

How to Build a Culture of Life

The Problem

Watching the news and reading the headlines, we may feel helpless seeing the heartbreaking lack of respect for human life. How do we respond when our efforts seem small in the face of the culture of death?

Our Christian Identity

To understand more fully how to defend and protect human life, we must first consider who we are, at the deepest level. God creates us in his image and likeness, which means we are made to be in loving relationship with him. The essence of our identity and worth, the source of our dignity, is that we are loved by God: "*We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son.*"^[1]

We are called to divine intimacy, true communion with God, and we can grow in this closeness with him through daily prayer, reading the Scriptures, and frequent participation in the sacraments, especially Confession and the Eucharist.

Our Mission as Christians

The knowledge and realization of how deeply we are loved by God elicits a response of love that simultaneously draws us closer to God and, at the same time, impels us to share his love with others.

Embracing a relationship with God means following in his footsteps, wherever he may call. Just as Jesus invited St. Peter and St. Andrew to become his disciples, he invites us to do the same: "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

Being a disciple of Jesus naturally includes sharing the Gospel with others and inviting them into a deeper relationship with God. As Christians, our identity and our mission are two sides of the same

coin; like the apostles, we are called to be missionary disciples.

Missionary Discipleship

This doesn't necessarily mean quitting our jobs or moving to foreign countries. For most of us, our mission field is daily life: "Christ teaches us how to evangelize, how to invite people into communion with him, and how to create a culture of witness: namely, through love. A Christian life lived with charity and faith is the most effective form of evangelization."^[2]

The first step towards living this life is allowing Jesus to meet and transform us daily. If we respond to his grace, our lives will show we have something beyond what the world offers: we follow a person whose love changes our lives, so we want others to also experience his transforming love.

When we live in union with God, open to his prompting, we're more able to see the opportunities for witness and his guidance in responding to these opportunities. We may fear doing the wrong thing or saying the wrong thing, but we do not need to be afraid. Jesus promised his disciples, "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Identity Crisis

As a society and as individuals, we often measure ourselves by false standards: by what and how much we do, our successes or failures, how others treat us, the degree of our pleasure or independence, etc. And when these changeable substitutes prove to be insufficient, or when we are faced with challenges and suffering, we may feel helpless, alone, or abandoned; we may be tempted to feel as though our lives have decreased value or worth.

But God's love—individual, real, unchanging—is the true source of our worth, identity, and dignity. It really is not a question of who we are, but rather *whose* we are. Because his love will never change, nothing can reduce our God-given dignity, and nothing can diminish the immeasurable worth of our lives.

Our Response

When someone is facing great trials, we need to meet them where they are, walk with them on their journey, intercede for them, and be open to sharing Christ's love however he directs.

When a woman becomes pregnant, and her boyfriend threatens to leave if she continues the pregnancy, we need to lovingly walk with her. When family members or friends become seriously ill, we need to assure them that God still offers them something in this life, and they still have purpose. We need to consistently be with them every step of the way.

Sometimes our actions speak for themselves; other times, words are needed. Whatever the situation, Jesus knows how to speak to each person's heart; we simply need to follow where he leads.

A Culture of Life

This is how we answer our missionary call. This is how we build a culture of life, a culture that joyfully proclaims the truth of God's love, purpose, and plan for each person. Changing the culture is a process of conversion that begins in our own hearts and includes a willingness to be instructed and a desire to be close to Jesus—the source of joy and love.

When we encounter Christ, experience his love, and deepen our relationship with him, we become more aware of our own worth and that of others. His love for each person is cause for great joy, and growing understanding of this priceless treasure motivates us to share his love with others. Our lives are often changed by the witness of others; so too, others' lives may be changed by our witness and authentic friendship with them.

Let us go, therefore, and not be afraid. God is always with us.

^[1] John Paul II, Homily, 17th World Youth Day, Downsview Park, Toronto, July 28, 2002.

^[2] USCCB Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, *Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization*. Copyright © 2012, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC. All rights reserved.

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