

Theme 1

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

USCCB > Beliefs And Teachings > What We Believe

Human life and DignityThe Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and euthanasia. The value of human life is being threatened by cloning, embryonic stem cell research, and the use of the death penalty. The intentional targeting of civilians in war or terrorist attacks is always wrong. Catholic teaching also calls on us to work to avoid war. Nations must protect the right to life by finding increasingly effective ways to prevent conflicts and resolve them by peaceful means. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

Scripture

Genesis 1:26-31

God created man and woman in his image.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

God loves the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.

Psalms 139:13-16

God formed each of us and knows us intimately.

Proverbs 22:2

The Lord is the maker of both rich and poor.

Luke 10:25-37

The good Samaritan recognized the dignity in the other and cared for his life.

John 4:1-42

Jesus broke with societal and religious customs to honor the dignity of the Samaritan woman.

Romans 12: 9-18

Love one another, contribute to the needs of others, live peaceably with all.

1 Corinthians 3:16

You are holy, for you are God's temple and God dwells in you.

Galatians 3:27-28

All Christians are one in Christ Jesus.

James 2:1-8

Honor the poor.

1 John 3: 1-2

See what love the Father has for us, that we should be called Children of God.

1 John 4:7-12

Let us love one another because love is from God.

Tradition

The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner. Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate. . .), #32

Human persons are willed by God; they are imprinted with God's image. Their dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the persons they are. On the Hundredth Year (Centesimus annus. . .), #11

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth -- the sacredness -- of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured.

All human beings, therefore, are ends to be served by the institutions that make up the economy, not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined goals. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27). Economic Justice for All, #28

Every individual, precisely by reason of the mystery of the Word of God who was made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14), is entrusted to the maternal care of the Church. Therefore every threat to human dignity and life must necessarily be felt in the Church's very heart; it cannot but affect her at the core of her faith in the Redemptive Incarnation of the Son of God, and engage her in her mission of proclaiming the Gospel of life in all the world and to every creature (cf. Mk 16:15). The Gospel of Life (Evangelium vitae. . .), #3

As explicitly formulated, the precept "You shall not kill" is strongly negative: it indicates the extreme limit which can never be exceeded. Implicitly, however, it encourages a

positive attitude of absolute respect for life; it leads to the promotion of life and to progress along the way of a love which gives, receives and serves. The Gospel of Life (Evangelium vitae. . .), #54

This teaching rests on one basic principle: individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for men are by nature social beings. Mother and Teacher (Mater et Magistra. . .), #219

There exist also sinful inequalities that affect millions of men and women. These are in open contradiction of the Gospel: Their equal dignity as persons demands that we strive for fairer and more humane conditions. Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace. Catechism of the Catholic Church. . . , #1938

Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes. . .), #27

Discussion

1. In 2009 Mercy Sister Margaret McBride in her role on the ethics committee of a Phoenix hospital approved the abortion of an eleven week old fetus in order to save the life of the mother. Bishop Thomas Olmsted declared that Sr. McBride had automatically excommunicated herself. Was her excommunication permanent? Is abortion ever permissible?
2. In 1990 Florida resident Terri Schiavo collapsed at home and was taken to a hospital where she remained in a coma. Doctors eventually declared her in a permanent vegetative state. Her husband asked that her feeding tube be removed. Her parents objected and a very long legal battle ensued. Former Governor Jeb Bush sided with the parents and fought to keep Terri alive. A judge eventually sided with the husband. The tube was removed and Terri died two weeks later on March 31, 2005. What would the church have to say? See TCC comments regarding Texas HB 3074.
3. Last year 29 year old newlywed Brittany Maynard was diagnosed with brain cancer. She moved to Oregon where state law permits medically assisted suicide, obtained a prescription that would allow her to die in her sleep, and ended her own life last November. How does the Oregon Death with Dignity Act differ morally from Texas HB 3074 which TCC supports.
4. Jesus honored the dignity of the Samaritan woman at the well. Is there a class of "Samaritans" in Texas today? More than one? What would church tradition have us do about them?
5. In Caritas In Veritate Pope Benidict XVI insists that economic choices must not "cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner." Ross Perot's wealth exceeds mine by many times. Is that an injustice? What are some examples of unjust income inequality?
6. The intentional targeting of civilians in war is always wrong. Was Harry Truman wrong to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki?