

The primacy of the person

Work exists for the human person, not the other way around. Government exists for the person, not the other way around. All the goods of the earth and the institutions of society, in fact, are given by God to serve the needs of the human person.

It is when this proper vision is lost that human beings are exploited. Violence is done, and rights are trampled, because individuals or institutions want to advance some other objective. Efforts for peace, justice, and life are therefore always marked by *the primacy of the person* over any material or political gain.

Responsibility to the weak

The ministry of Jesus shows a preferential option for the poor and weak, and the Church therefore inherits this as her own priority. The work of peace, justice, and life gives preference to the weakest, those whom society has marginalized, and those who cannot defend themselves. These ministries are, essentially, a voice to the voiceless -- whether those voiceless are oppressed nations, the poor, the terminally ill, or the unborn.

Efforts to justify abortion prove too much.

Those who try to justify abortion necessarily tear at the entire fabric of human rights and dignity. Any attempt to say that despite the clear evidence of the humanity of unborn children, their lives may be taken, is also an assertion that the lives of the born, whose humanity we all acknowledge, can also be taken. When abortion proponents try to say that the unborn are simply "tissue," they are making it possible to assert the same about every human being. When, on the other hand, they acknowledge that the unborn are human beings but say that difficult circumstances justify killing them, they are making it possible to justify killing any human being who makes someone else's life burdensome. Finally, when abortion advocates claim that the state may justify the taking of life, then the choice of which lives the state will justify taking becomes a secondary matter.

A call for practical Action

On a practical level, those who minister in the Church in the various arenas of the right to life, social justice, and peace need to *know one another* and be familiar with the works of each other which, by definition, are inherently interrelated. Common study days, retreats, and social interaction can go a long way in breaking down prejudice and ignorance which may exist within our own ranks regarding the nature and importance of various kinds of work that serves the human person.

Those who write and speak of these matters in academic and media circles need to be mindful of illustrating the interrelationship of the right to life with social justice and peace. By including reference at the same time to various issues which some people might regard as disconnected can help those people see the common foundation that these issues have.

Legislators and other public officials, in advancing various programs and policies, also need to be mindful that human rights must always advance in an integral and harmonious way. To deny the right to life itself, as is done by abortion, is to undermine all other efforts for justice and peace. As John Paul II declared, *"Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights -- for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture -- is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition of all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination . . . The human being is entitled to such rights in every phase of development, from conception until natural death, whether healthy or sick, whole or handicapped, rich or poor"* (*Christifideles laici*, #38).

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Justice, Peace, and the Right to Life

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The efforts of the Church to announce and fulfill the demands of justice and peace in our world, and to secure the right to life, all flow from a single source: the person of Jesus Christ. In the Lord Jesus we find the very justice of God, the peace that nobody can take from us, and the life which is eternal.

In fulfilling the demands of her mission, the Church must make it clear that her efforts are not to be understood as having their origin merely in a response to the particular circumstances of history, such as unjust court decisions or actions of nations which are destructive of human rights, but rather essentially and primarily as a response to *Jesus Christ*, his saving action, and his Great Commission to renew the world. The Church's message is the Gospel, and the Gospel is ultimately the person of Christ.

Because of this, it is important to take note of the fact that the many ministries of the Church which work for justice and peace, and those which focus on restoring the right to life where it has been explicitly denied -- such as in the case of legalized abortion -- are in fact ministries with the same source and foundation. At times these varied efforts of the Church can seem disconnected and, in certain circumstances, even in tension. But such divisions are false and unjustified. Here we briefly explore how the work of social justice, peace, and the right to life are inherently intertwined.

Human Life is always a Good

At every moment, human life is a good (see *Evangelium Vitae*, 34). Life reflects the glory of God, who made all things that they may have being, and who hates nothing of what he has made. At each stage of its existence, life belongs to God, who is

both its author and its final goal. He alone is the arbiter of when life begins and ends.

A deliberate attack on innocent human life is, in fact, an attack on God himself. This fact does not change with the many and varied forms, methods, and sources of those attacks. It does not change based on the motives of the attack, nor on the stage of life at which the attacks are suffered.

As the only Lord of human life, God has freely entrusted our lives to the care of one another. We are our brothers' keepers. There never comes a time in life when we are absolved of the obligation to care for one another, nor is this obligation a matter of our personal choice. Others are our brothers and sisters *before we choose* how we will respond to them. It is not our choice that makes them our brothers and sisters. Rather, our choices are to be informed by the fact that those around us already are our brothers and sisters.

The human person as the Center of every "issue"

Anything that affects human life and dignity is of concern to the People of God. Hence, followers of Christ are involved in efforts to stem the tide of war, to alleviate poverty, to implement humane ways to handle criminals, to promote adequate health care, to advance the cause of education, to eliminate every form of discrimination, to assure that people have the opportunity to work and that working conditions correspond to their dignity, to care for the sick and reject unethical practices such as assisted suicide and euthanasia, and to restore the right to life to the unborn threatened by abortion.

These, and many other issues related to human rights, are all centered on *the human person*. There are "issues" only insofar as there are *persons* who have inherent rights that need to be secured and advanced. The focus for God's people is not so much the "issue" of homelessness, but *the homeless person*; not the "issue" of health care, but *the person in need of such care*; not the "issue" of war but *the persons affected by it*; not the "issue" of abortion but *the person in the womb and the person of the mother tempted to abort*.

Because the center of all these issues is one and the same, they are all inherently complementary and aspects of an integral whole. These issues are not related as one might line up objects on a table and count or rearrange them; rather, they are related as various parts of the body one to the other. The relationship between issues affecting human life and dignity is not an extrinsic relationship but an intrinsic one. The relationship is, furthermore, not fashioned by any design of the human will, such as a manifesto or a political party, but rather by the demands of human nature itself.

As a result, we may say that an advance in any area of the defense of human life and dignity facilitates progress in all the rest, whereas a regression in any area hinders progress in all the rest.

This is not to deny that there are unique moral analyses called for by the various issues, and differences in the degree to which they relate to human dignity. Nor is this to say that every individual and group within the Church is to be actively engaged in every issue, which is humanly impossible. Rather, it is to say that the faithful must acknowledge the connection between the many demands of human life and dignity, and avoid a false dichotomy by which one can be in favor of one form of human advancement but opposed to another.

Common characteristics of the efforts of life, justice, and peace

Given all that has been affirmed so far, it is not surprising that we can find many common characteristics of the efforts to defend the right to life and to advance human dignity in countless different arenas.

Non-violence

Whether by abortion, crime, various forms of child abuse and domestic abuse, unjust war, and countless other offenses, violence continues to raise its head on the human scene. The efforts of the Church, by contrast, are all marked by *non-violence*, because the only appropriate response to the human person is the response of love. This response begins

by acknowledging that the person belongs to God and that no other person may shed innocent blood.

Non-discrimination

The color of one's skin, the place of one's origin, the condition of one's health, the level of one's dependency, the stage of one's development, or one's socioeconomic status are, among other things, reasons that some individuals and groups find for discriminating against others. Discrimination of this kind gives rise to unjust treatment and violence.

Efforts of social justice and peace affirm that all human beings are of equal value, and hence that discrimination is never justified. Right to life efforts are based on the same affirmation, as people point out that the unborn child is equal in dignity to the born, and that the dependency of one still in the womb is no justification for considering him or her a "non-person." If, in fact, a government claims authority to designate unborn human beings as "non-persons," it has also claimed authority to make the same declaration about those already born.

Expansion of the circle of welcome

Advances in human rights, dignity, justice, and peace are always marked by an *expansion of the boundaries of the human community*. Progress entails opening our arms wider, making more room at the table, and recognizing as our brothers and sisters those whom we failed to recognize earlier.

This is true when we overcome various forms of slavery and trafficking in human persons. This is true when nations cease the practice of genocide. This is true when women are given their rightful place in society as equal in dignity to men. This is true when the poor and the terminally ill are deemed worth the extra effort and expense to meet their needs. It is true when we come to see the unborn as a neighbor like ourselves, and when we affirm that "not even the murderer loses his personal dignity" (*Evangelium vitae*, 9). In whatever arena we examine, the right to life, and the works of justice and peace, are marked by *expanding the circle of welcome*.