

CHURCH TEACHING ON THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

"Human life is sacred because, from its beginning, it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever 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 or herself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being." (*The Gift of Life*, introduction, 5)

Of all visible creatures, only human beings are able to know and love their creator. They are the only creatures on earth that God has willed for their own sake. They alone are called to share, by knowledge and love, in God's own life. It was for this end that they were created, and this is the fundamental reason for their dignity.

The covenant between God and mankind is interwoven with reminders of God's gift of human life and man's murderous violence:

"For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning....Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." (Genesis 9:5 & 6)

The Old Testament always considered blood a sacred sign of life (cf. Leviticus 17:14). This teaching remains necessary for all time.

Scripture specifies the prohibition contained in the fifth commandment: "Do not slay the innocent and the righteous." (Exodus 23:7) The deliberate murder of an innocent person is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human being, to the golden rule, and to the holiness of the Creator. The law forbidding it is universally valid: it obliges each and every one, always and everywhere.

The natural law, present in the heart of each person and established by reason, is universal in its precepts, and its authority extends to all people. It expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his or her fundamental rights and duties. The great Roman Orator, Cicero, put it this way: "For there is at true law: right reason. It is in conformity with nature, is diffused among all men, and is immutable and eternal; its orders summon to duty; its prohibitions turn away from offense....To replace it with a contrary law is a sacrilege; failure to apply even one of its provisions is forbidden; no one can abrogate it entirely." (Cicero, *Republic III*, 22, 33)

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord recalls the commandment, "You shall not kill" (Matthew 5:21) and adds to it the proscription of anger, hatred, and vengeance. Going further, Christ asks his disciples to turn the other cheek, to love their enemies (cf. Matthew 5:22-39; 5:44). He did not defend himself and told Peter to leave his sword in its sheath (Matthew 26:52).

Christian prayer extends to the *forgiveness of enemies* (Matthew 5:43 & 44), transfiguring

the disciple by configuring him to his Master. Forgiveness is a high point of Christian prayer; only hearts attuned to God's compassion can receive the gift of prayer. Forgiveness also bears witness that, in our world, love is stronger than sin. Forgiveness is the fundamental condition of the reconciliation of the children of God with their Father and of men with one another.

Legitimate Defense

The legitimate defense of persons and societies is not an exception to the prohibition against the murder of the innocent that constitutes intentional killing. The act of self-defense can have a double effect: the preservation of one's own life and the killing of the aggressor. The one is intended; the other is not (St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh II-II, 64, corp. art.*). An effect can be tolerated without being willed by its agent; for instance, a mother's exhaustion from tending her sick child. A bad effect is not imputable if it was not willed either as an end or as a means of an action, e.g., a death a person incurs in aiding someone in danger. For a bad effect to be imputable, it must be foreseeable, and the agent must have the possibility of avoiding it, as in the case of manslaughter caused by a drunken driver.

Love toward oneself remains a fundamental principle of morality. Therefore, it is legitimate to insist on respect for one's own right to life. Someone who defends his or her life is not guilty of murder even if he or she is forced to deal his aggressor a lethal blow.

Legitimate defense can be not only a right but also a grave duty for someone responsible for another's life, the common good of the family or of the state. Submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory to defend one's country. Preserving the common good of society requires rendering the aggressor unable to inflict harm. For this reason, the traditional teaching of the Church has acknowledged as well-founded, the right and duty of legitimate public authority to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the crime, not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty. For analogous reasons, those holding authority have the right to repel by armed force aggressors against the community in their charge.

"Human society can be neither well-ordered nor prosperous unless it has some people invested with legitimate authority to preserve its institutions and to devote themselves as far as is necessary to work and care for the good of all" (Pope John XXIII). By "authority" one means the quality by virtue of which persons or institutions make laws and give orders to people and expect obedience from them. Every human community needs an authority to govern it. The foundation of such authority lies in human nature. It is necessary for the unity of the state. Its role is to ensure as far as possible the common good of the society.

If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority should limit itself to such means because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are

more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.

Intentional Homicide

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. Infanticide, fratricide, parricide, and the murder of a spouse are especially grave crimes by reason of the natural bonds that they break. Concern for eugenics or public health cannot justify any murder, even if commanded by public authority.

The fifth commandment forbids doing anything with the intention of *indirectly* bringing about a person's death. The moral law prohibits exposing someone to mortal danger without grave reason, as well as refusing assistance to a person in danger. The acceptance by human society of murderous famines, without efforts to remedy them, is a scandalous injustice and a grave offense. Those whose usurious and avaricious dealings lead to the hunger and death of their brethren in the human family indirectly commit homicide, which is imputable to them (cf. Amos 8-4-10).

Unintentional killing is not morally imputable. But one is not exonerated from grave offense if, without proportionate reasons, he or she has acted in a way that brings about someone's death, even without the intention to do so. The virtue of temperance disposes us to *avoid every kind of excess*: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco, or medicine. Those incur grave guilt who, by drunkenness or a love of speed, endanger their own and others' safety on the road, at sea, or in the air. Temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable. The temperate person directs the sensitive appetites toward what is good and maintains a healthy discretion.

Abortion

Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his or her existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person - among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life (*The Gift of Life I,I*). Endowed with a spiritual and immortal soul, the human person is the only person on earth that God has willed for its own sake. From his or her conception, he or she is destined for eternal beatitude.

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; and before you were born, I consecrated you" (Jeremiah 1:5; cf. Job 10:8-12; Psalm 22:10 & 11)

"My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth" (Psalm 139:15)

Since the first century, the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law:

"You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish" (*Didache* 2,2)

"For us, murder is once and for all forbidden; so even the child in the womb, while yet the mother's blood is still being drawn on to form the human being, it is not lawful for us to destroy. To forbid birth is only to murder the sooner. It makes no difference whether one takes away the life once born or destroys it as it comes to birth. He is a man who is to be a man; the fruit is always present in the seed" (Tertullian c 220, *Apology*, 9:8)

God, the author of life, has entrusted to human beings the noble mission of safeguarding life, and people must carry it out in a manner worthy of themselves. Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes.

Formal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offense. The Church attaches the canonical penalty of excommunication to this crime against human life. The Church does not thereby intend to restrict the scope of mercy. Rather, she makes clear the gravity of the crime committed, the irreparable harm done to the innocent who is put to death, as well as to the parents and the whole society.

The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a *constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation*:

"The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized and respected by civil society and the political authority. These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in a person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his or her origin. Among such fundamental rights, one should mention in this regard every human being's right to life and physical integrity from the moment of conception until death.

"The moment a positive law deprives a category of human beings of the protection which civil legislation ought to accord them, the state is denying the equality of all before the law. When the state does not place its power at the service of the rights of each citizen, and in particular of the more vulnerable, the very foundations of a state based on law are undermined....As a consequence of the respect and protection which must be ensured for the unborn child from the moment of conception, the law must provide appropriate penal sanctions for every deliberate violation of the child's rights." (*The Gift of Life III*)

Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being.

"*Prenatal diagnosis* is morally licit, 'if it respects the life and integrity of the embryo and the human fetus and is directed toward its safeguarding or healing as an individual....It is gravely opposed to the moral law when this is done with the thought of possibly inducing an abortion, depending upon the results: a diagnosis must not be the equivalent of a death sentence.' " (*The Gift of Life I,2*)

"One must hold as licit procedures carried out on the human embryo that respect the life and integrity of the embryo, do not involve disproportionate risk for it, and are directed toward its healing, the improvement of its condition of health, or its individual survival." (*The Gift of Life I,3*)

"It is immoral to produce human embryos intended for exploitation as disposable biological material." (*The Gift of Life I,5*)

"Certain attempts to *influence chromosomal or genetic inheritance* are not therapeutic, but are aimed at producing human beings selected according to sex or other predetermined qualities. Such manipulations are contrary to the personal dignity of the human being and his or her integrity and identity, which are unique and unrepeatable." *The Gift of Life I,6*)

Euthanasia Or "Mercy Killing"

Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible. Christ's compassion toward the sick and his many healings of every kind of infirmity are a resplendent sign that "God has visited his people" (Luke 7:16; cf. Matthew 4:24) and that the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Jesus has the power not only to heal but also to forgive sins (cf. Mark 2:5-12); he has come to heal the whole person, soul and body; he is the physician the sick have need of (cf. Mark 2:17). His compassion toward all who suffer goes so far that he identifies himself with them: "I was sick and you visited me" (Matthew 25:36). His preferential love for the sick has not ceased through the centuries to draw the very special attention of Christians toward all those who suffer in body and soul. It is the source of tireless efforts to comfort them.

Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable. Thus, an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his or her Creator. The error of judgment into which one can fall in good faith does not change the nature of this murderous act, which must

always be forbidden and excluded.

Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment. Here, one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he or she is competent and able or, if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected.

Even if death is thought imminent, the ordinary care owed to a sick person cannot be legitimately interrupted. The use of painkillers to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening their days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if death is not willed as either an end or a means, but only foreseen and tolerated as inevitable. Palliative care is a special form of disinterested charity. As such, it should be encouraged.

Suicide

Everyone is responsible for his or her life before God, who has given it to him or her. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.

Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his or her life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God.

The fourth commandment *illuminates other relationships in society*. In our brothers and sisters, we see the children of our parents; in our cousins, the descendants of our ancestors; in our fellow citizens, the children of our country; in the baptized, the children of our mother the Church; in every human person, a son or daughter of the One who wants to be called "our Father". In this way, our relationships with our neighbors are recognized as personal in character. The neighbor is not a "unit" in the human collective; he or she is "someone" who by his or her known origins deserves particular attention and respect.

If suicide is committed with the intention of setting an example, especially to the young, it also takes on the gravity of scandal. Scandal is an attitude or behavior that leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his or her neighbor's tempter. He or she damages virtue and integrity and may even draw his or her brother or sister into spiritual death. Scandal is a grave offense if, by deed or omission, another is deliberately led into a grave offense. Anyone who uses the power at his or her disposal in such a way that it leads others to do wrong becomes guilty of scandal and responsible for the evil that he or she has directly or indirectly encouraged. Voluntary cooperation in suicide is also

contrary to the moral law.

Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors. Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. Thus, we should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him or her alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. For this reason, the Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.

--compiled by Patrick J. Hession from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*