



Reverence for Life ... A Need for “A Heart That Sees”

On his recent visit to Austria, Pope Benedict XVI named abortion “a deep wound in society,” a threat inflicted by ethical blindness. In a prophetic voice raised in defense of a fundamental right to life, the Holy Father stated: “I am acting as an advocate for a profoundly human need, speaking out on behalf of unborn children who have no voice. I do not close my eyes to the difficulties and conflicts that many women are experiencing, and I realize that the credibility of what we say also depends on what the Church is doing to help women in trouble.” His address, “The Fundamental Human Right,” also expressed a grave concern about movements promoting “actively assisted death.” (September 7, 2007)

These remarks of the Holy Father to diplomats and government leaders in Austria mention an ecclesial task of service to the needs of women and their children as well as the pursuit of justice in the political order – a justice inspired by charity.

The practice of charity at the heart of the Church’s mission and ministry is a theme central to the theological vision of Pope Benedict XVI. *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), his inaugural encyclical, presents a theological reflection on the ministry of charity as a constitutive element of the Church. The ecclesial ministry of charity bears a commitment to justice. (DCE nn. 26-29)

In the political order, the Church’s specific contribution to a “just ordering of society and State” consists in providing an “understanding of the requirements of justice” and the political embodiment of those demands by means of “the purification of reason and through ethical formation.” (DCE n. 28)

In speaking of the indirect duty of the Church in the political sphere, *Deus Caritas Est* states that “charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as ‘social charity.’” (DCE n. 29)

In the same vein, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) attributes a priority to charity in its interrelationship to justice, for “[l]ove presupposes and transcends justice.” The dignity of the human person calls for the pursuit of justice to open up to “the new horizon of solidarity and love.” (CSDC nn. 203-204)

Love, then, as the "highest and universal criterion of the whole of social ethics" engenders an appreciation for the values of truth, freedom, and justice that flows "from the inner wellspring of love." (CSDC nn. 204-205)

In 1999, we, the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, published *Reverence for Life: The Pursuit of Justice* to implement the *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities* in the dioceses of Kentucky. Our pastoral letter strongly emphasized the indispensable need for life-affirming assistance for women and children along with the pursuit of justice in public policy. The month of October, a time when Catholics nationally participate in the annual "Respect Life Program," is an appropriate occasion to highlight selected pro-life themes set forth in our previous letter.

First, by way of a preface, the formation of the consciences of our Catholic people becomes a priority for us in our role as pastoral teachers. As the U. S. Bishops pointed out in *Faithful for Life: A Moral Reflection* (1995), the Church's role "to participate in the public debates about abortion and other threats to human life are correlative to the task to inform consciences and to promote justice."

Pope John Paul II called for renewed evangelization and catechesis in *Evangelium Vitae* (1995): "We need to begin with a renewal of a culture of life within Christian communities themselves. Too often it happens that believers, even those who take an active part in the life of the Church, end up by separating their Christian faith from its ethical requirements concerning life, and thus fall into moral subjectivism..." (EV n. 95)

Moral clarity based on Church doctrine is integral to a responsible formation of conscience.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) sets forth the definitive Catholic moral doctrine on the evil of abortion: "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 as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law." (CCC n. 2271) The Catechism also admonishes: "The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is *a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation.*" (CCC n 2273)

In reference to euthanasia, the Catechism states: "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." (CCC n. 2277)

Abortion and euthanasia have become pre-eminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental good and the condition of all other human goods and rights.

In a consistent ethic of life, the unborn child creates a special test for society's moral vision since the right to life is antecedent to and the necessary condition for all other rights of the human person. Respect for unborn life is the acid test for fostering a respect-life ethos in society since protection of the

unborn child is a radical symbol of society's regard for the helpless, the dependent, the unwanted, or the powerless.

In this sense, abortion is the fundamental human rights issue, for to diminish respect for the right to life of the unborn is tantamount to diminishing respect for life in all other contexts.

The heritage of the Catholic social doctrine is not limited to questions touching upon economic and political rights. It is concerned with human life issues – abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, the death penalty, and the violence of war fall within the scope of social morality.

Reverence for Life: The Pursuit of Justice, in accord with the Pastoral Plan, identifies the defense of human life and the promotion of human dignity within a broad spectrum of justice issues.

The Pastoral Plan locates the right to life and opposition to abortion and euthanasia in the context of the Church's coherent moral vision for a just ordering of society: "To focus on the evil of the deliberate killing in abortion and euthanasia is not to ignore the many other urgent conditions that demean human dignity and threaten human rights." Hence, in *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics* (1998) the U. S. Bishops state: "Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, unemployment, education, housing and health care." (LTGL n. 23)

Without doubt, reverence for life cannot cease with birth; pro-life values must be applied to every stage of human development. Again, as Pope John Paul II stated in *Evangelium Vitae*, building a culture of life requires that the service of charity be consistent: "*Where life is involved, the service of charity must be profoundly consistent. It cannot tolerate bias and discrimination, for human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good. We need then to 'show care' for all life and for the life of everyone....*" (EV n. 87)

Although legal protection of the unborn remains a long-range public policy goal, we note in *Reverence for Life: The Pursuit of Justice* that legislation of itself will not prove adequate. In *Evangelium Vitae* Pope John Paul II drew similar implications regarding the defense of life: "... it is not enough to remove unjust laws. The underlying causes of attacks on life have to be eliminated, especially by ensuring proper support for families and motherhood. *A family policy must be the basis and driving force of all social policies.*" (EV n. 90)

Linking the right to life of the unborn with quality of life issues stresses the need for providing reasonable alternatives to abortion. A life-affirming environment cannot be effectively established without life-affirming assistance. Solidarity in helping to carry the burdens of men and women in need entails provision of a variety of services which realistically offer alternatives to abortion.

Prenatal care, maternity care, emotional support, adoption services, child care, foster care, educational and vocational assistance represent important measures to mitigate the evil of abortion.

We renew the commitment of the Catholic Church in Kentucky to seeking and supporting public policy efforts to achieve the long-range legal protection of the unborn and to the provision of compassionate presence, service, and care by means of a variety of measures that support life: material assistance, social services pertaining to adoption and foster care, pregnancy counseling centers, spiritual assistance and counseling, programs of formation on the virtue of chastity, and education in natural family planning.

Since 1984, we have sponsored Opportunities for Life, a statewide telephone hotline staffed by volunteers from all over Kentucky. OFL provides support and assistance to women in crisis pregnancies and information about resources and support to inform women of their options in choosing life for their babies.

Catholic Charities and Catholic Social Services provide adoption services and guidance to women about adoption. These agencies also provide on-going counseling and parenting education.

Project Rachel is a post-abortion healing program available in several locations throughout our dioceses. Project Rachel creates an opportunity for healing, support and reconciliation.

We likewise pledge compassionate care in respect for the dignity of all who are wounded by the violence of abortion. In this ministry, we join the national body of bishops in its pledge to "uphold the spirituality of the Good Samaritan." (*Light and Shadows*, 1997).

In the writings of both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II, the biblical image of the Good Samaritan serves as a model of the Church's charitable activities and works of mercy.

For forming a people of life, Pope John Paul II identified the service of charity as being "inspired and distinguished by a specific attitude: we must care for the other as a person for whom God has made us responsible." *Evangelium Vitae* invokes two seminal biblical texts to disclose that disposition of solidarity: 1) The parable of the Good Samaritan enjoins us "to become neighbor to everyone (Lk, 10: 29-37), and to show special favor to those who are poorest, most alone, and in need"; 2) The judgment scene in the Gospel according to Matthew describes the salvific encounter with Christ in the corporal works of mercy: "In helping the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned – as well as the child in the womb and the old person who is suffering or near death – we have the opportunity to serve Jesus." (Mt 25:40)

In *Deus Caritas Est* Pope Benedict XVI envisions the Parable of the Good Samaritan as the model of the Church's ecclesial ministry of charity. The Holy Father designates the Christian approach to charitable activity as "the program of the Good Samaritan, the program of Jesus." (DCE n. 31)

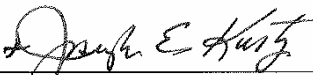
The works of charity must be suffused with "heartfelt concern" effected by a "formation of heart." That disposition in Catholics stems from the "encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to another." (DCE n. 31)

The "program of the Good Samaritan" embodies "a heart that sees." In other words, a heart that is graced to see "where love is needed, and acts accordingly." (DCE n. 31)

Living the Gospel of life must be nurtured by prayer, reflection, and solitude. A prayerful spirit can move the believer towards solidarity and communion with others, support a hopeful realism in the face of injustice, and forge a link between contemplation and service.

The spirituality of the works of mercy arises from our prayerful encounter with Jesus. The contemplative outlook attained through prayer illumines the heart, "a heart that sees" the face of Christ mirrored in the faces of "the least" of our brothers and sisters – the weakest, the powerless, the voiceless in our midst.

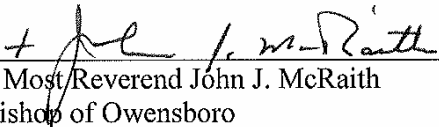
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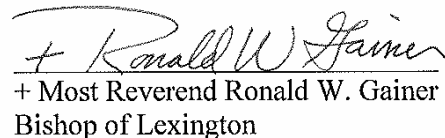
+ Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz
Archbishop of Louisville



+ Most Reverend Roger J. Foys
Bishop of Covington



+ Most Reverend John J. McRaith
Bishop of Owensboro



+ Most Reverend Ronald W. Gainer
Bishop of Lexington

References for Study and Reflection

Deus Caritas Est (2005) <http://www.vatican.va/>

Evangelium Vitae (1995), <http://www.vatican.va/>

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2d ed 1997), <http://www.usccb.org/catechism/text/>

Reverence for Life: The Pursuit of Justice (1999), <http://www.ccky.org/>

Pro-Life Prayer Services for Times of Transition, <http://www.ccky.org/>

The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. CCK speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of Kentucky constitute CCK's Board of Directors. Committees of the Conference are: Ecumenical, Education, Finance, Health Care, Hispanic, Pro-Life and Social Concerns.