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LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

The Church has proclaimed as a basic principle of its social teaching that each person is created in the image of God. It is the responsibility of every society to ensure that human life is protected from the moment of conception until natural death. The following documents are summarized in this chapter:

- *Brothers and Sisters to Us: Pastoral Letter on Racism, United States Catholic Conference, 1979*
- *Statement on Capital Punishment, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1980*
- *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae), Pope John Paul II, 1995*

Brothers and Sisters to Us: Pastoral Letter on Racism United States Catholic Conference, 1979

Racism is an evil that endures in our society, despite significant advances in the recent decades. The majority of Americans realize that discrimination is both unjust and unworthy of this nation.

It cannot be denied that the ugly external features of racism that marred our society in the past have in part been eliminated. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that too often what has happened has been only a covering over and not a fundamental change. The climate of crisis engendered by demonstrations and protests has too often given way to a mood of indifference.

Racial and Economic Justice

We must call attention to the persistent presence of racism and in particular to the relationship between racial and economic justice. Although racism and economic oppression are distinct, they are interrelated forces that can dehumanize our society.

Major segments of the population are being pushed to the margins. As economic pressures tighten, communities of color slip further into the unending cycle of poverty and deprivation.

The Church and Prejudice

The Church cannot remain silent about racial injustices in society and in its own structures. Discrimination belies our civil tradition and constitutional heritage that recognizes the equality, dignity, and inalienable rights of all its citizens. We are, as well, heirs of a religious teaching that proclaims that all men and women, as children of God, are brothers and sisters.

Racism is a sin that divides the human family by proclaiming that some human beings are inherently superior because of race. It is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.

We look to Christ for the strength to overcome racism. In Christ Jesus “there is neither Jew nor Greek . . . there is not male and female; for you are all one” (Gal 3:28). In Christ Jesus the Church finds the central cause for its commitment to justice and the struggle for the human rights and dignity of all persons.

Presence of Racism in the United States Today

The continuing existence of racism in our country is apparent when we look beneath the surface of our national life as, for example, in the case of unemployment figures. For many minority groups, being denied adequate access to employment opportunities has been a crushing burden for decades. A disproportionate number of families in these groups continue to face the generational poverty that this reality helps create. Racism can also be seen in housing patterns in our major cities and suburbs. The gap between rich and poor is widening, not decreasing.

Racism can be noted in the disproportionate minority population in prison and the violent crime that is too often the daily companion of those who live in poverty. The victims of such crimes are disproportionately nonwhite and poor. Racism is also apparent in the attitudes and behavior of some law enforcement officials and the unequal availability of legal assistance.

Racism is sometimes the basis for the growing sentiment that too much is being given to minorities by way of affirmative action programs or allocations to address long-standing imbalances in minority representation and government-funded programs for the disadvantaged. At times, protestations claiming that all persons should be treated equally reflect the desire to maintain a status quo favoring the predominant social group at the expense of the poor and the nonwhite.

The contribution of each minority to our national welfare is distinctive and rich. Each ethnic and racial group has sunk its roots deep in the soil of our culture and has contributed to the unique character and diverse population of this country.

Racism is manifest in the tendency to stereotype and marginalize whole segments of the population whose presence is seen as a threat. It can be seen in the indifference given to the minority poor who are perceived by some as expendable. The new face of racism is the computer printout, the graph of profits and losses, the pink slip, the nameless statistic. Racism today flourishes in the triumph of private concern over public responsibility, individual success over social commitment, and personal fulfillment over authentic compassion.

Christian Response to Racism

New forms of racism must be brought face to face with the figure of Christ. The Christian response to the challenges of our times is to be found in the Good News of Jesus. God's Word proclaims the oneness of the human family. All are created in the image of God. The Church is truly universal, embracing all races and ethnicities. The Church has a duty to proclaim the truth about the human being as disclosed in the truth about Jesus Christ.

Catholics must acknowledge a share in the mistakes and sins of the past, as prisoners of fear and prejudice. At times conformity to social pressures has replaced compliance with social justice.

The prophetic voice of the Church must not be muted—especially not by the counter-witness of some of its own people. The Church must strive to make every element of human life correspond to the true dignity of the person. The Church must continue to proclaim that the sin of racism defiles the image of God and degrades the sacred dignity of humankind, revealed in the mystery of the Incarnation.

Conversion is the continuing task of each Christian. Christians must try to influence the attitudes of others by expressly rejecting racial stereotypes, racist jokes, and ethnic slurs. We must become more sensitive to how social structures inhibit the economic, educational, and social advancement of the poor, and commit to work with others in political efforts to bring about increased justice.

We must take particular care to foster vocations to priestly and religious life among minority groups. Individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds should be encouraged to share their spiritual gifts within the context of the liturgy, as noted in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (10, 37, 39, 40).

Special attention should be given to the plight of undocumented workers. Catholic institutions that are employers should ensure that their policies faithfully conform to the Church's teaching on justice for workers and respect of their rights. Investment portfolios should be examined for inadvertent support of racist institutions and policies.

It is recommended that Catholic institutions avoid the services of agencies and industries that refuse to take affirmative action to achieve equal opportunity and that the Church itself always be a model as an equal opportunity employer.

Leadership training programs should be established to encourage effective leadership among cultural and ethnic minorities at all levels of the Church, local as well as national.

Active spiritual and financial support should be given to associations and institutions organized by African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian Catholics within the Church for the promotion of ministry to and by their respective communities.

There should be a continuation and expansion of Catholic schools in disadvantaged areas of our cities and rural communities. The Church in the United States has been distinguished by its efforts to educate the poor and disadvantaged.

The difficulties of today demand a new vision and renewed courage to transform our society. We live in an interdependent global community of nations; those nations possessing more of the world's riches must share with those in serious need. The private sector should be aware of its responsibility to promote social justice and genuine development in poor societies. There must be no turning back along the road to justice.

Statement on Capital Punishment
National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1980

Criticisms of the criminal justice system in the United States call for careful and prayerful reflection on the question of capital punishment by the Christian community, showing a respect and concern for the rights of all. The public debate about capital punishment concerns values of the utmost importance: respect for the sanctity of human life, the protection of human life, the preservation of order in society, and the achievement of justice through law. Many factors must be considered, including the need to provide safety for members of society and concern for law enforcement officers who may be endangered in the midst of violent crime. There are no simple answers to this complex topic, but it is necessary to look to the claims of justice and to the example and teaching of Jesus.

Purposes of Punishment

Catholic teaching has accepted the principle that the state has the right to take the life of a person guilty of an extremely serious crime and that the state may take appropriate measures to protect itself and its citizens from grave harm. The question for judgment is whether capital punishment is justifiable under present circumstances.

Since punishment involves the deliberate infliction of evil on another, it is always in need of justification. The three traditional justifications advanced for punishment are retribution, deterrence, and reform.

The deterrence of actual or potential offenders from future deeds of violence by the threat of capital punishment is far from certain. There are strong reasons to doubt that many crimes of violence are undertaken in a spirit of rational calculation. Reform cannot be used as justification for capital punishment since it necessarily deprives the offender of the opportunity to develop a new way of life. Although the need for retribution or the restoration of order justifies punishment, that punishment does not require taking the life of the offender.

The forms and limits of punishment must be determined by moral objectives that go beyond the mere infliction of injury on the guilty.

The forms of punishment must be determined with a view to the protection of society, the reformation of the offender, and the offender's reintegration into society (which may not be possible in certain situations).

In the conditions of contemporary American society, the legitimate purposes of punishment do not justify the imposition of the death penalty. There are serious considerations that should prompt Christians and all Americans to support the abolition of capital punishment. In May 2018, Pope Francis clarified in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2267) "that the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviability and dignity of the person."

Christian Values in the Abolition of Capital Punishment

The abolition of the death penalty would promote values that are important to Christian citizens. Abolition sends a message that the cycle of violence can be broken, that it is not necessary to take life for life, and that more humane and effective responses can be envisioned in response to violent crime.

It is also a manifestation of the belief in the unique worth and dignity of each person from the moment of conception, a creature made in the image and likeness of God. It gives further testimony that God is the Lord of life and is consonant with the example of Jesus, who both taught and practiced the forgiveness of injustice and who came to "give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Pope Francis, in the revision of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2267, on the teaching about the death

penalty states that the Catholic Church “works with determination for its abolition worldwide.”

Difficulties Inherent in Capital Punishment

Infliction of the death penalty extinguishes the possibility of reform and rehabilitation for the person executed as well as the opportunity to make some creative compensation for the evil that has been done.

What’s more, it involves the possibility of mistake, which cannot be totally eliminated from the justice system. It entails long and unavoidable delays, a consequence of necessary safeguards, but that can produce aimlessness, fear, and despair in the convict on death row.

The actual carrying out of the death penalty can bring with it great anguish for the offender, the offender’s family and loved ones, and those who are called on to perform or to witness the execution. Executions also attract enormous publicity, much of it unhealthy, stirring up considerable acrimony in public discussion.

There is widespread evidence that many of those convicted of serious crimes are sentenced to death in an unfair and discriminatory manner. The legal system and the criminal justice system both work in a society that bears in its psychological, social, and economic patterns the mark of racism and other prejudicial animosities. Those condemned to die are nearly always poor and are disproportionately of African American descent.

Conclusions

The abolition of the death penalty is not proposed as a simple solution to the problems of crime and punishment. There is a special need to offer sympathy to and support for the victims of violent crime and their families. It is the special responsibility of the Church to provide a community of faith and trust in which God’s grace can heal the emotional and spiritual wounds of those victimized.

The correctional system requires fundamental changes to be truly conducive to the reform and rehabilitation of convicted offenders and their reintegration into society. The importance of restricting the easy availability of guns and other weapons of violence must also be

emphasized. The glamorizing of violence in entertainment, with its detrimental effects on human moral development, especially among children and youth, must be vigorously opposed. Educational efforts must be undertaken to promote respect for the dignity of all people.

We are called to contemplate the crucified Christ, who set us the supreme example of forgiveness and of the triumph of compassionate love.

The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)
Pope John Paul II, 1995

The gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus' message. In conveying his redemptive mission, Jesus says, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). Believers in Christ must defend and promote the right to life. Through the Incarnation, the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being and established the incomparable value of every person. The gospel of God's love for each person, the gospel of the dignity of the person, and the gospel of life are a single and indivisible gospel (1–3).

The proclamation of life is ever more urgent due to the increase and gravity of threats to the lives of individuals and peoples. Broad sectors of public opinion justify certain crimes against life in the name of the right of individual freedom. Such initiatives are being given cognizance by legislators in many countries. The individual conscience is finding it more and more difficult to distinguish between good and evil in what concerns the basic value of human life (4).

Present-Day Threats to Human Life

The gospel of life proclaimed in the beginning when human beings were created in the image of God is contradicted by the painful experience of death entering the world. Death entered the world in a violent way through the killing of Abel by his brother Cain. Like the first fratricide, every murder is a violation of the spiritual kinship uniting humankind in one family. Many ideologies attempt to justify and disguise atrocious crimes against human beings.

God is merciful, even when he punishes. He places a mark on Cain lest anyone who comes upon him should kill him (Gn 4:15). In this, the paradoxical mystery of the merciful justice of God is shown.

Attacks against human life have continued through human history from a variety of sources, including murder, war, slaughter, and genocide. Violence continues against children who are forced into poverty, malnutrition, and hunger due to an unjust distribution of resources.

Attacks by the State

There is another category of attacks that affect life in its earliest and final stages. In many cases the state gives these attacks legal recognition and makes them available through the free services of health-care personnel. Such attacks strike human life at its greatest frailty, when it lacks any means of self-defense.

Many factors are involved, including a profound crisis of culture, the complexity of society, acute poverty, and anxiety or frustration in which the struggle to make ends meet can make the choice to defend life so demanding as sometimes to reach the point of heroism.

Culture of Death

A veritable structure of sin has emerged in the form of a “culture of death,” a war of the powerful against the weak. A life requiring greater acceptance, love, and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected.

To facilitate abortion, enormous sums of money have been invested in pharmaceutical products that can kill the fetus without need of medical assistance. Such developments remove abortion from any kind of control or social responsibility.

The Pro-Abortion Culture

The pro-abortion culture is especially strong where the Church’s teaching on contraception is rejected. In some instances, contraception and abortion are rooted in a hedonistic mentality unwilling to accept responsibility in matters of sexuality. The life that can result from a sexual encounter

becomes an enemy to be avoided at all costs, with abortion the only decisive response to failed contraception. Prenatal diagnosis of potential defects all too often becomes an opportunity for proposing and procuring an abortion.

Serious threats hang over the incurably ill and the dying as well. Culture today considers any suffering as the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs. Euthanasia is sometimes justified by a utilitarian motive of avoiding costs that bring no return and weigh heavily on society.

There is also a demographic argument made today in support of attacks against life. The more powerful nations fear that the most prolific and poorest people represent a threat to their well-being and peace. Sometimes, the economic help that richer nations can provide is made conditional on the acceptance of an antibirth policy.

The Right to Life

The process that once led to discovering the idea of “human rights”—rights inherent in every person—is today marked by a surprising contradiction. In an age when the inviolable rights of the person are solemnly proclaimed and the value of life is publicly affirmed, the very right to life is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the moment of birth and the moment of death. This remarkable contradiction is rooted in today’s cultural and moral nature. A mentality of extreme subjectivism exists that recognizes as a subject of rights only the person who enjoys full or at least incipient autonomy and who emerges from a state of total dependence on others. In addition, the prevailing tendency is to equate personal dignity with the capacity for verbal and explicit communication. There is no room in this thinking for the one who is a weak element in the social structure.

This is the exact opposite of what a state ruled by law is historically intended to affirm. When freedom, out of a desire to emancipate itself from all forms of tradition and authority, shuts out the most obvious evidence of an objective and universal truth, then the person exercising that freedom no longer takes the truth about good and evil as the point of reference for choices. Rather, the criterion becomes only a subjective and changeable opinion—selfish interest and whim.

Such a view of freedom leads to a distortion of life in society, a mass of individuals placed side by side but without any mutual bonds. Social life ventures on to the shifting sands of relativism. Everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining—even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life.

Simultaneously, there is within culture an eclipse of the sense of God and of the human. When a sense of God is lost in a secularized culture, the sense of the human being is also threatened—individuals no longer see the transcendent character of the human person. In such a context, suffering, a factor of possible personal growth, is always viewed as an evil, to be opposed and avoided. The body is seen then as pure materiality, a complex of organs, functions, and energies to be used according to the sole criteria of pleasure and efficiency. Sexuality is depersonalized and exploited. Interpersonal relations are seriously impoverished.

Christ's blood reveals to humanity the greatness of the human being and the true vocation: the sincere gift of self. The blood of Christ is the instrument of communion, the richness of life for all. It is from the blood of Christ that all people draw the strength to commit themselves to promoting life. The unconditional choice for life reaches its full spiritual and moral meaning when it flows from, is formed by, and is nourished by faith in Christ. The Church is becoming more aware that the Lord has given it the grace and responsibility to proclaim, celebrate, and serve the gospel of life (7–9, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18–23, 25, 28).

The Christian Message concerning Life

The gospel of life is concrete and personal, consisting of the proclamation of the person of Jesus, who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). Through the words, actions, and person of Jesus, humanity is given the possibility of knowing the complete truth concerning the value of human life. It can also be known in its essential traits by human reason.

The fullness of the Gospel message about life was prepared for in the Old Testament. The Lord revealed himself to Israel as its Savior, with the power to ensure a future to those without hope. In coming to know the value of its own existence as a people, Israel grew in its perception of the meaning and value of life itself.

Revelation progressively allows the first notion of immortal life planted by the Creator in the human heart to be grasped with ever-greater clarity.

Jesus and the Proclamation of Human Dignity

Just as God reassured Israel in the midst of danger, so the Son of God proclaims to all who feel threatened and hindered that their lives are a good to which the Father's love gives meaning and value. The crowds of the sick and the outcasts who follow him and seek him out find in Jesus' words and actions a revelation of the great value of their lives and a firm basis for their hope of salvation. It is by his death that Jesus reveals the entire splendor and value of life.

The human being has been given a sublime dignity through the intimate bond that unites each individual to God: in the human being shines forth a reflection of God. All who commit themselves to following Christ are given the fullness of life: the divine image is restored, renewed, and brought to perfection in them. Whoever believes in Jesus and enters into communion with him has eternal life because that person hears from Jesus the only words that reveal and communicate to his existence the fullness of life. The dignity of this life derives not only from its beginning, the fact that it comes from God, but also from its final end, its destiny of fellowship with God in knowledge and love of him.

God is the sole Lord of this life. God does not exercise this power in an arbitrary and threatening manner, but rather as part of his care and loving concern for his creatures. The sacredness of life gives way to its inviolability. The commandment "You shall not kill," included and more fully expressed in the positive command of love for one's neighbor, is reaffirmed in all its force by the Lord Jesus. The deepest element of God's commandment to protect human life is the requirement to show reverence and love for every person. To defend and promote life, to show reverence and love for it, is a task that God entrusts to every person.

The mission of Jesus, including the many healings he performed, shows God's great concern even for the individual's bodily life. No one can arbitrarily choose whether to live or die. The absolute master of such a decision is the Creator alone.