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How is God calling you to defend the dignity of human life?

Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila
Bishop of Fargo

For Catholics in the United States, October is annually observed as Respect Life Month. The theme for this year's Respect Life Program are the words of Jesus found in John's Gospel, "I came so all might have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Begun in 1972, the Respect Life Program, developed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Secretariat of Pro-life Activities, provides the teaching of Christ and his Church on the value and dignity of human life to the Catholic faithful and the general public. As Catholics, we recognize that human life is a gift bestowed by the Creator upon every human being from the moment of conception through natural death.

We are blessed to have in our diocese many organizations, endeavors and faithful people who have committed their energies and gifts towards furthering a culture of life. As we consider what it means to "be a people of life and for life" during this month of October, I would like to offer you some reflections from John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life). I ask you to use these quotes for your own prayerful reflection and to discern how God is calling you to take up the banner of life in your daily living. I would also encourage you during the month of October to read this encyclical in its entirety.

"The Church knows that this Gospel of life, which she has received from her Lord has a profound and persuasive echo in the heart of every person - believer and nonbeliever alike - because it marvelously fulfills all the heart's expectations while infinitely surpassing them. Even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart (Romans 2:14-15) the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree. Upon the recognition of this right, every human community and the political community itself are founded" (EV 2).

The work of the culture of life is something that belongs to every person. Everyone can by their very example of daily living show respect to each person they encounter — a respect that recognizes that we are made in the image and likeness of God, that we are human beings deserving of a response that shows care and concern. We are all called to pray daily for those who are suffering, for the mother who considers abortion, for the child who is forgotten or unwanted, for families who struggle and are lost within the grips of a culture of death.

Whatever is opposed to life dishonors our Creator

"The Second Vatican Council, in a passage which retains all its relevance today, forcefully condemned a number of crimes and attacks against human life. Thirty years later, taking up the words of the Council and with the same forcefulness I repeat that condemnation in the name of the whole Church, certain that I am interpreting the genuine sentiment of every upright conscience: '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” (EV 3).

We have a crisis in our society, even here in the Fargo diocese. The state’s only abortion facility, located in Fargo, takes the lives of more than 1,400 innocent children each year. Yet, in the midst of this atrocity, we have six pregnancy help centers that provide compassionate care and assistance to mothers and fathers who find themselves with an unplanned pregnancy. Two maternity homes located in our diocese offer a safe and nurturing environment to mothers who may have nowhere else to go. One of these, the St. Gianna’s Maternity Home, is a Catholic institution dedicated to providing its residents with a Catholic environment. Two organizations provide adoption services that are respectful of marriage, families and the needs of the pregnant woman.

Prolife legislation is important

“The fact that legislation in many countries, perhaps even departing from basic principles of their Constitutions, has determined not to punish these practices against life, and even to make them altogether legal, is both a disturbing symptom and a significant cause of grave moral decline. Choices once unanimously considered criminal and rejected by the common moral sense are gradually becoming socially acceptable. Even certain sectors of the medical profession, which by its calling is directed to the defense and care of human life, are increasingly willing to carry out these acts against the person. In this way the very nature of the medical profession is distorted and contradicted, and the dignity of those who practice it is degraded” (EV 4).

Yet for us in North Dakota, much work is being done to safeguard the lives of women and their unborn children. This past legislative session saw the passage of a bill that would revise our Abortion Control Act, setting more restrictions on the abortion industry in our state. The bill, HB 1297, set forth new restrictions on the use of abortion drugs, new reporting requirements and provided that new materials be implemented to inform women of their rights and the development of their unborn child. It also included a provision requiring all state agencies to give preference to birth over abortion.

Our North Dakota Catholic Conference works tirelessly alongside other organizations such as North Dakota Right to Life, Concerned Women of America and the North Dakota Family Alliance. So effective has been their work that, in 2010, the National Abortion Rights Action League gave the state of North Dakota an “F” and ranked us 50th in the nation for securing women their so-called “right” to an abortion.

Killing an innocent human being contradicts justice and charity

“The deliberate decision to deprive an innocent human being of his life is always morally evil and can never be licit either as an end in itself or as a means to a good end. It is in fact a grave act of disobedience to the moral law, and indeed to God himself, the author and guarantor of that law; it contradicts the fundamental virtues of justice and charity. ‘Nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying. Furthermore, no one is permitted to ask for this act of

killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly. Nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action” (EV 57).

“But today, in many people’s consciences, the perception of its [abortion’s] gravity has become progressively obscured.

The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behavior and even in law itself, is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake. Given such a grave situation, we need now more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception. In this regard the reproach of the Prophet is extremely straightforward: ‘Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness’ (Isaiah 5:20). Especially in the case of abortion there is a widespread use of ambiguous terminology, such as ‘interruption of pregnancy,’ which tends to hide abortion’s true nature and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion. Perhaps this linguistic phenomenon is itself a symptom of an uneasiness of conscience. But no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth. The moral gravity of procured abortion is apparent in all its truth if we recognize that we are dealing with murder and, in particular, when we consider the specific elements involved. The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. No one more absolutely innocent could be imagined” (EV 58).

“It is true that history has known cases where crimes have been committed in the name of ‘truth.’ But equally grave crimes and radical denials of freedom have also been committed and are still being committed in the name of ‘ethical relativism.’ When a parliamentary or social majority decrees that it is legal, at least under certain conditions, to kill unborn human life, is it not really making a ‘tyrannical’ decision with regard to the weakest and most defenseless of human beings? Everyone’s conscience rightly rejects those crimes against humanity of which our century has had such sad experience. But would these crimes cease to be crimes if, instead of being committed by unscrupulous tyrants, they were legitimated by popular consensus” (EV 70)?

The real tragedy of legalized abortion and its contract with the “father of lies” is the devastating number of unborn children who have been killed by abortion along with the growing number of women and men who have been wounded by the abortion decision. Statistics are staggering. Since 1973, it is estimated that More than 53 million unborn children have been killed by abortion in the United States alone. Research indicates that up to one in three women will have had an abortion by the time they are 45 years old.

We have two generations of people who come to our churches wounded. Yet, there is hope. In our diocese is a panel of courageous women who have had abortions who share their stories. They have presented in churches and on our university campuses. Their witness is changing people’s hearts and minds as they expose the reality of abortion and the saving mercy of Jesus Christ.

We also have the Rachel’s Vineyard Retreat ministry for people who are seeking reconciliation for their abortion experience. Through an intimate encounter with Jesus Christ on these retreats, both women and men are afforded the opportunity to grieve the loss of

their child, receive the mercy of Christ and the Church, and move towards a path of healing and hope in their lives.

Conscience rights are under attack

"To refuse to take part in committing an injustice is not only a moral duty; it is also a basic human right. Were this not so, the human person would be forced to perform an action intrinsically incompatible with human dignity, and in this way human freedom itself, the authentic meaning and purpose of which are found in its orientation to the true and the good, would be radically compromised. What is at stake, therefore, is an essential right which, precisely as such, should be acknowledged and protected by civil law. In this sense, the opportunity to refuse to take part in the phases of consultation, preparation and execution of these acts against life should be guaranteed to physicians, health-care personnel and directors of hospitals, clinics and convalescent facilities. Those who have recourse to conscientious objection must be protected not only from legal penalties but also from any negative effects on the legal, disciplinary, financial and professional plane" (EV 74).

Just this August, we saw an unprecedented attack on conscience rights with the Department of Health and Human Services mandate that "preventative services for women" be included in almost all private health plans under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. So critical is this attack that the USCCB has established a new Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty. In announcing the committee, Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York stated that: "Never before have we faced this kind of challenge to our ability to engage in the public square as people of faith and as a service provider. If we do not act now, the consequences will be grave."

We need to stay informed and take action, when we can, to be a voice of reason and faith in the public square by writing our congressmen, responding to legislative action alerts, and adhering to Catholic principles in our own work places.

We must proclaim life

"We are the people of life because God, in his unconditional love, has given us the Gospel of life and by this same Gospel we have been transformed and saved. We have been ransomed by the 'Author of life' (Acts 3:15) at the price of his precious blood (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; 1 Peter 1:19). Through the waters of Baptism we have been made a part of him (Romans 6:4-5; Colossians 2:12), as branches which draw nourishment and fruitfulness from the one tree (John 15:5). Interiorly renewed by the grace of the Spirit, 'who is the Lord and giver of life,' we have become a people for life and we are called to act accordingly" (EV 79).

One of the most profound ways we can "proclaim life" is by our efforts of prayer and fasting for the cause of life. A chapel is now dedicated to an intense and focused prayer to end abortion located near the abortion facility in Fargo.

The Visitation Chapel is a sacred place where Mass is offered every Wednesday at 8 a.m., the day when abortions most often take place. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament follows the rest of the day until Benediction is offered at 3:45 p.m. Sidewalk counselors and prayer volunteers have for years stood in front of the abortion facility every Wednesday to reach out to women who are entering with the hope of changing their hearts and minds about an abortion decision.

Our 40 Days for Life campaign, which is currently underway and will continue until Nov. 6, brings together people of all faiths and from across our state for a continuous effort of prayer, fasting and public witness to the sanctity of human life. Everyone can pray for an end to abortion. Whether you live in Fargo, Bottineau, Towner, Napoleon or another community in our diocese, we are called to offer a united and intense prayer to the Father of Life for this cause.

"Faced with so many opposing points of view, and a widespread rejection of sound doctrine concerning human life, we can feel that Paul's entreaty to Timothy is also addressed to us: 'Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching' (2 Timothy 4:2). This exhortation should resound with special force in the hearts of those members of the Church who directly share, in different ways, in her mission as 'teacher' of the truth. May it resound above all for us who are Bishops: we are the first ones called to be untiring preachers of the Gospel of life. We are also entrusted with the task of ensuring that the doctrine which is once again being set forth in this Encyclical is faithfully handed on in its integrity. We must use appropriate means to defend the faithful from all teaching which is contrary to it" (EV 82).

The month of October affords us with opportunities to preach on the Gospel of Life from the pulpit and provide our young people with a catechesis on the dignity of the human person and ways in which we can love and promote life.

The USCCB has created a series of catechetical handouts on the life issues that can be used for catechesis with older students and adults. These handouts along with a variety of other resources and prayer guides, especially designed for parishes to use in their work with young people and adults, can be obtained from our diocesan Respect Life Office.

We must speak to our parishioners and young people about the life issues and their relevance in our present-day spiritual battle with the culture of death. Most important is that we empower our young people with a catechesis on the moral life in order to prepare them to go out into the world and proclaim Christ and his Gospel with clarity and courage.

John Paul II concluded his great encyclical on life with a prayer to Mary. I encourage you to pray this prayer frequently during the month of October and beyond.

O Mary, bright dawn of the new world, Mother of the living, to you do we entrust the cause of life Look down, O Mother, upon the vast numbers of babies not allowed to be born, of the poor whose lives are made difficult, of men and women who are victims of brutal violence, of the elderly and the sick killed by indifference or out of misguided mercy. Grant that all who believe in your Son may proclaim the Gospel of life with honesty and love to the people of our time. Obtain for them the grace to accept that Gospel as a gift ever new, the joy of celebrating it with gratitude throughout their lives and the courage to bear witness to it resolutely, in order to build, together with all people of good will, the civilization of truth and love, to the praise and glory of God, the Creator and lover of life.

The full encyclical can be read on the Vatican website at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jpii_enc_25031995_eva_ngelium-vitae_en.html.