criminal. However, as John Paul II explains, even in these two cases one is morally obliged to show great respect for human life. He declares in EV 57, “If such great care must be taken to respect every life, even that of criminals and unjust aggressors, the commandment ‘You shall not kill’ has absolute value when it refers to the innocent person. And all the more so in the case of weak and defenseless human beings, who find their ultimate

defense against the arrogance and caprice of others only in the absolute binding force of God's commandment.” Clear in the teaching are the basic dignity of all human life, and the absolute value of innocent human life from the moment of conception. The intentional taking of innocent human life—which characterizes embryo-destructive stem cell research, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, and genocide—is intrinsically evil and never morally justifiable.

In regard to the two exceptions to the absolute prohibition against taking human life, the dignity of human life must always be kept in mind. In the case of the legitimate defense of self or society, the distinction is made concerning the double effect of the action. In legitimate self-defense a person intends to preserve his own life and does not intend to kill the unjust aggressor (CCC 2263). A person who cannot defend himself without also bringing about the death of the unjust aggressor is morally justified in doing so. We observe this when a person who tries to kill a police officer is shot by the officer. The police officer is both protecting himself and acting as an agent of the state to protect the common good. There is the intentional protection of oneself and the common good and the unintentional taking of a human life.

In the case of the defense of society the issues are much more complex. In addition to defending the human dignity of the one attacked, one must also consider the actions taken against multiple unjust aggressors, the types of weapons used, innocent citizens of the countries involved, prisoners of war, and so forth. In both of these cases there exists the duty to preserve the common good and people's safety. The CCC teaches us, “Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for one who is responsible for the lives of others” (CCC 2265).

Let us now briefly consider the issues of capital punishment and war. Concerning capital punishment, Catholics are called to recognize that while society has the duty to protect itself from a murderer, the criminal never loses his or her dignity. Hence all criminals, even the most hardened, must be treated with respect and dignity. Revenge has no place in the heart of the Christian. The CCC, reiterating the teaching of John Paul II in EV, notes that when non-lethal means are available to protect persons and society, such as life sentences without parole, those are “more in conformity with the dignity of the human person” (CCC 2267). Furthermore, he taught that given the means available today for the protection of society from murderers,

justifiable cases of capital punishment “are very rare, if not practically non-existent” (EV 56). Since the reasons for capital punishment are “rare” and “practically non-existent,” Catholics should oppose the death penalty and encourage society to choose another way to protect itself, such as life imprisonment without parole.

The topic of war is too broad and complex to develop in a talk such as this. The CCC 2309 outlines clearly “the strict conditions” which must exist “for legitimate defense by military force.” Even when these “strict conditions” are fulfilled, decisions of war must always be made with both the dignity of the human person and the common good always in the forefront. Moreover, one must consider “the permanent validity of the moral law during armed conflict” (CCC 2312), which includes the respect and humane treatment of all non-combatants, the wounded, and prisoners of war (CCC 2313).

The Culture of Death

Let us now turn to the culture of death in which we find ourselves as Catholics today. In EV 3, John Paul II cites the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Guadium et Spes* (GS 27) and its strong condemnation of attacks against the dignity of human life. Though the quote is lengthy, it helps us to understand that the culture of death existed even in 1965, and indeed well before then, and has only grown deeper in our times. The Council Fathers stated: “Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator.”

John Paul II acknowledges that “we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the ‘culture of death’ and the ‘culture of life.’ We find ourselves not only ‘faced with’ but necessarily ‘in the midst of’ this conflict: we are all involved and we all share in it, with the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life” (EV 28). He calls us as Catholics, true to the faith we have received, to be “unconditionally pro-life” and to accept this responsibility no matter what the cost.

We can observe that the attacks against life have only grown over the 40-plus years since Vatican II. Today in our country abortion is legal throughout all nine months of pregnancy, euthanasia is actively promoted in some of our states, and embryonic stem-cell research occurs with great pressure to support it with federal funds. Globally we observe the plight of the unjust distribution of resources, human trafficking, drug trafficking, the presence of radical jihadism and terrorism, and worst of all, the contradiction of professed Catholics and Christians taking public positions against human life. The culture of death has grown to a far greater magnitude than ever imagined by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council.

John Paul II in his encyclical cites four causes for the culture of death: a misunderstanding of the person, a false idea of freedom which has become separated from truth, the loss of the sense of God, and a misunderstanding of conscience. Let us look briefly at each factor.

First, there is a misunderstanding of the human person. Today there is a sense that the human person has dignity and value only if he or she is wanted, fully able to care for himself or herself, and able to be completely autonomous. Hence the unborn or the dying, since they are not autonomous and are unable to care for themselves, are considered not to have the same rights or dignity as others. John Paul II notes, “it is clear that on the basis of these presuppositions [those of the culture of death] there is no place in the world for anyone who, like the unborn or dying, is a weak element in the social structure, or for anyone who appears completely at the mercy of others and radically dependent on them...” (EV 19).

The right to life and human dignity is not dependent on the person’s autonomy and ability to live independently. A state does not have the right to decide who has dignity and who does not.

Historically we are cognizant of what happens when states think they have that right. We need only consider Nazi Germany, the gulags of Communist Russia, the apartheid of South Africa, the killing fields of Cambodia, the genocide that occurs in Sudan; the list could go on and on. A true culture of life recognizes that dignity is bestowed by God from the moment of conception through natural death. This truth was recognized by our forefathers in the Declaration of Independence and has now been lost since the Roe v. Wade decision of 1973.

Second, there is a false idea of freedom and a disconnection of freedom from truth. This disconnection leads to a subjectivism and relativism which negates objective truth about what is good and what is evil. We see this embodied in the Planned Parenthood vs. Casey decision of 1992, when the Supreme Court Justices in the majority stated, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” Such a statement by the justices supports a notion that there is no objective truth to the “concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life” which human beings through reason are able to discover.

John Paul II forcefully states that such a separation between freedom and truth leads a person to both a “subjective and changeable opinion, or indeed his selfish interest and whim” and the “shifting sands of complete relativism” (EV 19 and 20). For Catholics there is a clear relationship between truth and freedom. Jesus taught, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32). A culture of life, for a believer or non-believer, is deeply aware that freedom and truth must be related and that true freedom must be grounded in the truth. To put this in terms our culture might better understand, the fact that we can destroy the environment in which we live (what we might consider our freedom) does not mean that we are morally correct in doing so (because it violates the truth of the goodness of creation). We can acknowledge that this truth is self-evident. If only we could apply similar, self-evident reason to individual human lives, most especially the unborn. Yet sadly we give more dignity to animals than to unborn human beings. A culture of life acknowledges that true freedom is grounded in truth.

Third, in a culture of death with the loss of the sense of God, there is no hope for humanity. If there is no sense of God, there is no sense of eternal life. The human person essentially lives in

despair when there is no hope for immortality. John Paul II in EV cites the Second Vatican Council, “Without the Creator the creature would disappear...But when God is forgotten the creature grows unintelligible” (EV 22 and GS 36). “Life itself becomes a mere ‘thing,’ which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation” (EV 22). This view of man and the loss of the sense of God lead “to a *practical materialism*, which breeds individualism, utilitarianism and hedonism” (EV 23).

All three of these elements of “practical materialism” are present in society today. When one looks at the way young people are bombarded by the media to have the latest style in clothes, computers, i-pods, automobiles, music, etc. and then the manner in which these items are promoted in advertising through highly charged sexual images, one cannot help but observe the depth of self-centered pleasure, individualism and the objectification of the human person to which our culture has moved. One detects the hopelessness and despair that mark our culture in the violence that is so present among young people. This violence is especially evident in video games, films and, most tragically, in real life in the senseless murders that occur on our high school and college campuses. If human life is to be valued, the culture must have a sense of the Creator.

Finally, there is real confusion around the understanding of conscience which has led to confusion about what is good and evil. If I asked each one of you to define conscience I would probably receive a variety of different answers. Too often today, due to the influence of the media and the secular world, conscience is understood more as one’s opinion than anything else. For example, one person’s so-called conscience will say that abortion is perfectly acceptable, while another person’s conscience will say the opposite. Or one person’s so-called conscience will say that being a suicide bomber is fine, while another’s will say it is not. One can recognize the lack of reason and logic in this false understanding of conscience and see how it leads to a culture of death when an objective evil is judged as a good.

The CCC teaches that conscience is “the interior voice of a human being, within whose heart the inner law of God is inscribed. Moral conscience is a judgment of practical reason about the moral quality of a human action. It moves a person at the appropriate moment to do good and

avoid evil” (Glossary of the CCC and see CCC 1777-1778). The proper understanding of conscience and the acknowledgement of good and evil as defined by truth and by God is essential for a culture of life. The practical question is how we form our consciences so that they can make correct judgments. I will return to this question in my concluding remarks concerning how we may promote a culture of life.

Conclusion: The Promotion of a Culture of Life

I will briefly highlight just four points among the many that John Paul II addressed at the conclusion of his encyclical *EV* to promote a culture of life. First, I will look at the call to faith in Jesus Christ. Next I will address the importance of education, and then the formation of one’s conscience. Finally, I will look at the responsibility to participate in the life of society.

All Catholics have a duty and responsibility to advance a culture of life and strive to transform society to one that deeply respects and cherishes human life from the moment of conception to natural death. As Catholics we place our faith in Jesus Christ. We must know and receive the love that Jesus Christ desires to give us. Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (DCE), God is Love*, reminded us that “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*DCE* 1). That person is Jesus Christ!

This means we must enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ and, in that communion with him, we will discover communion and relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus teaches us: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6); “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd” (Jn 10: 10-11); “I have called you friends” (Jn 15: 15); and “Come to me all you who labor and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). As the Second Vatican Council taught, and John Paul II never tired of citing, “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (GS 22).

Only through a living faith in the person of Jesus Christ does the human person come to fully understand himself or herself and the dignity that we have as children of the Father. In Jesus, we truly become the sons and daughters of the Father. This relationship with Jesus Christ is personal and communal. The relationship is most fully lived in union with Christ and the Church; and most especially in the regular reception of the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist and the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture. Like any human relationship, intimacy grows and develops through one's entire life. This relationship is our joy, our deepest desire, and God's will. In order to build a culture of life we must have a deep faith in Jesus Christ and know in faith that our deepest and truest identity is as a beloved daughter or son of the Father. Every decision, action and word flows from this identity. As Jesus was a man for others so too must we be for others in our world.

The second point John Paul II makes is that, as Catholics and a people of life, we must continue to educate ourselves. We never have full knowledge of our faith or, for that matter, of any subject we may study. We can continue to grow in knowledge.

You will note that throughout this presentation I have cited Scripture, the CCC and Church documents. I cannot stress enough how essential it is for you to prayerfully read Sacred Scripture, and most especially the Gospels. If you have not read the four Gospels, I encourage you to start with the Gospel of Mark, reading one chapter a day, or half a chapter a day, and go through the whole year reading the four Gospels.

You would not be here this evening if you were not interested in the question of human life and its many aspects; therefore I encourage you, too, to read the sections of the CCC on the dignity of the human person and especially on the Fifth Commandment to understand the clear teaching of the Church on human life. Another necessary area of study is a careful reading of John Paul II's EV, *The Gospel of Life*. For a group such as yours, Loyola Alive, it would be easy to have a study group that looks at all the life issues outlined in the *Gospel of Life*.

The third point is the proper formation of your consciences. The understanding of conscience as the voice of God in the heart of each person is essential. The voice of God is rooted in the good

and the true and in love as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. God is the one who establishes the good. Truth is objective and is most fully discovered in the person of Jesus Christ. Once again the study of the CCC in the section on conscience will help you to form your consciences. If a conscience is not formed, it is easy for it to be erroneous in its judgment of good and evil. Tragically in reflecting on what decisions to make, a person may be listening to the father of lies rather than to God.

Jesus reminds us that “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15: 9-12). A Catholic with a properly formed conscience puts faith in Jesus Christ, lives the commandments, has knowledge of the teaching of the Church as presented in the CCC, and desires to live a virtuous life through the total gift of self to God and by living his love in the world. The proper formation of your conscience in love and truth -- in Jesus, who is both love and truth -- is necessary if you are to experience joy. To build a culture of life Catholics must form their consciences and always choose life and the dignity of the human person from the moment of conception to natural death.

Finally, and most challenging, is the promotion of the culture of life in society. Catholics in the political arena today are too often more faithful to party platforms and partisanship than to their faith in Jesus Christ, his Church, and the promotion of a culture of life. There is a false separation between one's private life and faith and one's public life.

Today some Catholic politicians who support abortion hide behind the lies of “pro-choice” or not wanting to “impose their morality” on others. Yet they strongly support other life issues by opposing capital punishment, seeking just treatment for immigrants, and correctly understanding that part of just governance is ensuring the dignity of human life. Quite rightly, they do not consider this to be “imposing morality” in these areas. There may also be politicians who are pro-life with respect to abortion, euthanasia and embryonic stem-cell research, yet who support capital punishment and policies that result in the oppression of immigrants. They seem to forget

to opt for the dignity of the human person in these cases, and they choose to be more faithful to their party platform than to their Catholic faith.

Catholics in the political arena must recognize that opposition to intrinsic evils, such as abortion, euthanasia, genocide, embryonic stem-cell research and same sex unions is always required by the faithful Catholic. Because these intrinsic evils are direct attacks on human life and marital dignity, they are non-negotiable for every Catholic. Catholics must recognize, too, that in the other human life issues – such as immigration, capital punishment, the economy, health-care and war -- the dignity of the human person must first and foremost be taken into consideration in seeking solutions to these questions.

As John Paul II reminded everyone involved in civil and legislative affairs, “a law which violates an innocent person’s natural right to life is unjust and as such, is not valid as a law” (EV 90). “Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a *grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection*” (EV 73). We are warned in Scripture and by John Paul II that “we must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5: 29 EV 73). Every Catholic who supports intrinsic evils is reminded that they will one day stand before the judgment seat of God and give an account of themselves and how they lived the Gospel of Life.

At the same time, as pro-life Catholics, we must have concern for immigrants, the suffering, the sick and the poor. We must work for the avoidance of war, the elimination of the death penalty and an end to drug-trafficking. If we are truly going to be pro-life and build a true culture of life, all of these are matters of concern. While there can be different solutions for questions regarding some issues which are not intrinsic evils, the inherent dignity of the human person from the moment of conception to natural death must be the lens through which all decisions are made. We must constantly, at every level, promote the dignity of the human person and the truth that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God from the moment of his or her conception until natural death.

In closing, I thank you again for the opportunity to offer these reflections to you. I encourage you, as Catholics, to promote a culture of life. This must begin with each one of you, reflecting on how you personally place your faith in Jesus Christ, educate yourselves, form your consciences, and participate in the political process. Then I encourage you to pray. Pray most especially for the conversion of the hearts and minds of those who support intrinsic evils that they may come to acknowledge the dignity of the human person and promote a culture of life. Pray for the conversion of the hearts and minds of those who support a culture of death in the public arena, especially for Catholics who have opted against life and the Gospel. Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies (Matt. 5:44) and he himself forgave his enemies from the Cross. We are to do no less. Only prayer will lead to a true conversion of heart and mind, and to the truth of Jesus Christ and the abundant life he promises to us. May each of us work untiringly for a culture of life and live faithfully the Gospel of Life. Thank you.