

## **Support, in word and deed, the dignity of human life**

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On Nov. 4, 2008, the United States witnessed an historic event in the election of the first African-American president. With his election as president we have seen our nation take great strides forward in the civil rights movement and the rights for all peoples regardless of race. I congratulate President-elect Barack Obama and assure him of my prayers and the prayers of the faithful of the Diocese of Fargo in the immense responsibilities that he will undertake as president. One of those prayers will be for the conversion of his heart and mind to recognize the dignity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death and the truth that no government has the right to legalize abortion.

In his acceptance speech on Nov. 4, President-elect Obama stated, "I will listen to you, especially when we disagree." I pray that President-elect Obama will listen when it comes to the question of the unborn and not impose the intrinsic evil of abortion on the consciences of so many who know the truth that abortion is the destruction of a unique innocent human being. The President-elect in his voting record and his speeches has revealed that he is one of the strongest supporters of legalized abortion, as well as the "Freedom of Choice Act" (FOCA). In this he directly opposes the divine law of God concerning the dignity of each human life, and so he strongly disagrees with the position of the Catholic Church. On a purely political level, he even disagrees with the majority of Americans, who at least want some limits on abortion. The Church, and most especially bishops and priests, will need to make the teaching of the Church known to every Catholic.

The Catholic Church teaches throughout her history the truth of the dignity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death. This truth was recognized by our country until 1973 with the decision of *Roe v. Wade*. Today this truth is known even more clearly through reason and science. Every one of our lives began at the same moment: when an egg and sperm came together in our mother's womb, formed one cell, and began to divide. It is truly marvelous and beautiful when you observe the truth through the technology of modern science.

Throughout the last several months I have been surprised and saddened at how little some Catholics know and accept the teaching of the Church on the matter of abortion. As a bishop I have received mail from Catholics with diverse complaints. Some state that I haven't spoken forcefully enough and that it is my fault that the truth about abortion is not clearly taught in parishes. Others write and state that they are Catholic and pro-

choice, and see themselves as faithful to Christ and the Church. Catholics need to promote the Gospel of Life and understand, as Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessors have made definitive and clear, that the question of the moral legality of abortion is non-negotiable. It is always and everywhere wrong, and this moral truth must be enshrined in law in every civil society.

I want to look at misunderstandings in Catholic teaching that I have encountered over the last several months. Most know that since the Church defends each human life, she must teach against abortion. However, some believe that it is possible to be a faithful Catholic and be pro-choice. This is impossible. Abortion is an intrinsic evil, which means that in no circumstance is it permitted nor may it ever be supported, even as a means to a good end. No Catholic can be faithful to Jesus Christ and the Church and support an intrinsic evil. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* names several intrinsic evils or disorders, and I urge all Catholics to study these. Certainly the most serious is the destruction of innocent human life, such as abortion (CCC 2270-72), euthanasia (CCC 2277), the intentional killing of non-combatants in war and genocide (CCC 2313). Catholics must come to understand that every intrinsic evil undermines the dignity of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God and must never be condoned or supported.

Another misunderstanding among some Catholics is that abortion is just one issue among many issues. They will say “I am not a one issue person.” It is true that all Catholics must be concerned about the just ordering of society, which means concern for the economy, immigration, the war in Iraq, health care, taxes, etc. All of these impact the dignity of the human person and the flourishing of society. Different prudential judgments may be made about how to prioritize and address these matters in light of the teaching of the Church. Nevertheless, there are fundamental rights that no civil society may take away. The fundamental right to life is essential to all other rights (CCC 2273). Therefore the right to life, from the moment of conception until natural death, is the first among all rights and the first issue that must be taken into consideration, acted upon and protected. The Bishops of the United States spoke of this in their 2007 document on faith and public life, “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” (*Faithful Citizenship* 28).

The Second Vatican Council taught, “For God, the Lord of life, has conferred on men the surpassing ministry of safeguarding life in a manner which is worthy of man. Therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes” (*Guadium et Spes* 51). Our late Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, taught “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.** ...the apostolic preaching reminded Christians of their duty to obey legitimately constituted public authorities (cf. Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-14), but at the same time it firmly warned that ‘we must obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29)...**In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it, or to**

**‘take part in a propaganda campaign in favour of such a law, or vote for it’**

(emphasis added, EV 73).

Catholics, regardless of their affiliation with a political party, must always support the dignity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death, and they must enact good laws which do so. Thus Catholics, be they judges, politicians, or voters, who support *Roe v. Wade* or “assisted suicide” by any type of legislation or candidate, place themselves outside of the law of God and the Church each time they vote in support of so-called abortion rights or rights to die. Each Catholic who is a member, works for or donates to a political party has the obligation to transform party platforms, to put forward candidates who respect life, and to avoid cooperation in advocating abortion through either platform policies or candidates who oppose life.

A grave misunderstanding concerns the relationship between the distinct missions of the Church and the State and what it means to live one’s faith in the world. The Second Vatican Council lamented that “[the] split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age” (GS 43). In many ways this dichotomy has increased regrettably in the past 40 years through the removal of religious and moral values from the public square. Indeed the mission of the Church and the task of the State are distinct, but they are never completely separate. The constitutional distinction between Church and State is found in the non-establishment of a state religion. However, this is not the denial of the entry of God or moral convictions into the public square.

The misinterpretation of the separation of Church and State as the denial of the entry of God or moral convictions into the public square reveals the reality that the religion predominately lived today is that of secular atheism, the denial of God, whether directly through the works of Richard Dawkins and modern academia, or more subtly through practical atheism, living day-to-day life as if God didn’t exist. Some Catholics in the separation of their faith from decisions in the political order abandon God and embrace secular atheism. Secular atheism goes hand in hand with secular humanism, namely, the idea that man alone can order society and the common life of the human race and that God has no part in this order. Secular humanism can never flourish, because the moment society abandons God’s law it also abandons humanity. Abandoning the truth is directly opposed both to our ideals as Christians and to the founding principles of our country as seen in the Declaration of Independence which acknowledges the “laws of nature’s God” and “the Creator.”

President George Washington declared in his farewell speech in 1796, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them.” Our forefathers had no concept of a civil and democratic society separated from belief. They knew that such a society would either never survive

or, if it survived, would seriously undermine the rights and true freedom of peoples, particularly the freedom to practice religion.

Every faithful Catholic has a responsibility to promote the teachings of the Church in the world and to live them out. The Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* reminded the laity that "...by their very vocation, [they] seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God....They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven" (LG 31). Being faithful to the call and mission given to us by God can never be limited to Sunday worship, but requires the surrender of our complete and entire lives. If we are faithful Catholics, everything we do will be influenced by our relationship with God, his truth, his love and his constant inspiration. If we withhold the beauty and truths about human life from our nation's laws, we diminish our society.

Over the next several months, Catholics will be called upon to witness to the preservation of the fundamental right to life from the moment of conception until natural death. As Pope John Paul II reminded Catholics in 1988, "the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights -- for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture -- is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition of all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination . . . everyone has the mission and responsibility of acknowledging the personal dignity of every human being and of defending the right to life, some lay faithful are given particular title to this task: such as parents, teachers, health workers and the many who hold economic and political power" (*Christifideles Laici* 38). In his recent visit to the United States, Pope Benedict reminded us that "[Christian truths] alone can guarantee respect for the inalienable dignity and rights of each man, woman and child in our world—including the most defenseless of all human beings, the unborn child in the mother's womb" (Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass in Yankee Stadium, April 20, 2008).

Over the next several months and years I invite you to join me and continue to work diligently to promote the Gospel of Life. I encourage all of the clergy and laity of the Diocese of Fargo to work toward this goal and foundational truth. Regardless of which political party a Catholic belongs to, he or she must work tirelessly for life and the protection of the unborn child.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving, let each one of us give thanks to God for the gift of our own life, the gift of our Catholic faith, and the gift of our country. I give thanks to God for the blessing of being a bishop and for being able to serve the faithful of the Church of Fargo. My fervent prayer for this Thanksgiving is that every Catholic and every person of good will might come to know the truth of the dignity of human life from conception to natural death and support this truth both in word and deed.