

HUMAN LIFE IS SACRED AND INVIOABLE

FROM THE GOSPEL OF LIFE (EVANGELIUM VITAE), 54–57

FROM THE BEGINNING, THE LIVING TRADITION OF THE Church—as shown by the *Didache*, the most ancient non-biblical Christian writing—categorically repeated the commandment “You shall not kill”: “There are two ways, a way of life and a way of death; there is a great difference between them...In accordance with the precept of the teaching: you shall not kill...you shall not put a child to death by abortion nor kill it once it is born...The way of death is this: ...they show no compassion for the poor, they do not suffer with the suffering, they do not acknowledge their Creator, they kill their children and by abortion cause God’s creatures to perish; they drive away the needy, oppress the suffering, they are advocates of the rich and unjust judges of the poor; they are filled with every sin. May you be able to stay ever apart, O children, from all these sins!”¹

As time passed, the Church’s Tradition has always consistently taught the absolute and unchanging value of the commandment “You shall not kill.” It is a known fact that in the first centuries, murder was put among the three most serious sins—along with apostasy and adultery—and required a particularly heavy and lengthy public penance before the repentant murderer could be granted forgiveness and readmission to the ecclesial community.

This should not cause surprise: to kill a human being, in whom the image of God is present, is a particularly serious sin. Only God is the master of life! Yet from the beginning, faced with the many and often tragic cases which occur in the life of individuals and society, Christian reflection has sought a fuller and deeper understanding of what God’s commandment prohibits and prescribes.² There are in fact situations in which values proposed by God’s Law seem to involve a genuine paradox. This happens for example in the case of legitimate defense, in which the right to protect one’s own life and the duty not to harm someone else’s life are difficult to reconcile in practice. Certainly, the intrinsic value of life and the duty to love oneself no less than others are the basis of a true right to self-defense. The demanding commandment of love of neighbor, set forth in the Old Testament and confirmed

by Jesus, itself presupposes love of oneself as the basis of comparison: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk 12:31). Consequently, no one can renounce the right to self-defense out of lack of love for life or for self. This can only be done in virtue of a heroic love which deepens and transfigures the love of self into a radical self-offering, according to the spirit of the Gospel Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:38-40). The sublime example of this self-offering is the Lord Jesus himself.

Moreover, “legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another’s life, the common good of the family or of the State.”³ Unfortunately it happens that the need to render the aggressor incapable of causing harm sometimes involves taking his life. In this case, the fatal outcome is attributable to the aggressor whose action brought it about, even though he may not be morally responsible because of a lack of the use of reason.⁴

This is the context in which to place the problem of the death penalty. On this matter there is a growing tendency, both in the Church and in civil society, to demand that it be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely. The problem must be viewed in the context of a system of penal justice ever more in line with human dignity and thus, in the end, with God’s plan for man and society. The primary purpose of the punishment which society inflicts is “to redress the disorder caused by the offense.”⁵

Public authority must redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime, as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom. In this way authority also fulfills the purpose of defending public order and ensuring people’s safety, while at the same time offering the offender an incentive and help to change his or her behavior and be rehabilitated.⁶

It is clear that, for these purposes to be achieved, the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully

1 *Didache*, I, 1; II, 1-2; V, 1 and 3: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F.X. Funk, I, 2-3, 6-9, 14-17; cf. *Letter of Pseudo-Barnabas*, XIX, 5: loc. cit., 90-93.

2 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 2263-2269; cf. also *Catechism of the Council of Trent III*, §§ 327-332.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2265.

4 Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 64, a. 7; Saint Alphonsus De’ Liguori, *Theologia Moralis*, I, III, tr. 4, c. 1, dub.3.

5 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2266.

6 Cf. *ibid.*

evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent.

In any event, the principle set forth in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church remains valid: “If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.”⁷

If such great care must be taken to respect every life, even that of criminals and unjust aggressors, the commandment “You shall not kill” has absolute value when it refers to the innocent person. And all the more so in the case of weak and defenseless human beings, who find their ultimate defense against the arrogance and caprice of others only in the absolute binding force of God’s commandment.

In effect, the absolute inviolability of innocent human life is a moral truth clearly taught by Sacred Scripture, constantly upheld in the Church’s Tradition and consistently proposed by her Magisterium. This consistent teaching is the evident result of that “supernatural sense of the faith” which, inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit, safeguards the People of God from error when “it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.”⁸

Faced with the progressive weakening in individual consciences and in society of the sense of the absolute and grave moral illicitness of the direct taking of all innocent human life, especially at its beginning and at its end, the Church’s Magisterium has spoken out with increasing frequency in defense of the sacredness and inviolability of human life.

Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral. This doctrine, based upon that unwritten law which man, in the light of reason, finds in his own heart (cf. Rom 2:14-15), is reaffirmed by Sacred Scripture, transmitted by the Tradition of the Church and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.⁹

The deliberate decision to deprive an innocent human being of his life is always morally evil and can never be licit either as an end in itself or as a means to a good end. It is in fact a grave act of disobedience to the moral law, and indeed to God himself, the author and guarantor of that law; it contradicts the fundamental virtues of justice and charity. “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. Furthermore, no one is permitted to ask for this act of killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly. Nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action.”¹⁰

As far as the right to life is concerned, every innocent human being is absolutely equal to all others. This equality is the basis of all authentic social relationships which, to be truly such, can only be founded on truth and justice, recognizing and protecting every man and woman as a person and not as an object to be used. Before the moral norm which prohibits the direct taking of the life of an innocent human being “there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone. It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the ‘poorest of the poor’ on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal.”¹¹ ■

7 No. 2267.

8 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

9 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 25.

10 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Euthanasia *Iura et Bona* (5 May 1980), II: AAS 72 (1980), 546.

11 Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (6 August 1993), 96: AAS 85 (1993), 1209.



Pope St. John Paul II on his Encyclical *The Gospel of Life* (1995): “[...]it] is meant to be a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability, and at the same time, a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life! Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness!”