

The Right to Life and the Dignity of the Human Person – a Summary

*When he presents the heart of his redemptive mission, Jesus says: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). In truth, he is referring to that "new" and "eternal" life which consists in communion with the Father, to which every person is freely called in the Son by the power of the Sanctifying Spirit. It is precisely in this "life" that all aspects and stages of human life achieve their full significance. – Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 1*

As a gift from God, every human life is sacred from conception to natural death. The life and dignity of every person must be respected and protected at every stage and in every condition. The right to life is the first and most fundamental principle of human rights that leads Catholics to seek to build a world where there is greater respect for human life and commitment to justice and peace.

*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. – Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*, Introduction, no. 5*

The dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops explains that there are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are incompatible with love of God and neighbor. These actions are called "intrinsically evil" because they must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned. A prime example is the intentional taking of innocent human life, as in abortion and euthanasia. Similarly, direct threats to the sanctity and dignity of human life that always must be opposed include human cloning, destructive research on human embryos, genocide, torture, racism, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war.

Catholic teaching about the dignity of life also calls us to oppose the use of the death penalty and to overcome poverty and suffering. Opposition to intrinsically evil acts that undercut the dignity of the human person also should open our eyes to the good we must do – to our positive duty to contribute to the common good and act in solidarity with those in need. As Pope John Paul II said, "The fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandment. (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 52).

Applying the Teaching to Political Life

Applying the Church's teaching on respect for human life can be challenging when we bring these beliefs to the public square. The Church's teaching on human life and dignity has been misunderstood and misused in two ways:

- The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity. The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It always must be opposed.
- The second is the misuse of these necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other threats to human life and dignity such as racism, the use of the death penalty, unjust war, the use of torture, war crimes, and addressing the serious issues of poverty, health care, and immigration. Catholics are urged to seriously consider Church teaching on these issues. Although choices about how best to respond to these and other compelling threats to human life and dignity are matters for principled debate and decision, this does not make them optional concerns or permit Catholics to dismiss or ignore Church teaching on these important issues.

The themes of Catholic social teaching are not a quantitative list of issues for equal consideration – there are important distinctions among moral issues acknowledging that some involve the clear obligation to oppose acts which never can be justified and that others require action to pursue justice and promote the common good. At the same time, “A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church’s social doctrine does not exhaust one’s responsibility towards the common good.” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, no. 4) The Church calls upon Catholics to form their consciences in the light of their Catholic faith, learning about the candidates and issues.

Where can I Learn More?

[Visit the Understanding Life Issues page](#) of the website of the Catholic Diocese of Manchester to view resources from the Start of Life Issues (such as contraception and abortion) to the End of Life (including euthanasia, advanced directives, and the death penalty). You also will find links to information on stem cell research, human cloning, reproductive technologies, and torture.

The [website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) includes extensive materials on Human Life and Dignity at Human Life and Dignity. Click the individual topics on the left side of the page for more information.