

"THE SANCTITY OF LIFE"

**A
STATEMENT
BY
THE BISHOPS OF LOUISIANA**

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**Louisiana Catholic Conference
Lafayette, Louisiana**

**STATEMENT OF LOUISIANA'S CATHOLIC BISHOPS
ASSEMBLED AS THE
BOARD OF DIRECTORS
LOUISIANA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE**

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SANCTITY OF LIFE

It was in 1979 that Pope John Paul II wrote these words: "Man's (and woman's) situation in the modern world seems indeed to be far removed from the objective demands of the moral order, from the requirements of justice, and even more of social love."¹ Having recognized that these words continue to describe our situation today, and in keeping with our mandate to preach the Gospel, we, the Bishops of Louisiana, wish to address the attitudes of our church and society toward life itself.

We begin with our understanding of the human person, and with the rights which pertain to the person. These human rights are not something which are added to the situation of men and women of the world, but are rather realities which are rooted in the very nature of mankind.² They flow from the inherent dignity of the human person, and cannot be denied without doing violence to that dignity.³

When considered from the perspective of faith, this dignity is enhanced by the special relationship between humankind and the creator. "An outstanding cause of human dignity lies in man's (and woman's) call to communion with God."⁴ This call is found first in the fact of being created "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1:27), and is made even more explicit in the Redemption of that creation in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-10).

¹ Redemptor Hominis, Pope John Paul II, (1979), n. 16.

² Pacem in Terris, Pope John XXIII, (1963), n. 9. "Any human society if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature."

³ Pacem in Terris, Pope John XXIII, (1963), n. 11: "Beginning our discussion of the rights of man, we see that every man has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life."

⁴ Gaudium et Spes, 19. Cf. Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, n. 5, (Origins 16:40, p.701): "Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves 'the creative action of God' and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end."

This relationship allows us to proclaim that, "Every human life is sacred, because every human person is sacred. It is in the light of this fundamental truth that the church constantly proclaims and defends the dignity of human life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death."⁵ This right to life itself is fundamental because it forms the basis for the enjoyment of every other right which pertains to the human person.⁶

It is a tragedy that the Church in this age finds it necessary to speak out on behalf of all those whose life is threatened. Even innocent life, which is absolutely inviolable, is attacked in various ways.⁷ We maintain that nothing can outweigh the right to life of the innocent person, no matter what the condition of that life, and reject all direct attacks against innocent life. We speak out in a special way on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, following the examples of the prophets, and of Jesus himself (Is. 61:1-2, Lk. 4:18-19). "The church firmly believes that human life, even if weak and suffering, is always a splendid gift of God's goodness. Against the pessimism and selfishness which casts a shadow over the world, the church stands for life."⁸

In its history, the Church has encountered certain conflict situations (e.g., self-defense, a just war) in which direct attacks on human life might be justified. Even in those situations, steps must be taken to preserve life wherever possible, while working to preserve the values that are at stake.⁹ This presumption in favor of life is obvious, for example, in the principles of the just war theory, which demand that war be a last resort, that there be a probability of success, that only proportionate means be employed, and that the lives of non-combatants be protected.¹⁰

It remains our concern that any and all attacks on the individual's right to life can serve to lessen the respect which individuals and society have for the dignity of the human person. A

⁵ Address to Catholic Health Association, Pope John Paul II, September 14, 1987, (Origins, 17:17, n. 5, P. 293).

⁶ Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, n. 4, (Origins 16:40, p. 700): "Physical life, with which the course of human life in the world begins, certainly does not itself contain the whole of a person's value nor does it represent the supreme good of man, who is called to eternal life. However, it does constitute in a certain way the 'fundamental' value of life precisely because upon this physical life all the other values of the person are based and developed."

⁷ Declaration on Euthanasia, Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, June 26, 1980, Sect. II, (Origins, Vol. 10, pp. 554ff): "It is necessary to state firmly once more that 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."

⁸ Familiaris Consortio, Pope John Paul II, 1981, n. 30, (Origins 11:28-29, p. 447).

⁹ For example, St. Thomas, in treating the possibility of self defense calls for the use of as little violence as possible, while rejecting the taking of the aggressor's life as a legitimate intention of the will. Cf. Summa Theologica, St. Thomas Aquinas, 11-11, Q. 64, a. 7.

¹⁰ The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response, NCCB, 1983, n. 80-101.

particular case in our society is the practice of capital punishment, a revocation of the individual's right to life which can only be justified when necessary to protect the common good.¹¹ Even when one's dignity is diminished by sin, the constant call to forgiveness, conversion, and reconciliation reminds us that dignity is never irretrievably lost, especially in the light of God's mercy.¹² If other means of protecting society can be found, this practice should be abandoned, since this ultimate punishment, especially when inflicted without proper safeguards, can be interpreted as lessening the respect which society has for the sacredness of every human life.

The responsibility to deepen that respect falls upon both individuals and groups, and on public officials, as we work together for the common good.¹³ "All human beings ought to value every person for his or her uniqueness as a creature of God called to be a brother or sister of Christ by reason of the incarnation and the universal redemption. For us, the sacredness of human life is based on these premises. And it is on these same premises that there is based our celebration of life--all human life."¹⁴

It is clear to us that the objective demands of the moral order, the requirements of justice, and even more of social love challenge every individual to work actively to promote respect in our society for the dignity and sanctity of every human life.

¹¹ Summa Theologica, St. Thomas Aquinas, 11-11, Q. 64, a. 2.

¹² Dives in Misericordia, Pope John Paul II, n. 14: "Thus the fundamental structure of justice always enters into the sphere of mercy. Mercy, however, has the power to confer on justice a new content, which is expressed most simply and fully in forgiveness ... We have already called attention to the fact that he who forgives and he who is forgiven encounter one another at an essential point, namely the dignity or essential value of the person, a point which cannot be lost and the affirmation of which, or its rediscovery, is a source of the greatest joy."

¹³ Pacem in Terris, Pope John XXIII, (1963), n. 60: "It is agreed that in our time the common good is chiefly guaranteed when personal rights and duties are maintained...For to safeguard the inviolable rights of the human person, and to facilitate the fulfillment of his duties, should be the chief duty of every public authority."

¹⁴ Homily on the Capitol Mall, Pope John Paul II, Washington, D.C., Oct. 7, 1979, (quoted in the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Reaffirmation, NCCB, (Origins 15-24, p. 401).