



Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time October 9, 2011 A

RESPECTING LIFE AT ALL STAGES A Sensitive and Challenging Issue

On *Respect Life Sunday*, our Church exhorts us to reflect on our call as disciples of Jesus to respect and love life at all its stages.

Human life has infinite and divine value because it is formed in the *image* and *likeness* of God, our Creator. The call to respect life is no challenge when people live healthy, caring and productive lives. The challenge comes when life is *in danger* (deformed unborn or born child), *unproductive* (the homeless) or *uncaring* (troublesome child, teenager, spouse, or criminal).

The way our Church and society regard human life is radically different. Following the example of Christ, our Church places infinite value and dignity on human life, whereas society more and more sees some human life as dispensable. For example, our Supreme Court gives us permission to rid of our holy innocents (the unborn), to kill the criminal, to hasten the death of the terminally ill. Conversely, our Church, following the Great Commandment of Jesus, calls us to love *all* people—the weak and the strong, the old and the young, the saint and the sinner. No one is to be excluded from our loving embrace, no matter how helpless, unloving, weak, poor or unproductive one may be.

A Sensitive Issue

Jesus' call to us to love and respect human life *at all its stages* can be a very sensitive issue to some of us.

Protecting the life of the unborn is a sensitive issue for women who have had an abortion and who may still be struggling to come to terms with their decision to kill their child. It may also be painful for women who may have gone through a crisis pregnancy or for those who may sincerely believe in a woman's right to choose to keep or not to keep her unborn child.

Domestic violence, which also shows a grave disrespect for human life, is a sensitive issue for some of the people sitting in pews on a Sunday morning who may have experienced domestic violence or, worse yet, perpetrated such violence and are now trying to come to terms with the harm they had done.

The death penalty is a sensitive issue for families who may have had a loved one killed or violated by a member of our society. This is also an emotional issue for the 65-67% of Catholics who still believe we should execute persons guilty of a capital offense. Euthanasia may be a sensitive issue for people who have witnessed a loved one die a very painful death. Our Christian obligation to care for the poor is also a touchy issue, especially when we are being asked to pay more taxes to support the poorer members of our human family.

Also a Challenging Issue

Despite the sensitivity of each of the above issues, we as disciples of Christ and members of his Church are called to be totally pro-life. We are called to gently but firmly oppose a culture that is losing its nerve and will when it comes to life matters. Since 1973, about 39 million abortions have been performed in America, i.e., one abortion every 24 seconds. Since the adoption of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 abortion rulings, *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*, it is legal to abort unborn babies *anytime* during the nine months of pregnancy for *any* reason. A few years ago, the Supreme Court expanded the ruling (*Stenberg v. Carhart*) to include late-term abortions which allowed the procedure even when the child is almost completely born. I am sure most of us do not even wish to reflect on this controversy. In partial birth abortions, a doctor starts to deliver a living child during its second or third trimester of development. He stops in mid-delivery, and with only the child's head still inside the mother, the doctor kills the baby. Even though 70% of Americans oppose partial birth abortions, the Supreme Court has ruled to permit this horrible procedure. Hopefully, it will soon be outlawed.

This is one area where we cannot "agree to disagree." It would be like our ancestors who "agreed to disagree" on the issue of slavery. It is as if it's alright to say, "Personally, I'm opposed to slavery, but if others want to have slaves, that is okay with me because I do not want to impose my morality on others." 150 years ago, that would have been seen as a reasonable viewpoint, especially in the Southern states.

Today, we would be outraged if anyone tried to reason with us in that way. Yet, is that not the kind of reasoning we hear all the time when it comes to the issue of abortion? “Personally, I’m opposed, *but if...*” Our Church clearly tells us that abortion is a matter that we cannot just “agree to disagree” with because it is a direct violation of another person’s right to life. “Agreeing to disagree” on abortion is an attempt to move the issue into a morally neutral zone. As followers of Christ, we can never permit this to happen. So the challenge here is to be unequivocally pro-life and, at the same time, to be full of compassion for women who bear the brunt of crisis pregnancies.

Our Bishop’s 1999 Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty

In 1999, our U.S. bishops issued the following *Good Friday* appeal for an end to the death penalty:

Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes all of us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life. We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life.... Through education, through advocacy, and through prayer and contemplation on the life of Jesus, we must commit ourselves to a persistent and principled witness against the death penalty, against a culture of death, and for the Gospel of Life.

When I consider some of the crimes that people commit, I frankly think that lethal injection is too small a punishment. A part of me thinks that such people should die a slow and very painful death. I realize that such thinking does not proceed from the most noble or Christ part of me, but rather from the natural inclination to want to exact revenge on the perpetrators. As the bishops have stated, the death penalty solves nothing but diminishes us as a people. Capital punishment only serves to perpetuate the cycle of violence. As Gandhi once said, "Violence only adds darkness to an already dark night."

Furthermore, it is obvious that those who cannot afford it are not likely to get adequate legal representation. Let’s face it, when was the last time a defendant who had the means to hire top-notch attorneys was executed? We should be concerned that the system not only withholds adequate representation to the poor, but worse, innocent persons have been executed time and again for lack of strong legal support.

Pro-life All the Way

When we hear the term *pro-life*, most of us think of the abortion issue. Yet, to be *pro-life* in the way our Church thinks involves a whole range of issues: the unborn, the poor, domestic violence, human rights, even respect for the life of the criminal, hoping there is repentance. While we may not be activists for all the above (who could?), we should be philosophically pro-life *all the way*. Certain situations could be very challenging, but thank God, we have wonderful examples in our Church family and wider society of dedicated people toughing it out during a crisis pregnancy, improving the lives of the poor, helping the terminally ill to die without pain, reaching out to criminals on death row. Such people are like Jesus who reached out to the criminals who died beside him on Calvary. Finally, being pro-life calls us to treat each other with dignity and respect. Those of you who live day in and day out with your own family, will at times find that call very challenging. All we can do is keep trying.

Reflection questions on life issues and on today’s Gospel

1. When it comes to life issues (protection for the unborn, the dying, the criminal, the homeless, the uninsured, etc.), where do we stand? To what extent are we pro-life on some issues and not on others?
2. To what extent do the poor feature in our budget? Do they get the first cut or the leftovers?

Have a blessed week

