A Pastoral Letter to Christ’s Faithful
of
the Diocese of La Crosse

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On the Dignity of Human Life
and Civic Responsibility
To Christ’s Faithful of the Diocese of La Crosse:

ON THE DIGNITY OF HUMAN LIFE AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In these and in the coming months, politicians are beginning their campaigns for election or reelection to public office in 2004. The start of political campaigns reminds us that we, as Catholics, are called to be faithful to Christ also through our political involvement. Every election gives us the opportunity to discuss the ways our government should lead us now and into the future for the common good.

FORMING POLITICAL JUDGMENTS

Sadly, many Catholics misunderstand the meaning of the so-called “separation of Church and state” in our nation and believe that the Word of God, handed on to us in the Church, has no application to political life. Certainly, our government does not endorse or fund a particular Christian denomination or religion. But, at the same
time, we, as Roman Catholics, have the right and, indeed, the obligation to inform our consciences and political judgments from the teachings of our faith, especially in what pertains to the natural moral law, that is the order established by God in creation.

For example, while the Ten Commandments forbid stealing, no one would believe that laws against theft are an imposition of the Jewish or Christian religions. People of different faiths or of no faith can recognize the natural obligation to respect the property of others. Also, no one would consider Christian opposition to slavery a “religious” issue. Rather, Christians who oppose slavery and other similar evils are acting according to the standard of right and wrong, which has its foundation in our common human nature.

**EMBRACING THE CHALLENGE OF OUR FAITH**

As Catholics, we face a special and critical challenge when the moral law demands something different from what society sanctions. In such a situation, many around us, and especially the communications media, will urge us to conform to societal standards, to “follow the crowd.”

Our Catholic faith, however, demands that, in solidarity with our fellow citizens, we follow the norm of the moral law and also proclaim it in society for the good of all. “Catholics are called to be a community of conscience within the larger society and to test public life by the moral wisdom anchored in Scripture and consistent with the best of our nation’s founding ideals” (Administrative Board of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium [September 1999], p. 8). When Dr. Martin Luther King wrote his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” he cited the natural-law teaching of Saint
Thomas Aquinas in defense of civil disobedience. If Dr. King drew from Catholic teaching to uphold what is right and good, then should not we as Catholics do so as well?

**PROTECTING ALL HUMAN LIFE**

Catholic teaching distinguishes itself from what society presently sanctions by its firm and unchangeable defense of the dignity of human life. As Catholics, we are always held to defend human life from conception to natural death. The Church teaches that human life should be protected at every stage of development, whether in the womb, in the wheelchair or on the death bed.

Our consistent stance on the dignity of all human life is not understood by some. Many understand our care for the poor and the marginalized, but they part company with us in our defense of innocent and defenseless life in the womb. They will stand with us against capital punishment, but not against procured abortion or euthanasia.

The situation is most difficult for us and profoundly sad for our society, especially for her defenseless and heavily burdened members, but it should not make us doubt the truth of Catholic teaching. On the contrary, we must work to point out the contradiction of protecting some human lives and not others, and work to protect all human life. “Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. The conviction that human life is sacred and that each person has inherent dignity that must be respected in society lies at the heart of Catholic social teaching. Calls to advance human rights are illusions if the right to life itself is subject to attack. We believe that every human life is sacred from conception to natural death; that people
are more important than things; and that the measure of every institution is whether or not it enhances the life and dignity of the human person” (Ibid., p. 13).

The work of the Fifth Diocesan Synod has underlined for us the urgency of the apostolate of the respect for human life, especially on behalf of the unborn: “Because of the prevalence of procured abortion in our society, the Diocese is to give the most urgent attention possible to fostering the respect for the life of the innocent and defenseless unborn and to working to end the practice of procured abortion in our nation” (Synod V Acts: Celebrated June 11-14, 2000, p. 434, n. 217). For the sake of the common good, we must not fail in our Christian and civic duty to restore the respect for the life of the unborn.

SAFEGUARDING THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL GOOD

Catholic teaching is true to the natural moral law which obliges us to protect all human life. In our history as Americans, we sometimes have found reasons to exclude certain populations from the protection of the law. We were always wrong in doing so. How is our present-day exclusion of the unborn, the elderly and the sick any different from our exclusions of the past? The Church’s moral teaching merely tells us what we should see with our own eyes, that the children we abort and the sick we “mercy kill” are our brothers and sisters in the human family.

Some will say that the defense of innocent life is only one issue among many, that it is important but not fundamental. They are wrong. In the natural moral law, the good of life is the most fundamental good and the condition for the enjoyment of all other goods (cf. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics [November 1998], n. 5). Recall the words of
Pope John Paul II on the mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world:

The inviolability of the person which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God, finds its primary and fundamental expression in the inviolability of human life. 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 (Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christifideles Laici, “The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World” [December 30, 1988], n. 38b).

The protection of innocent life is not just a political issue, but, much more importantly, it is a basic political responsibility (cf. Living the Gospel of Life, nn. 33-34).

**Making consistently the choice for life**

Catholics therefore cannot legitimately believe that, if they support programs for the poor and marginalized, this “makes up” for not being consistently prolife. “Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing and health care.... But being ‘right’ in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life. Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community” (Living the Gospel of Life, n. 23).
Concern for the plight of the poor must be accompanied by a profound respect for the dignity of all human life. Otherwise, it can be corrupted and all too easily embrace procured abortion and euthanasia as acts of compassion toward the suffering. But it is a false compassion which seeks to lessen human suffering by eliminating those who suffer. When we allow the killing of those most in need, we do not love the poor as Jesus did, Who gave His life as a ransom for many (cf. Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; and 1 Tm 2:6).

The responsibility to defend human life in all its stages falls upon all Catholic citizens. It falls, with particular weight, upon Catholic politicians. A year ago, on the Solemnity of Christ the King, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of our Holy Father Pope John Paul II published a document, *Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life* (November 24, 2002), which clarifies for Catholic politicians their most serious responsibility for the defense of human life. The document explains: “John Paul II, continuing the constant teaching of the Church, has reiterated many times that those who are directly involved in lawmaking bodies have a ‘grave and clear obligation to oppose’ any law that attacks human life. For them, as for every Catholic, it is impossible to promote such laws or to vote for them” (n. 4a).

**RESPONDING MORALLY TO UNJUST LAWS**

Oftentimes, Catholic politicians who hold anti-life positions defend their voting record on the ground that they are following their constituency or the will of the “majority.” One cannot however defend an unjust law on the ground of political consensus. We do not consider the “Jim Crow” laws, which discriminated against African Americans, “just” because the majority of the population supported them.
Catholic politicians have the responsibility to work against an unjust law, even when a majority of the electorate supports it.

When Catholic politicians cannot immediately overturn an unjust law, they must never cease to work toward that end. At the very least, they must limit, as much as possible, the evil caused by the unjust law. Pope John Paul II illustrates for us this important moral principle: “[W]hen it is not possible to overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law, an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at *limiting the harm* done by such a law and lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality” (*Encyclical Letter Evangelium Vitae*, “On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life” [March 25, 1995], n. 73c). The judicial system in the United States of America allows legislators to limit access to procured abortion, and Catholic politicians are obliged to restrict the scope of this gravest of injustices whenever the opportunity presents itself.

While certainly there are Catholic politicians who have worked diligently to promote the Gospel of Life through our laws, many have compromised their duty to do so. I joined my voice to that of my brother Bishops five years ago in our appeal: “We urge those Catholic officials who choose to depart from Church teaching on the inviolability of human life in their public life to consider the consequences for their own spiritual well being, as well as the scandal they risk by leading others into serious sin.... No public official, especially one claiming to be a faithful and serious Catholic, can responsibly advocate for or actively support direct attacks on innocent human life” (*Living the Gospel of Life*, n. 32).

Once again and more urgently, I, as Bishop of the Diocese of La Crosse, appeal to all Catholics who hold political office to examine your conscience in the
light of your duty to protect human life in all its stages. Further, I urge you to resolve to live the Gospel of Life fully and faithfully in all your legislative activity.

BEGINNING IN THE HOME

Whether we are citizens or politicians, whatever be our state in life, we all have the responsibility to work for a society which safeguards and promotes the dignity of human life. We must recognize that the building of a culture of life begins in the home, in our families. It begins with a true understanding of the conjugal union and its ordering to the gift of children (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2366). So often Catholics fail to act against abortion or euthanasia with the appropriate energy, because they have compromised the Church’s teaching on the procreative end of marriage by accepting artificial birth control (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2370). The port of entry for the culture of death in our society has been the abandonment of the respect for the procreative meaning of the conjugal act. It is the contraceptive way of thinking, the fear of the life-giving dimension of conjugal love, which very much sustains that culture.

Pope John Paul II has rightly observed: “[T]he pro-abortion culture is especially strong precisely where the Church’s teaching on contraception is rejected” (*Evangelium Vitae*, n. 13). If we are to act for the Gospel of Life with renewed vigor in our families and our parishes, we must adhere firmly to the Church’s teaching on artificial contraception. We should promote natural family planning as a moral alternative for those who, for grave reasons, need to limit the number of children in the family. The legislation of the Fifth Diocesan Synod gives us clear and firm direction: “The teaching of the Church on the transmission of human life and on
Natural Family Planning is to be understood as fundamental to the teaching on the respect for all human life” (Synod V Acts, p. 433, n. 213; cf. also p. 410, n. 40).

**PRAYING ABOVE ALL**

I conclude with the reminder that separation of Church and state in our country cannot be understood as a separation of faith from life. I recall the words of Pope John Paul II regarding the proper vocation and mission of the lay faithful as “members of the Church and citizens of human society”: “There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called ‘spiritual’ life, with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called ‘secular’ life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture” (Christifideles Laici, n. 59b; cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, Apostolicam Actuositatem [November 18, 1965], n. 4). Our faith and our political judgments cannot be separate compartments of our lives; they must relate to each other in a life which is lived with integrity. This is especially true with respect to safeguarding the right to life, the foundation of all other rights.

The Fifth Diocesan Synod has reminded us that “the primary means to be employed in restoring respect for all human life is prayer, especially prayer before the Blessed Sacrament” (Synod V Acts, p. 434, n. 218). In meeting the challenge of promoting the respect for all human life during the coming elections, I urge individuals, families and parishes to make regularly the Holy Hour for Life (cf. Ibid., p. 434, n. 219). Christ, Who came to give His life for the salvation of all and Who sacramentally renews the outpouring of His Life for us in the Holy Eucharist, will not fail to hear our prayer on behalf of all who suffer threats to their right to life.
In this time when the dignity of human life is threatened and assaulted in so many ways, we pray through the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Star of the New Evangelization and Patroness of Life. The Mother of God appeared on our beloved continent in 1531 to show forth God’s immeasurable mercy and love for all His children of America, especially the native peoples. By her apparitions, she hastened the end of the widespread and horrible pagan practice of human sacrifice, and she confirmed the dignity of all human life. May she, in our time, inspire and foster the conversion of America to the Gospel of her Divine Son, which is, first and foremost, the Gospel of Life. Our prayers offered through the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe will not go unanswered.

I invoke God’s blessing upon you, your homes, and your apostolate of the respect for human life.

Given at La Crosse, on the twenty-third day of November, the Solemnity of Christ the King, in the Year of the Lord 2003.

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